

Vote by Chicago teachers on concessions contract begins today, after postponement

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The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), in collaboration with school district leaders appointed by Mayor Rahm Emanuel, is attempting to push a four-year concessions contract onto the city's 25,000 teachers. Voting by teachers is scheduled to begin in schools today, after the CTU announced a delay of two days.

The day before voting was scheduled to begin, on October 26, the CTU announced that it would be postponed. In a move calculated to save face, the union tried to portray the postponement as a courteous decision made by the leadership to give teachers an additional two days over a weekend to read through the entire agreement they are to vote on.

This is not a new move for CTU. During the strike in 2012, CTU leaders attempted to hold a vote on a contract and end the strike without showing teachers the contract itself. After widespread outrage, it delayed the vote by two days as well. Such underhanded moves to ram through a concessions agreement reveal CTU's phony claims of "rank-and-file democracy" to be totally false.

In addition to meager pay raises below the rate of inflation and increased health care costs, the tentative agreement ends the "pension pickup" for new hires beginning January 2017, making newer teachers pay 7 percent towards their pension (supposedly offset by a wage increase). This will create an incentive to lay off the most experienced and best compensated teachers in favor of lower-paid new hires. Scheduled pay increases, based on teacher seniority and professional development, called steps and lanes, were also reduced compared with the 2012-2015 contract.

Teachers have voiced strong opposition to the tentative agreement in recent meetings and on social media. Four meetings hosted by CTU took place at schools different areas of the city last week, where

smaller groups of frustrated teachers questioned CTU representatives.

Teachers at one of the meetings angrily demanded to know why the CTU divided the workforce on pensions. One younger teacher said, "This is now set up to use the second tier against us in future negotiations. Why would you do this?" Others asked, "So what happens next, if this gets voted down? Will it be renegotiated?" and "Why was nothing said about our step and lane changes also being reduced compared to the last contract?"

Numerous other complaints were voiced on broad topics, including lack of retroactive benefits for the thousands of teachers laid off in 2015, and the lack of pay and benefit protections for paraprofessionals and school staff.

Special education and high school teachers argued that after the very long negotiations, CTU had failed to reverse deep cuts to staff and programs that have negatively impacted classroom instruction and student development and wellness. In response, a CTU staffer weakly explained that the CTU was forming a legislative team with the CPS to go to the state capital in Springfield to try to drum up more money for schools. This was only the most obvious point at which CTU representatives admitted to officially teaming up with the city administration of Rahm Emanuel.

Teachers should reject this contract, but a "no" vote is only the beginning. The defense of the rights of teachers and the institution of public education must be carried out on a new and different political basis. This must begin with an understanding that the CTU is a co-conspirator with the Emanuel administration and the Democratic Party in the attack on public education.

In this year's presidential elections, the AFL-CIO, including the CTU's parent organization, the American

Federation of Teachers (AFT), has been enthusiastically campaigning for Hillary Clinton. Both Democrats and Republicans agree that trillions can be spent on the military while they claim there is no money for schools, healthcare, pensions or decent jobs.

A Clinton administration will escalate the assault on the working class waged by Obama, further attacking public education. This is the real significance of CTU's and AFT's attempts nationwide to lower teacher expectations and portray a concessions contract as a win.

In its statement opposing the contract, which has been widely distributed by teachers on Facebook, the SEP calls on teachers to form rank-and-file committees to carry forward a struggle to defend public education. These committees, it states, must be based on:

1) A rejection of the claim that there is no money for public education and good-paying jobs and benefits. Instead of agreeing to concessions, teachers should demand a massive infusion of funds into the public education system, to be paid for through a sharp increase in taxes on the wealthy and the elimination of military spending.

2) Complete independence from the Democratic and Republican parties, the twin instruments of the corporate and financial elite. An immediate appeal should be made to all sections of the working class for a common struggle against the renewed assault on jobs and benefits that will take place regardless of whether it is Clinton or Trump who is elected in November.

SEP Vice-Presidential Candidate Niles Niemuth will be speaking at a public meeting on November 1 at 7:00 pm at the University of Illinois, Chicago, Lecture Center Building F, Room F4, 807 South Morgan Street. For more information, visit sep2016.com.

This author also recommends:

Mobilize the working class to defend public education: Vote "no" on the CPS-CTU concessions contract!

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