

Chicago teachers to vote on one-day strike

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Amidst a state budget impasse now in its twentieth month, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) plans to hold a vote on April 5 by the city's 27,000 teachers and staff for a one-day strike to take place on May 1 to protest school cuts. The "strike" is the latest in a series of stunts called by the CTU to let off steam and facilitate the continued attack on public education.

Teachers and staff have already been furloughed four days this year, and in recent days CTU has organized work-to-rule in some schools.

Chicago's Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel, once a White House official under both Obama and Clinton, has recently floated plans to end the school year about three weeks early, on June 1, furloughing teachers and staff and forcing hundreds of thousands of households to scramble for childcare. School clerk positions are also under threat.

CTU President Karen Lewis declared about the one-day action, "If the board goes ahead with the threat of canceling three weeks of school, we would view their action as a massive violation of our contract, and that could provoke a strike."

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has filed for an injunction with the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board to stop the strike.

The budget impasse has already devastated social services and state institutions. It is being used by Republicans, Democrats and the CTU to advance the attack on public education and worker pensions as part of an effort to force the working class to pay for the entire crisis. The latest round of threatened cuts comes as former hedge fund mogul and Republican Governor Bruce Rauner continues to withhold \$215 million in state funds to CPS until state legislators finalize a plan to gut state worker pensions.

Last year, CPS officials, fully anticipating Rauner's intransigence and expecting to impose mid-year cuts, passed a school budget that incorporated \$215 million

Rauner had yet to allocate. Based on that budget, CTU teamed up with the Emanuel administration to push through a concessions agreement for teachers last October. The contract passed despite overwhelming support for a strike to oppose the introduction of a two-tier pension system, wage losses and increased health care costs. At that time, teachers had been working without a contract for nearly 16 months.

In line with the Democratic Party's efforts to obscure the class character of the attack on public education, CPS CEO Forrest Claypool filed a lawsuit earlier this month against Rauner. The lawsuit did not charge that his refusal to disburse funds is part of an assault on public education, but rather that it is narrowly racist. "The governor is not holding up school funding for predominantly white school districts in the rest of the state in order to achieve his political agenda, he is not holding them hostage—he is only holding hostage our students," Claypool said.

The seemingly endless string of school cuts, layoffs, lawsuits, and threats of additional cuts and layoffs is evidence of the complicity of the CTU with the Emanuel administration in settling the budget impasse on the Democrats' terms while maintaining a lid on the boiling anger over social conditions in the city, including intolerable conditions in the schools.

Last spring, the CTU put on a one-day strike protest on April 1, April Fool's Day, that drew widespread criticism from teachers who took to social media to say the action was unserious given the scope of the problems they and their students face. Since it shut down the 9-day strike in 2012 on terms set by Emanuel, the CTU has done everything it can to prevent any significant mobilization of teachers against the attack on public education.

The school district has been operating under conditions of extreme crisis, and teachers and students have to work in filthy, dilapidated and overcrowded

facilities and with inadequate personnel.

This year, it is reported that 90 percent of the schools do not have a librarian, and children are not able to check out books. Without additional funding, CPS is reportedly expected to be without any librarians when school starts again in the fall. The ratio of social workers and nurses to students is reported to be about 1 to 1000.

The constant refrain from city officials that “there is no money for education” is a blatant lie. In the years that he has been in office, Emanuel has expanded on the tradition of his predecessor, Richard Daley, in slashing the schools’ budgets while at the same time making CPS a source of highly lucrative contracts for well-connected business people.

Parasitic “school reform” startups have been awarded tens of millions in contracts on fraudulent premises. One such entrepreneur, Scott Solomon, was convicted last year along with former CPS head Barbara Byrd-Bennett in a corruption scheme involving CPS contracts upwards of \$20 million. He was sentenced just last week to seven years in prison for his role. Byrd-Bennett is to be sentenced late next month. No money has been paid back.

Janitorial services that were privatized in 2014, and turned over to Aramark and Sodexo at the cost of hundreds of millions of dollars, have left the schools filthy with unremoved garbage and vermin. School staff have had to organize clean-ups with students. Bathroom supplies like soap and paper products are not restocked, and teachers and staff pay for these basic necessities out of their own pockets.

As it is with the budget impasse in general, there is broad agreement between both Democrats and Republicans that further cuts will be made to schools. The disagreement between the two parties is over how those cuts will be meted out. The role of the CTU leadership is to bind teachers and other workers to the Democratic Party’s version of austerity, which relies on the unions to suppress the class struggle and drive social anger back into support for the Democratic Party, which then only further attacks public education.

Teachers are faced with the choice of continuing on the same path, or forging ahead in building new and independent fighting organizations that take as a starting point the needs and interests of the working class—for jobs, wages and quality education—and not

whatever pittance the Democratic and Republican politicians see fit to hand down for schools.



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