

Chicago Teachers Union calls off one-day strike vote

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11 April 2017

Last week, just hours before a scheduled vote to decide whether Chicago's 27,000 public school teachers would carry out a one-day walkout to protest school cuts, Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) President Karen Lewis announced to local media, "No, we're not striking." She added, "They're [teachers] going to be asked to participate in May Day activities, because May Day is a really important day."

CTU had planned to hold a vote on April 5 to decide on a May 1 walkout after organizing work-to-rule protests at some schools. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) filed a request for a state injunction to prohibit any strike.

Shortly after Lewis made her comments on April 5, another CTU official, staff coordinator Jackson Potter, stated that debate and discussion were still planned on the proposed vote to strike, saying "I just don't think it's a done deal." But Lewis's announcement meant the official decision had already been made and the question would not go before the union delegates.

Instead, CTU delegates voted on two resolutions that represent a low even for CTU's bureaucratic cowardice. The first resolution is for teachers to take a personal business day off to participate in May Day protest events. The second resolution commits CTU to an emergency house of delegates meeting to decide on what the union's response will be if the Democratic administration of Mayor Rahm Emanuel imposes additional furlough days. Teachers are furloughed already four days this year and CPS has proposed to end school three weeks early to make up for a budget shortfall.

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 incorporating \$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 CTU pushed through the contract 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 recent days, International Socialist Organization member and CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey commented that the union was having "a hard discussion internally" on whether to walk out. Sharkey and some other union delegates remarked there was not very much support for the measure. This should come as no surprise after CTU's April Fools' Day stunt last year—a one-day walkout that many teachers vocally opposed as an unserious response to the severe situation they and their students face.

Since it shut down the nine-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 being carried out by both big business parties.

In recent days, Lewis has also indicated that discussions are being held between CTU and CPS on reversing some of the four planned furlough days in exchange for cutting teacher pay.

While issuing rhetorical protests, the CTU has functioned as one of Mayor Emanuel's chief collaborators, facilitating the dismantling of public education through cuts and layoffs, and the continued funneling of desperately needed resources to for-profit

charter school operators and investors. Far from opposing this, the CTU and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), are seeking to cash in by collecting dues from the miserably paid and miserably treated charter school teachers.

An AFT-aligned outfit, the Chicago Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff, has already “organized” teachers at UNO Charter School Network, the ASPIRA chain of charter schools, and is currently seeking recognition at the Noble Network of Charter Schools, which is backed by Governor Rauner, the billionaire Pritzker family and Chicago Board of Education President Frank Clark.

With Trump’s appointment of Betsy DeVos, whose ideological and corporate commitments pose a grave threat to students and teachers across the country, an intransigent and sharply political defense of public education is needed. New avenues of struggle must be developed, including rank-and-file teacher committees, in opposition to the CTU and the Democratic Party.

Securing the social rights to high quality education and secure jobs are political struggles, pitting the interests of the working class—black, white, native-born and immigrant—against the corporate and financial aristocracy and both corporate-controlled parties that defend it.



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