

As teachers face new battles against Trump

# Lessons of the fight against Obama’s “school reform”—Part 2

Nancy Hanover, Jerry White  
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In September 2012, 26,000 Chicago teachers, in the nation’s third largest school district, mounted their first strike in 25 years. The teachers sought to reverse the ongoing destruction of public education in the city, raising issues of class sizes, high-stakes testing, lack of music and art in schools, teacher pay, benefits, paid prep time and job losses.

This strike pitted workers directly against the Democratic Party administration of Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Obama’s former chief of staff. It occurred in the city where Obama’s education secretary, Arne Duncan, first tested out his reactionary “school reform” agenda of dismantling public education.

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) did everything to downplay the political issues at stake in the strike and to prevent it from becoming a catalyst for a broader movement of the working class against the Democratic Party. The CTU, headed by the nominally “left” Caucus of Radical Educators (CORE), had worked hard to prevent the strike, then did their best to end it quickly.

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten made clear the national union’s determination to wind down the strike in the interest of Obama’s campaign, stating that although “Emanuel wanted to make major changes in Chicago Public Schools ... some changes we didn’t agree with ... we are all Democrats.”

The strike evoked popular support among workers and young people looking for a fight.

Emanuel had overseen an explosion of social inequality, handing out tax breaks and other incentives to financial, real estate and other firms while starving the schools, public transit and other essential services of funding. The jobless rate for out-of-school 16-24-year-olds in the city was 70 percent.

The last thing the CTU, AFT and other city unions wanted was a broader mobilization of the working class. Instead, the CTU reached a deal behind the backs of teachers that capitulated to Emanuel’s most important demands, including extending the school day without compensation, expanding test-based evaluation systems, and giving broad authority to principals for hiring and firing.

Throughout, CTU President Karen Lewis and Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization, downplayed Emanuel’s plans for mass closures of city schools.

After first failing to push through a return-to-work without revealing the content of the sellout, the CTU used a combination of intimidation—aided by the mayor’s move to obtain a court injunction—and outright lies, to push through a second return-to-work

vote. While admitting the union had agreed to an “austerity contract,” Lewis said the CTU would not negotiate anything better because of “tough economic times.” She pointed to state law barring strikes over class sizes and school closings—failing to mention that the CTU had endorsed the very bill that stripped teachers of the right to strike over these issues.

The defeat cleared the way to escalate the attack on public education not only in Chicago, but nationally. Other pro-“reform” mayors, like Philadelphia’s Michael Nutter, crowed that the defeat of the strike would give them a free hand to dismantle teacher pensions, close public schools, and hand over the education system to private corporations.

Within a year of the strike’s aftermath, 50 Chicago public schools were closed, 3,500 teachers and school workers laid off, and more programs slashed. As a reward for the betrayal of the strike, the unions were given access to “organize” the largest charter school business, giving the union the opportunity to collect dues from low-paid charter school teachers and make up for the loss of thousands of teachers’ jobs.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* became a center of opposition, and fought for teachers to transform the strike into a powerful political movement of the working class to defend and vastly improve public education.

Summing up the lessons of the struggle, the WSWWS wrote:

“The defense of public education and every other basic social right requires a direct attack on the economic and political dictatorship of the banks and big business and a vast redistribution of wealth from the financial oligarchy to the needs of working people. To fight for this, the working class must free itself from the political domination of the Democrats, who defend the interests of the super-rich just as viciously as their Republican counterparts.

“The next period will see the emergence of even more powerful class struggles. New organizations of struggle are required. Above all, the working class needs a new leadership that fights for its political independence from the two capitalist parties and in doing so fights for socialism.”

## Detroit’s sickouts

In 2015-16, Detroit teachers gained national attention by organizing

a series of wildcat job actions to demand safe and sanitary schools, decent rates of pay and proper funding of the district ravaged by a decade of state-appointed emergency managers. Using social media, rank-and-file teachers organized sickouts, in defiance of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), and garnered support throughout the US, and even internationally.

The actions were a rebuff to the Obama administration, which touted Detroit as “ground zero” for its pro-corporate school “reforms.” Randi Weingarten, a member of the Democratic National Committee and a hit man for the Hillary Clinton campaign against supporters of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, was determined to prevent the teachers’ militant actions from galvanizing opposition to the Democrats.

As Obama visited Detroit on January 20, 2016, teachers’ sickouts escalated in defiance of both the DFT and threats of court injunctions. The district’s emergency manager, Darnell Earley, who had also overseen the lead poisoning of the city of Flint, attempted to drag militant teachers into court and threaten them with fines and prison. A judge rejected the bid, opting instead to rely on the DFT to wind down the protests, and pave the way for the restructuring of the school district.

Weingarten and Detroit Democrats did this by claiming they were fighting to regain “local control” of the school district from the state-appointed emergency manager. In a reactionary subterfuge, they injected racial politics by claiming that the majority African American residents of the city were facing a “racist” takeover by white Republicans, including Governor Rick Snyder.

The union and the Detroit Democrats then conspired with Snyder to dissolve the Detroit Public Schools district and bail out the Wall Street investors who held the district’s bonds. While local Democrats regained control of the district, spending decisions were left in the hands of an unelected Financial Review Board that answered to Wall Street. The DFT put its full backing into the Snyder plan because it preserved the union’s role as the “bargaining agent” and union dues collector.

Under the new Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) the rights of teachers continue to be savaged. The state legislature created a new financial entity, paying off all existing debtors except for the teachers, who had been blackmailed into loaning the DPS \$10,000 each. The DPSCD continued the same overfilled classrooms and understaffing, while enacting new cuts to health care and pensions.

Throughout these struggles, educators demonstrated a high level of self-sacrifice and determination. Many teachers were justifiably proud that they had stood up in the face of myriad threats, and they received widespread support from working-class parents and students.

At the same time, the political weaknesses and illusions of teachers were exploited by the unions and the Democratic Party to isolate the struggle and ultimately defeat it. In the first stage of these battles many teachers believed it was enough to have their voices, so long suppressed, finally heard by the media and leading politicians.

As experience has demonstrated time and time again, the entire political establishment—whether led by Democrats like Obama or Republicans like Trump—is not neutral, let alone pro-worker. While Democrats patronize teachers, praising to the sky their sense of civic duty and critical importance to society, the Democrats, no less than the Republicans, answer to the corporate and financial elite.

Under conditions of the long-standing decline of American capitalism and the explosive growth of social inequality, both political

parties are hell bent on reversing all of the gains won over generations of struggle by the working class. They intend to loot everything—pensions, health care, quality education, decent housing, culture—so the super-rich can buy more mansions and yachts.

It is not possible to defend, let alone vastly improve, public education without attacking the massive fortunes of the super-rich and breaking their dictatorial grip over society. Three billionaires in the US—Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffett and Bill Gates—control a mass of wealth equal to that controlled by half of the US population, or 150 million people.

The struggles in Wisconsin, Chicago and Detroit, along with battles by teachers in Mexico, Chile, Australia and other countries in the recent period, have demonstrated the strivings of educators to break free from the domination of the pro-capitalist unions and assert their social rights. This must now become a conscious process.

The *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* calls on educators to form rank-and-file committees to take up the elemental responsibilities long ago abandoned by the AFT and NEA, and mobilize educators and the whole working class against layoffs, school closures, privatization, and to demand a vast increase in school funding.

As every teacher intimately knows, educational problems are inseparable from the social crisis. Students cannot learn if they are plagued with chronic poverty, homelessness, poor housing conditions, the opioid drug epidemic, and other social ills. To address this, trillions must be spent to rebuild urban and rural areas and to end unemployment and poverty once and for all.

If the collective wealth created by working people is to be used to raise the material and cultural level of the masses, instead of being squandered on bank bailouts, tax cuts and criminal wars, then the working class must organize itself as an independent political force—-independent of the Democrats and Republicans—to take the economic levers of society in its own hands and redistribute the wealth.

The Socialist Equality Party is leading that fight and we call on teachers to contact the SEP, subscribe to the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* and take up the fight for socialism today.

*Concluded*



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**