

Chicago charter teachers strike for increased pay, lower class sizes

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Teachers at fifteen Acero Charter Schools, one of more than 34 charter school operators in Chicago, went on strike Tuesday morning in the first strike against a US charter school operator.

The teachers are demanding a reduction in class sizes, which are reported to be above 30 students; increased special education resources; and pay increases to bring charter teachers and paraprofessionals (called “apprentices”) closer to what Chicago Public School district teachers receive. Clerks and support staff at Acero do not have a pay schedule and are asking for one. Teachers are also asking for some assurance that Acero students and families will not be turned over to ICE without a court order.

“We want equal pay,” a teacher said at a rally Tuesday afternoon in Chicago. “We charter teachers work much longer hours and days and teach hundreds of students a day.”

Charter school teachers receive 15 percent lower pay and work longer days and school years than CPS teachers, who are themselves underpaid and overworked. Other charter school teachers have authorized strikes in recent weeks, including at Chicago International Charter Schools, Civitas Education Partners and Quest Management.

The Acero network has 550 teachers and 7,500 students. It is formerly known as UNO, named for the United Neighborhood Organization that began it. UNO/Acero has intimate ties to the Illinois Democratic Party and business interests. The schools’ name change was the result of a major fraud scandal that took down former CEO Juan Rangel, who chaired Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s election campaign.

The charter operators’ practice of taking in public funds and giving lush packages to their executives, but not paying their educators, is a major issue at Acero

and other charter schools. Only yesterday, Acero released financial statements that are reported to show a multi-million-dollar budget surplus and expected classroom cuts.

Acero teachers have been in bargaining for six months. The charter teachers’ union, United Educators for Justice, merged with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) earlier this year. CTU is now led by International Socialist Organization (ISO) member Jesse Sharkey.

At a December 3 press conference, Sharkey explained the union’s strategy of working within the charter school framework: “I believe the charters when it first started, one of its selling points was this was a union-free environment, in which they could do whatever they wanted. What they failed to take account of is actually that union contracts are part of the things which regulate, enforce the education industry to actually produce fair practices both for people who work in those schools and for the students who attend the schools.”

AFT President Randi Weingarten, who has come to Chicago to be seen on the picket lines, made similar points today to the *New York Times*: “They [charters] are now in a different generation. They’re going through growing pains, and what you’re seeing in a bunch of the different charter schools is that teachers are saying we want to make a career helping kids in this structure, but we need to have the conditions kids need and the pay we need.”

The CTU once posed as an opponent of charter schools, which have long been used to attack public education. But the union has, under the current CORE (Caucus of Rank and File Educators) leadership, adapted to the Democratic Party’s “new normal” of district school closings, driving down pay, and

expanding charter schools, determining that its financial interest lay in taking dues from the more exploited charter teachers. Indeed, the AFT (CTU's parent union) won the franchise to unionize Chicago charters in exchange for CTU's assistance in organizing the city's shutdown of the strike in 2012.

The charter operators may agree that they too will be served by the kind of "stability" Sharkey helped to provide embattled Mayor Emanuel. That is, the CTU will act in the same way in demobilizing and betraying charter school teachers as they have with public school teachers.

Chicago has been ground zero of the attack on public education, with charter expansion and school closing plans going back decades. Just this week, a WBEZ analysis found that the city has closed or fired all teachers at 200 schools since 2002, making up nearly a third of the district. This aggressive shutdown of public schools has fueled the expansion of charters.

The expansion of charters has driven down conditions in district schools nationwide, bringing them closer to the conditions in the more exploited charter schools. The transformation of schools into businesses has been so complete, school principals under Barack Obama's "Race to the Top" were encouraged to act as CEOs, individually targeting "problem" employees and cutting costs where they saw fit, just as it is in the charters.

The anti-working-class character of the teachers' unions was seen earlier this year during the strikes by teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma and other states. The unions intervened in struggles that were initiated outside of them with the aim of suppressing and shutting down resistance.

This convergence of private-sector style pay and conditions imposed in charter and public schools alike is seen in both city and suburban school districts.

About 500 teachers in suburban Geneva District 304 also walked out Tuesday morning. Their contract expired in August. Geneva teachers are fighting for a 17 percent pay increase and for steps and lanes to be included in teacher salaries. Teachers complain that they are facing miserable 1.9 percent salary increases over multi-year stretches even as the district devotes budget surpluses to pay down debts to keep property taxes from rising.

In Township High School District 211, centered in

Palatine, teachers and support staff have been working without a contract since July 1. Their union, the Northwest Suburban Teachers Union Local 1211, agreed to return in the fall after accepting as good coin the district school board's agreement to work toward a compromise, despite the board's insistence on the need to cut costs. In fact, the district maintains a budget surplus of \$7.9 million, a reserve fund of \$119 million, and has spent substantial amounts of money on facilities in recent years. It even has no debts and has prepaid its pension obligations for non-teaching staff before those payments are due.

The union is asking for a meager 2 percent increase in base pay for the first year of the contract and an increase equal to the rate of inflation for the subsequent three years, while the district's last offer includes a 2 percent raise in the first year, but only 75 percent of the rolling average of the rate of inflation over the past 10 years for the remaining years of the contract. The unions agreed to a miserly 1.7 percent increase in base pay over the four-year term of the previous contract, an effective cut of around 5 percent when accounting for inflation.

Last Thursday, south suburban Kankakee teachers rejected a proposed contract and authorized a strike. That was the third offer teachers had turned down. The 324 Kankakee teachers receive nearly \$11,000 less per year than the Illinois state average of \$65,700.

Teachers across Illinois face the same challenges and the same class enemies in the bipartisan assault on education. To fight for their interests, teachers should form rank-and-file workplace committees, independent of the unions, to unite teachers across schools and across districts, and link up their struggle with autoworkers, UPS and Amazon workers, in a fight back.



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