Democrats, union tops seek to isolate Chicago charter teachers' strike

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Teachers at 15 Acero Charter Schools in Chicago, one of more than 34 charter school operators in the city, walked out Tuesday morning in the first ever strike against a US charter school operator. Pickets resumed Wednesday morning.

Some 500 teachers in the suburb of Geneva, Illinois also remained on strike Wednesday.

The Acero teachers are demanding a reduction in class sizes, increased classroom resources and pay increases. Clerks and support staff 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 Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) without a court order.

After six months of bargaining and two days on strike, few concrete details are being released by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) on its negotiations with Acero.

Charter school teachers are even more exploited than Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teachers, who have suffered years of deteriorating conditions due to the collusion of the CTU with the Democratic-controlled city government. Charter teachers receive 15 percent lower pay than CPS educators and work longer school days and school years.

Other charter school teachers have authorized strikes in recent weeks, including those at Chicago International Charter Schools, Civitas Education Partners and Quest Management, but they have not been mobilized by the union to back the strike at Acero and broaden the struggle.

CPS teachers spoke in support of Acero teachers on social media. Christina Vestal said, "I teach kindergarten and have 30 with no aide. I hope their demands are met, but CTU doesn't even bargain over class size."

The Acero network has 550 teachers and 7,500 students. It was formerly known as UNO, named for the United Neighborhood Organization that founded it. UNO/Acero has intimate ties to the Illinois Democratic Party and business interests. The school's 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.

On Tuesday, the United Educators for Justice/CTU held a rally in front of the Acero headquarters on Randolph Street in downtown Chicago.

Elizabeth, who has taught at UNO/Acero schools for 14 years, felt the main issue in the strike was the extreme inequality within Acero schools. She told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Spending is very uneven from school to school. One campus is well positioned and funded, and others are not at all."

As with charter schools across the country, Acero receives public funds and awards lucrative packages to its executives, purchases real estate, and finances lavish construction projects that benefit connected insiders, while skimping on pay and resources for educators. Only yesterday, Acero released financial statements that are reported to show a multi-million-dollar budget surplus and projected classroom cuts.

Elizabeth continued, "I have some freedom to develop what I am teaching. I can have rigorous lessons and use best practices. Not all teachers can do that. There's a lot of inequity. This means parents and students can't expect the same things from all of our schools. We need the resources put into our schools."

One Acero teacher, who has more than 20 years as an educator teaching in different parts of the world, is in her first year with the charter operator. She was astounded at the lack of basic resources available for students and the overcrowded conditions.

"I'm a first-year teacher," she said. "I wake up at 5:30 in the morning and am at work by 7 a.m., before my students arrive at 7:30. They're there until 3:30 p.m. and I usually stay until 5 or 6 at night. So my days are 11 or 12 hours. We [charter teachers] work a longer school year, longer days. I sometimes work weekends—it depends. I have taught in four or five other schools. Being first year in any school, it takes you a longer time to do things.

"I've been abroad for very many years, teaching in international schools. When I got back to the US, I did some subbing, so I've been in several schools. I've taught in a lot of different environments and it astounds me.

"I was so surprised to see what was going on here. Having 32 kids in my classroom. It's nearly the most I've ever seen. Twenty-one years ago, at my first job, I had 36, in a Catholic school. At other schools I worked in abroad, American schools, I had 20-22 students. So, this was shocking.

"We're out here trying to get resources for our kids. I could not believe that when I started teaching here I couldn't get any

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money for anything in my classroom. I mean essentials: bulletin boards, markers, staplers, scissors, nothing."

While striking teachers are determined to fight and have the support of CPS teachers, the unions and the Democratic Party are doing everything they can to sabotage their struggle and expand the corporate "school reform" agenda.

The Tuesday morning pickets and afternoon rally provided an opportunity for American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten, whose annual salary of more than $500,000 is even larger than that of Acero CEO Rich Rodriguez, and Democratic Party politicians to pose for photos with striking teachers.

The recent elections both locally in Illinois and nationally have been marked by the Democratic Party's efforts to change its image from that of a party of and for the wealthy. Under the cover of the slogan "A Chicago for the many," leading Democrats in Illinois, with the aid of the teachers unions and various pseudo-left organizations, are vying for more say on what "tough decisions" are made.

Current mayoral candidate Toni Preckwinkle, currently the Cook County Board president and chair of the Cook County Democratic Party, appeared at the rally in downtown Chicago, walking the picket line and taking selfies with teachers, as did former CTU staffer and candidate for county commissioner Brandon Johnson.

Preckwinkle, who has a record of advocating hundreds of millions in budget cuts, pension "reform" and an unpopular tax on sweet beverages, is trying to refurbish her image. She holds an enormous amount of political power in the city and backs pro-business policies. But at the rally, she stressed that she was once a teacher.

There was a sharp contrast in the scene on Randolph Street. On the one hand, amid chants and whistles, determined teachers demonstrated against the conditions in the schools that the Democratic Party has created in Chicago. On the other hand, a leading Democratic Party politician with a long record of serving the interests of business, standing alongside well-heeled national and local union lackeys, used the demonstration as a backdrop for her election campaign. Late Wednesday, local media reported that CTU is to endorse her for mayor on Thursday morning.

Within a couple of hours of the rally, Preckwinkle announced her mayoral education agenda, which includes a four-year freeze on charter schools and school closings, a return to an elected school board, and what she called "real progressive revenue" to fund neighborhood schools, which may involve changing the state's income tax law and restructuring the TIF (tax-increment financing) district funds.

Preckwinkle denounced the "corporate privatization of our public schools" and promised to invest in social workers and support staff.

But belying the "progressive" window dressing, her education agenda is evidently open to additional school closings.

This is the reality behind the cynical posturing. Teachers and all workers should reject Preckwinkle's phony promises with contempt. They come from a Democratic Party leader with more than two decades in the Chicago party machine, which has presided over the closure of hundreds of schools.

Chicago has been ground zero for the bipartisan 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, comprising nearly one-third of the country's third largest school district. This aggressive shutdown of public schools has fueled the expansion of charters, and it was led by the Illinois and Chicago Democratic Party.

The CTU has played a key role in this. At a December 3 press conference, CTU President Jesse Sharkey, a member of the International Socialist Organization, explained the union's strategy of working within the charter school framework, declaring: "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."

Just as he did for outgoing Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Sharkey is offering the CTU's services to guarantee the institutional stability city officials require to carry out their anti-working class policies.

Teachers in Chicago, Illinois and across the US 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 and the Democratic Party, to unite teachers across schools and districts and link up their struggle with autoworkers, UPS workers and Amazon workers.

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