

Chicago teacher union shuts down charter school strike, holds rally for Democratic candidates

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Classes resumed Monday morning at Acero Charter Schools in Chicago, the largest of more than 34 charter school operators in the city. The Chicago Teachers Union shut down the strike over the weekend but has not released any details of its agreement nor told teachers when they would have the right to vote on the deal.

Teachers and staff walked out at 15 Acero facilities last Tuesday morning in the first strike against a US charter school operator. Their demands included a reduction in class sizes, increased classroom resources and pay increases to bring their compensation and conditions closer to what teachers and paraprofessionals (called “apprentices”) have in Chicago Public Schools (CPS). Clerks and support staff demanded a pay schedule. Teachers also asked for assurance that Acero students and families will not be turned over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents without a court order.

As it is in other charter schools, Acero teachers regularly work 10–12 hour days and some weekends. Staff make as little as \$30,000 per year or less, and work two or more jobs to make ends meet. Since 2002, more than 200 district schools have been shuttered, and 190 schools have been opened, more than half of which are charter schools. Chicago was selected by Democratic Party and business leaders to be the center of a radical privatization of the school system that took place under the last two city mayors, Richard M. Daley and former Obama administration official and investment banker Rahm Emanuel. One of the architects of corporate “school reform” was Arne Duncan, the CEO of the Chicago schools under Daley and Obama’s Secretary of Education.

Bargaining between the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and Acero had entered its seventh month when an agreement was reached early Sunday morning. With the

new agreement, Acero has reportedly dropped a complaint filed against the CTU with the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board, a body appointed by Republican governor Bruce Rauner, for unfair labor practices.

Neither CTU nor Acero have offered concrete details of the contract. The media has claimed it includes pay raises for paraprofessionals based on seniority and education level; a reduction in the class size cap from 32 to 30 and a school year closer to the length of Chicago Public Schools’ academic year. It also includes some type of “sanctuary school” status for immigrant students.

The CTU is notorious for hailing every sellout as a “victory” and concealing the full picture from teachers. In any case, the union has collaborated in repeatedly driving down the wages, benefits and working conditions of Chicago Public School teachers. Therefore any “parity” achieved by charter school teachers is part of the general lowering of conditions for all teachers throughout the city.

From the beginning of the strike the union kept the strikers in the dark. A remarkable vagueness characterized the entire process—an indicator of the disrespect to teachers—from the demands, to the tentative agreement, to the ratification process. As far as the CTU and its officials were concerned the whole thing was a backdrop for the endorsement of mayoral candidate Toni Preckwinkle. The CTU endorsed the Democratic Cook County Board president and five-term alderman on the second day of the strike, just hours after she appeared on the picket lines to announce her phony education policy for the city.

The CTU is led by union president Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), which has long promoted illusions in and covered up for the anti-working-class character of the Democratic Party and the trade unions.

These political machinations were on full display at a “victory rally” Sunday afternoon at the CTU headquarters, which was held a few hours after the agreement had been announced. At the event, Chris Baehrend, the chairman of the CTU-aligned Chicago Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff, and other union officials promised more details about the agreement but provided no information to teachers. The event was wrapped up without any questions or comments from the floor.

The “victory rally” for charter school teachers turned out to be an election rally for sitting and aspiring Democratic politicians. Each day of the strike, however, provided a sharp contrast between the teachers and staff fighting extremely exploitative conditions, and the Democratic Party officials and union officialdom who over the last several decades have created a disaster in Chicago schools. This includes the betrayal of the 2012 teachers strike, which paved the way for mass school closings and an expansion of charters. In a quid pro quo with the Emanuel administration, the unions gained access to “organize” charter school teachers to make up for the loss of dues from thousands of laid off CPS teachers.

Speakers included Democrats Preckwinkle, State Representative for the 10th District Melissa Conyears-Ervin, who is currently running for city treasurer, and newly elected County Commissioner Brandon Johnson, a Preckwinkle protege and CTU staffer in the union’s political division. The rally was also promoted by the Democratic Socialists of America and featured their endorsed candidates for city elections that will take place February 2019.

Preckwinkle said, “I want to thank Jesse Sharkey, Stacey Davis Gates and all of the CTU membership who believed in my vision for an inclusive and united Chicago that focuses on the needs of working families and our neighborhoods.”

Promoting the CTU, Preckwinkle said she supported the union’s “efforts to fight for more resources for your students, better working conditions for educators, and an end to the bad practices of the charter industry and win the schools our students deserve.” The latter is a tag line of the mildly reformist program written by the ISO to give the CTU and other unions a pseudo-left cover.

Sharkey thanked each Democratic politician by name and, acting as if his moment had finally arrived, postured as an influential player in Democratic Party machine politics. “We are no longer a few people meeting in the

basements of churches, but we are now a movement that commands national attention and can stop the city. We are not a powerful union because we found friends and that made us powerful. We became powerful, and then we found friends.”

That’s it in a nutshell. Drooling over the influence that his pseudo-left counterparts have in European governments, such as Greece, pseudo-left figures like Sharkey have found a path to lucrative incomes and eventual integration in capitalist governments through the vehicle of the pro-capitalist and corporatist unions.

The Democratic Party, in the face of growing popular hostility, is desperately trying to refurbish its image by posturing as “progressive,” and enjoys the full support of the organizations of the upper-middle class like the ISO and DSA.

Teachers want to wage a determined fight to defend public education. This is not possible if they are straitjacketed by unions, which function as tools for the corporate and political establishment. Securing the funding for high quality public education, decent living standards and working conditions for teachers and the eradication of poverty and other social ills is not possible without expropriating the private fortunes of billionaires like the Pritzkers, Jeff Bezos and Warren Buffett.

In order to fight, teachers need to organize rank-and-file committees across Chicago and suburban districts, which are independent of the unions and the Democratic Party, to unite and link up their struggle with other sections of workers, including autoworkers, UPS workers and Amazon workers. This must be connected to a new political strategy based on the fight for socialism.

The authors also recommend:

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