

Longest-serving Chicago alderman charged with attempted extortion

Kristina Betinis
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In a federal courtroom in Chicago last Thursday, 14th Ward alderman and city council finance chairman Edward Burke was charged with seeking to extort business for his law firm and a \$10,000 campaign contribution from an Archer Heights Burger King franchisee operating a restaurant in his ward.

Long a major figure in the corrupt Democratic Party machine, Burke was arrested just ahead of the city council elections in February. This has had the effect of exposing once again the Democratic Party's deep corruption and shameless profit-seeking.

Burke did not enter a plea on Thursday afternoon, and was released after posting \$10,000 bond. Later on Thursday, he told reporters he had done nothing wrong. A condition of his release is getting rid of 23 handguns found in his city offices.

The federal complaint alleges Burke withheld permits for renovations to the Burger King to force the franchise owner to retain Burke's law firm for his property tax work. The FBI investigation began in 2017 after Burger King executives contacted law enforcement. Federal agents raided Burke's offices in late November 2018.

The complaint notes Burke's office went so far as to have a ward employee tell a restaurant representative that the construction had to stop, and "the business has to stop." Eventually the Burger King executives agreed to give some tax work to Burke's firm, Klafter and Burke, as well as a \$10,000 donation to the re-election campaign of Cook County Board Chair Toni Preckwinkle. Preckwinkle is now the front-runner in the February mayoral election. The complaint cites the donation was made "in order to prevent Burke's further interference" with the restaurant. The Preckwinkle campaign claims to have given back that donation.

Though the restaurant is not named in the federal

complaint, it came to light that it was the restaurant on Pulaski and 41st that had been central to an investigation of the 2014 murder of teenager Laquan McDonald by Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke. That restaurant's surveillance cameras captured the teen's murder and Chicago police were found to have gone into the restaurant and forced employees to give them access to the cameras in an attempt to destroy the video evidence of the killing.

The Burger King franchise owner, Shoukat Dhanani, is the second-largest Burger King franchisee in the US with more than 500 stores. In 2017, he was forced to pay \$250,000 in fines for 843 child labor violations in his Massachusetts stores. Alderman Burke evidently wanted a cut in the profit-making.

On Friday, Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced Burke had stepped down from his position as city finance chairman. After that position was vacated, Emanuel announced on Sunday a forensic audit was planned for the \$100 million per year city workers' compensation program run by Burke, which has been exempt from oversight by the city's inspector general. Burke has been accused in recent months of giving workers compensation and disability checks to political allies and supporters.

So-called "ghost payrolling" is a long-standing patronage practice in which aldermen award different forms of unearned compensation in exchange for off-the-books political work and favors. Chicago city leaders have periodically come under federal investigation for the practice. In 1996, one such investigation turned up several well-known ghost payroll beneficiaries from the time of the first Mayor Daley, including Harold Washington, later Chicago's first African-American mayor. At the time, federal investigators remarked that none of the ward bosses or

city officials perceived that they had done anything wrong, and insisted this is simply the way city business is conducted.

Ed Burke is the longest serving alderman in the history of the city council, and has run the 14th ward since 1969. He was once a Chicago police officer and media reports indicate he has been a licensed private detective and security contractor since the 1980s. He is currently a law partner at Klafter and Burke, a real estate tax assessment firm.

Burke's wife Ann is an Illinois Supreme Court justice for the first judicial district. Earlier this year, Burke was honored at the City Club of Chicago for 50 years in Chicago politics.

Burke, who is 75, is part of an old guard of ward bosses that includes figures such as Ed "Fast Eddie" Vrdolyak, who once led the Cook County Democratic Party and was convicted in 2007 of mail and wire fraud and in 2016 of tax evasion, and Tom Keane, convicted in 1974 of mail fraud and conspiracy charges. Thirty-three Chicago alderman have been convicted of corruption according to former alderman and current University of Illinois-Chicago political scientist Dick Simpson.

Burke is a deeply corrupt representative of a deeply corrupt Democratic Party. The investigation and complaint, and any future indictment, emerge out of the day-to-day conflicts of the political cliques vying for power in a city that seems "up for grabs" since Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced he would not run for re-election.

Burke confirmed he will be running for re-election in the February 26, 2019 vote. With less than two months to go before the city elections, Burke's arrest has elicited more than the usual ritualistic calls for an end to corruption and for new leadership. A number of Democratic Party hopefuls are seeking to take advantage of this scandal.

Burke's ward is majority-Hispanic and he faces four challengers, all of them Hispanic. In recent days, former county commissioner and newly elected Congressman Jesus "Chuy" Garcia endorsed a Burke opponent from his own organization, 28-year-old Tanya Patino.

"Whether he is charged tomorrow or next month doesn't really matter. Chicago needs to get cleaned up. That's why we need to elect new, young

representatives like Tanya to the Council," Garcia said.

Garcia was also involved in the campaign of Aaron Ortiz, Patino's boyfriend, who successfully won a primary nomination against Ed Burke's brother Dan in Illinois House District 1. The Garcia machine made it a central issue in that race that Ed Burke's law office took on Donald Trump as a client and won him lower property taxes for the riverfront hotel and condominiums in the Trump Tower in Chicago.

Patino said of Burke, "Him representing Donald Trump, a person who speaks so negatively of immigrant families, and that being also the majority of our ward, I think that's what I mean with him being disconnected and out of touch with the community."

The upcoming city elections to replace current Democratic mayor Rahm Emanuel promise to be even more chaotic and filthy than usual, as a record number of candidates come forward to vie for the mayoralty and fill city council seats in races that are by some estimates expected to result in turnover of as much as one-third of the council.



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