

City Colleges of Chicago averts staff and faculty strike

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On Monday, not even a week after the setting of a February 4 strike date, the Cook County College Teachers Union (CCCTU) and Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced that a tentative agreement had been reached over contracts for full-time faculty and staff at the City Colleges of Chicago (CCC), Chicago's community college system. While no details have been released, there is no doubt it is a rotten deal which paved the way for the union's endorsement of Democrat Toni Preckwinkle in the Chicago mayoral election on Tuesday.

Faculty at the system's seven colleges have been working without a contract since July, while the contract for staff expired the year before that. Faculty and staff, around 2,000 in total, had voted in December by 93 percent and 91 percent respectively to authorize a strike. They have been concerned not only to defend their own living standards, but to fight back against the relentless assault on teachers and education that has been carried out by the Emanuel administration and the entire Democratic Party in the city and state.

City College workers were demanding raises and a reduction in salary disparity, as well as a system of steps and lanes for some professional staff. They were also insisting that the colleges hire more librarians, set smaller lab sizes and staff a higher proportion of classes with full-time faculty, as opposed to the current practice of employing primarily poorly paid adjunct professors, who make up 60 percent of the teaching staff.

Workers have also been eager to oppose an administration plan that would scrap healthcare for retirees. Currently after retirement workers are able to receive healthcare for 10 years, and eliminating it would, in effect, raise the retirement age to 65, the age at most would qualify for Medicare.

Aside from these issues, there is a deep desire to fight back against CCC's "Reinvention" program, which has seen consolidation of college programs at specific campuses, limiting the range of options available to students at any particular one. The program, which was started under previous mayor Richard M. Daley, forced the colleges to specialize in particular programs, with curriculum dictated

by over 100 corporate partners. As a result of the limited program variety and travel challenges for many students, CCC has seen its enrollment fall by nearly a third, from over 66,000 students in the year 2000, to just under 45,000 today.

Other demands included more faculty oversight over curriculum changes, while the union also pushed for an elected board of trustees, similar to the Chicago Teachers Union's (CTU) demands for an elected school board for Chicago Public Schools (CPS). Currently, the CCC board is, like that of CPS, appointed entirely by Chicago's mayor. Elected boards would simply make CCC and CPS like the state's other community colleges and school districts, whose elected boards are often mired in corruption and carry out nearly identical policies.

Neither the union nor the CCC administration have released any details concerning the tentative agreements, though the *Chicago Sun-Times* has reported that the contracts are for four years. According to the union's website, faculty and staff received information about the tentative agreements and ratification procedures on Monday. As with most recent union contracts, workers will likely be shown only selective highlights, and not the new contract in its entirety.

A joint statement released by City Colleges of Chicago Chancellor Juan Salgado and CCCTU president Tony Johnston stated, "We believe these are both fair agreements for City Colleges faculty, professional staff, students and the taxpayers of Chicago and are pleased we could work together to continue to support our students."

Emanuel released a statement saying, "The City Colleges of Chicago are making record progress for the tens of thousands of students they serve. This agreement recognizes the commitment of the faculty and professionals who are helping write a new chapter in higher education in Chicago. I commend all parties for staying at the table and working in good faith to reach an agreement, keep our City Colleges moving forward, and help Chicago students achieve their hopes and dreams."

The "progress" to which Emanuel alludes is largely a

fraud, as indicated by a college inspector general's report which said that the increased graduation rate at Richard J. Daley College was artificially raised by the awarding of numerous certificates through a largely unsupervised International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers training program. In 2017, the 300 diplomas awarded by the college through that program raised its graduation rate to 26 percent, while it would have stood at just 12 percent without them.

The cuts and consolidations at CCC have occurred in the context of a general assault on public higher education in Illinois on the part of the Democratic Party over nearly two decades. From 2000 to 2015, the Illinois state government cut state appropriations to higher education by \$1.4 billion, according to the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability, resulting in a per-student spending reduction of 54 percent.

Adjusted for inflation, these cuts amounted to a 41 percent decline in higher education spending, more than any other area of state government. Health care and human services saw massive reductions of 22 percent and 34 percent respectively, with K-12 education receiving a comparatively smaller cut of 13 percent.

During the two-year budget impasse from July 2015 to August 2017, community colleges received no money at all from the state for 10 months. Even after the passing of a regular budget, higher education funding has not been restored to even its pre-impasse levels, with funding for the current fiscal year over \$150 million less than the funding in fiscal year 2015, the last year before the impasse began.

As a result of the program consolidation and cuts to higher education funding, headcount enrollment at the CCC has fallen 21.5 percent since 2014, while full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment has fallen 22.5 percent, indicating a higher proportion of part-time students. Community college enrollment in Illinois as a whole has fallen 16 percent since 2014. Since 2000, the number has fallen almost 100,000, or 25 percent.

By reaching an agreement before the February 4 strike date, Emanuel and the union avoid a strike during the closing weeks of the Chicago mayoral election campaign, which would have put the candidates in the potentially embarrassing situation of having to articulate their anti-education policies.

In its election endorsement of Cook County Board President and Chair of the Cook County Democratic Party Toni Preckwinkle, the CCCTU website claimed, "Toni Preckwinkle has a clear track record of advocating for progressive policies as an alderman and as President of the Cook County Board."

In fact, during her term on the Cook County Board, Preckwinkle has presided over hundreds of millions in

budget cuts, including \$120 million from the county health system. She has presided over the layoff of thousands of workers, and even attacked the pensions of county workers. There is absolutely no basis to believe that Preckwinkle as mayor would carry out substantially different policies than Emanuel.

CCCTU claims that Preckwinkle has agreed to support legislation for an elected board at CCC as well as program variety at the various colleges. Workers at CCC should be deeply skeptical of these claims.

The Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) has boasted about having a seat at the table under newly elected billionaire governor J.B. Pritzker, a Democrat. CTU President and leading International Socialist Organization member Jesse Sharkey has boasted of his union's newfound influence in the city's machine politics, saying "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."

The exchange involved in the unions having a "seat at the table" is a clear understanding that these organizations will be responsible for policing workers on the job, as well as making sure that anger over continued cuts and the erosion of living standards is contained. Workers at CCC should reject the rotten collaboration of the unions and the Democratic Party and form independent rank-and-file committees to fight for better wages, benefits and working conditions and to link up with the struggles of other educators and workers in the United States and internationally.



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