Teachers at four Chicago charter school campuses walk out

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With contract talks stalled after nine months of negotiations, 175 teachers at four Civitas campuses, part of Chicago International Charter School (CICS), walked out on strike Tuesday at 6 a.m. Teachers and staff are seeking raises, smaller class sizes, a reduction in healthcare costs and more support staff including social workers.

The talks broke down over the demand for 8 percent raises in the first year. CICS says it would accept the proposal only by eliminating crucial support staff, like social workers and counselors.

The four schools—ChicagoQuest, Northtown, Wrightwood and Ralph Ellison schools—are managed by Civitas Education Partners and have an enrollment of about 2,200 students. This walkout is the second strike of charter teachers in the US; the first took place at Acero Charter Schools, also in Chicago, last December. Charter schools are publicly-funded by taxpayers but privately managed.

CICS has kept the schools open with non-union strikebreakers and school administrators, according to the *Sun Times*. The charter operator said there would be "enough adults in the building to ensure that students are safe," and students will be in "online learning, recreational and arts activities."

Justifying this decision, Civitas CEO LeeAndra Khan said, "Our first responsibility is the safety and well-being of each of the 2,200 students who attend our four schools. If teachers go on strike, it is simply too great a burden on the families of those students to close our schools when many families will struggle to find alternative care for their children."

Civitas is a subgroup of the CICS chain of charters. Four of CICS 17 campuses are unionized. Like other charters, they hire for-profit Education Management Organizations (EMOs) like Civitas to run the schools. The CICS executives are real estate investors, general contractors, partners in law firms and executives in financial services corporations (including Mesirow Financial) that generously support the Democratic Party.

CICS CEO Elizabeth Shaw is a former Teach for America executive who worked with notorious national school "reformer" Paul Vallas at the city and state levels in Louisiana. Vallas, who is running for mayor of Chicago in an election to take place later this month, worked closely with the Obama administration to convert the New Orleans public school district to majority charter schools in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

CICS was originally established as part of a plan by the Renaissance Schools Fund, a pro-privatization corporate group, to create 13 new charter chain schools in Chicago with the aim of capturing 20 percent of the city's student population. It was enthusiastically welcomed by then-mayor-elect Rahm Emanuel.

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) charges that CICS put only $500,000, or two percent of its budget, towards classrooms at the four union schools during the last year, while increasing spending on management by 35 percent. The union states that CICS increased the number of those receiving six-figure salaries from four positions in 2017 to fourteen.

CTU also claims CICS created two new charter management organizations, wholly owned by CICS, that function as shell companies that take public dollars away from classroom needs. Following the standard playbook of such for-profit EMOs, these shell companies are alleged to be taking upwards of thirty cents on the dollar from the four schools on strike into "management fees." It is also suspected that a million dollars of publicly-funded taxpayer money is either

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being hoarded or has already been invested with the company of CICS co-founder and former president Craig Henderson.

Further, CTU officials claim the charter operator has $36 million in funds available for school operations, a sum Civitas claims is an “emergency fund” equivalent to three months of operating expenses.

The starting salary for a CICS teacher is around $44,000, $8,000 less than teachers entering Chicago Public Schools make. Teaching assistants start at a miserly $28,000.

Teachers have spoken out on social media to demand the union not accept any class size “loopholes.” Last December, teachers at 15 Acero Charter Schools walked out for four days over pay and conditions. The CTU later presented as a “victory” the agreement that included pay raises and a reduction of the overcrowded Acero class size by just one student—to a cap of 31 students per room. Teachers, on the contrary, emphasized that their large class sizes are still unmanageable and sometimes dangerous. The Acero agreement still has not been made public.

The Acero strike was used as political fodder by the discredited American Federation of Teachers (AFT) leadership and the Democratic Party. AFT President Randi Weingarten dropped in for a couple of hours on the first day of the strike for photo-ops. Later on, the CTU’s endorsed mayoral candidate, Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle, used the marching teachers as a backdrop for her campaign.

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

The author recommends:

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