Chicago mayoral run-off: The cost-cutter or the cop?

Kristina Betinis
29 March 2019

Next Tuesday April 2, a run-off election will decide the next mayor of the city of Chicago. Two Democratic candidates, both African-American women—Toni Preckwinkle and Lori Lightfoot—have been locked in a bitter and ugly fight for the mayor's office.

The third largest city in the US, Chicago is characterized by extraordinary levels of social inequality, a reality that has been demonstrated at each stage of the municipal elections so far. All candidates accept the fiscal limits laid down by the billionaires and big business, leaving virtually no funds for social services or wage and benefit increases for public sector workers.

After decades of cuts and givebacks, there are major areas where social investment is needed: housing, transit infrastructure, schools, hospitals and health care centers. But Preckwinkle and Lightfoot, while desperate to portray themselves as progressive, have spoken of little but the constraints they accept and will work under.

The primary elections of February 26 narrowed the crowded field of 14 down to two: Toni Preckwinkle, chairwoman of both the Cook County Board and the Cook County Democratic Party, and former federal prosecutor and longtime Chicago Police Department official Lori Lightfoot. The new mayor is set to take office May 20.

Given the choice between Preckwinkle, who has cut the better part of $1 billion from the Cook County budget and boasts about it regularly, and Lightfoot, who has represented the Chicago Police Department in different roles throughout her long career, voter turnout next week is likely remain near a historic low.

Even by the standards of the filthy corruption and violence that characterize Chicago capitalist politics, it's difficult to imagine how the options could be much worse than machine-hack cost-cutter or defender of police violence.

The voters that decided the run-off would be between Lightfoot and Preckwinkle numbered less than 541,000, or just one-third of those registered to vote in the city. The near-record low turnout reflects the widespread disgust with Democratic Party rule in the city, especially among youth, who largely abstained from voting—only 3.5 percent.

The vast majority of African-American voters who voted in the primary did not support either Lightfoot or Preckwinkle, making it more difficult for either candidate to proclaim themselves the representative of the "black community" and in that way give themselves a "left" image. This has been a major stumbling block for both campaigns, even as the candidates attempt to assure business that its interests will also be served.

In the primary, both candidates attempted to portray themselves as progressive reformers, distorting their own records beyond recognition. Both candidates have decades-long careers in which they've thoroughly integrated themselves into the Democratic Party apparatus and the business interests it serves, especially investment banking and real estate.

Both campaigned on their race and gender identity in an effort to order to obscure their basically right-wing politics and distinguish themselves in the large primary field. Both candidates are African-American women and Lightfoot is lesbian.

But once the run-off campaign began and the two had to distinguish themselves in a head-to-head contest, the dynamic shifted. The race became nasty, alienating the city population even further. Homophobic attack ads against Lightfoot were circulated on the south side.

On Monday March 25, a poll by WTTW, Temkin and Harris was released indicating a significant lead for Lightfoot of 53 percent to Preckwinkle's 17 percent. Another recent poll indicated white middle-class voters, mainly on the north side, support Lightfoot 64 to 13. Much of Lightfoot's support during the primary was in the upper middle class and wealthy areas on the north side.

In trying to win support on the south and west side Preckwinkle, recently enlisted the help of US Representative Bobby Rush, who declared at a campaign event in Bronzeville: "This election is really about what type of police force we're going to have in the city of Chicago, and everyone who votes for Lori, the blood of the next young black man or black woman who is killed by the police is on your hands. If you're against police brutality and murder, you ought to be for Toni Preckwinkle. She's the only one who is going to have the police under her control."

While there is no reason to believe Preckwinkle would have the Chicago Police Department (CPD) "under control", and neither Preckwinkle nor Lightfoot support removing law enforcement from public schools, Lightfoot's entire career and her campaign statements have aimed at repairing and improving the reputation of the police.

At a recent debate she claimed, "The police and the community need each other. The rift that has developed has to be healed. We have to get to a place where the police are doing their job, serving and protecting in a way that's constitutional but, more importantly, with respect and empathy for the people they're serving."

© World Socialist Web Site

Chicago has spent more than $100 million in settlements involving police abuse. Lightfoot is more concerned about the money paid out than the suffering and death at the hands of the police thugs, for which the money is small compensation. She said, “That’s unacceptable. I think it’s offensive to taxpayers in the city. We need to be proper stewards of precious tax dollars. We’re not looking at risk management systems and redundant systems that could save money.”

In trying to portray herself as a reformer, Lightfoot described her long record as a mayoral appointee to police oversight commissions as signifying opposition to police corruption and murder. Those who have pointed out her utter failure at police “reform” in those years are absolutely correct to do so, but they also risk missing the point. These appointments are political positions, and likely key to the favor Lightfoot has won recently from business interests.

Once a federal prosecutor, Lightfoot was the head of the Chicago Police Board, the Chicago Police Department (CPD) Office of Professional Standards and the Civilian Office of Police Accountability, the latter two ostensibly oversight divisions that put part of the Chicago police department in charge of investigating complaints against its officers. A senior equity partner for the corporate law firm Meyer Brown, Lightfoot also represented CPD in suits brought against it. One of these cases involved a settlement to the family of Christine Eilman for more than $22 million after it was found CPD bore responsibility for its officers dumping the young woman in a dangerous area while she was in a mental health crisis, acts that were determined to have contributed to her violent death.

Lightfoot enjoys the public support of the Illinois Education Association, US Representative and Bernie Sanders surrogate Jesus “Chuy” Garcia—who ran against former Mayor Rahm Emanuel in 2015—and prominent feminist (and one-time CIA asset) Gloria Steinem. Both the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Sun-Times* have endorsed her.

In an effort to portray Lightfoot as inexperienced, Preckwinkle has boasted of her proven ability to cut costs, lay off workers and “find efficiencies,” including cuts to worker’s compensation the system of payment when workers are injured on the job.

She said, “In the last 9 years we’ve made $850 million in cuts. The first obligation of the mayor is to look for efficiencies. That’s why I’ve talked about not just tax increment finance reform, but workman’s comp reform.”

This is the candidate that has the support of the Chicago Teachers Union. Preckwinkle is endorsed by Ken Bennett, an aide to outgoing Mayor Rahm Emanuel; Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White; Valerie Jarrett, the senior adviser to former President Barack Obama; three Service Employees International Union (SEIU) locals; Teamsters Local 700 and United Food and Commercial Workers Local 881.

Preckwinkle was recently re-elected President of the Cook County Board of Commissioners. She is the first African-American and woman to serve as Chairperson of the Cook County Democratic Party, which controls the city and county governments for the most part.

Prior to taking over as head of the county board in 2011, she served as an Alderman for 19 years representing the city’s 4th ward in Hyde Park. Preckwinkle’s decades in the city council have given her close ties to its often felonious cast of characters, like recently indicted alderman Ed Burke. The Chicago Teachers Union has directly intervened in this year’s mayoral race, a role the union reprised from 2015. Preckwinkle claims to support the expansion of certain staff in public schools and has agreed to a four-year moratorium on school closures.

Both candidates claim to support an elected school board. The Chicago Public Schools board has been since the 1990s under mayoral control.

Negotiations between the city and CTU for the Chicago Public Schools teachers’ contract got underway in January, and part of CTU’s strategy is to ensure they have a good political relationship with their new boss. CTU President Jesse Sharkey, a member of the International Socialist Organization, issued a statement following the primary election in which he hailed the election of either candidate on the basis of their race and gender, not what class they represent, declaring, “An African-American woman on the cusp of the mayor’s seat is a monumental achievement.”

Chicago has had a previous African-American mayor, Harold Washington, and a previous female mayor, Jane Byrne. Neither lifted a finger to help the working class, and both served the interests of corporate Chicago. There is no reason to think that a blending of the two, an African-American woman, cut from the same mold of capitalist politics, will prove any different.

The question of city finances has been left to debates in the very last days in the run up to the election. The city’s now-permanent state of budget crisis has been a weapon in the Democrats’ political arsenal in years of attacks on the living standards of working families. Every effort has been made to lower expectations in this election for any serious improvements to needed city infrastructure, housing, jobs, social services.

For all the noise made about “progressives” taking office in Chicago, their proposals leave the massive wealth of the financial aristocracy completely untouched. Neither candidate supports taxing the financial aristocracy. When asked about the so-called “Lasalle Street Tax” on financial and investment banking transactions, both firmly said no. Both candidates also support the expansion of casino gaming. Lightfoot has courted big business and recently earned positive press from *Crain’s Chicago* for her statements of opposition to rent control and any kind of tax on financial transactions.

According to the proposed 2019 city budget, an astonishing 21.6 percent of all city of Chicago spending will go to financial institutions in the form of debt payments, much of which is pension debt. That amounts to more than $1.9 billion.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site