Teachers at three Chicago charter schools strike as union blocks common fight with public school educators

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Around 80 teachers at three Chicago Public Schools (CPS) charter campuses with a combined student enrollment of over 1,000 students began a strike last Wednesday to fight for higher wages and support services for their students. The strike is one of several that have been carried out at Chicago charter schools this year, affecting 22 different school campuses. Notably, all have followed a similar pattern at the direction of the Chicago Teachers Union, which has isolated the teachers' struggles and signed deals that keep in place what is essentially a two-tier education system.

Charter schools in Chicago are privately run but officially public schools, which receive public funds based upon their enrollment. However, these schools have a great deal of leeway in how they apportion the funds they receive, taking out large sums as management fees and administrator salaries. The teachers and other staff at the schools are also not covered by the regular CPS contract, and are paid far less, one of the reasons they were created in the first place.

Two of the schools currently on strike, Instituto Health Sciences Career Academy and the Instituto Justice Leadership Academy, are both run by charter operator Instituto del Progreso Latino. Latino Youth High School is operated by the Pilsen Wellness Center. While both are technically considered nonprofits, the former's board is dominated by representatives of the banks, insurance companies and other large corporations, while the latter has over the years been embroiled in scandals involving misappropriated funds and nepotistic hiring practices.

Initially, teachers at five schools had planned to strike Thursday, but the CTU reached a last-minute deal with officials from two of them, Youth Connection Leadership Academy and Chicago High School for the Arts (ChiArts). Additionally, 450 staff members at the City Colleges of Chicago, the city's two-year community college system, who are also CTU members, went on strike Wednesday morning, only to see a deal reached within 10 hours.

Rather than working to conduct the widest joint struggle to put an end to this two-tier education system or even for meaningful increases in teacher wages and benefits, the Chicago Teachers Union and its parent organizations, the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT), have operated according to a planned strategy of keeping teachers' strikes in different schools, cities and states isolated from each other, only to shut them down at the earliest opportunity.

The deals that have emerged are uniformly rotten, with wage increases barely covering inflation, but often with a variety of announcements of increased "wraparound" services, vague promises to hire counselors or other support staff, or other costless measures of dubious significance, like "sanctuary schools" provisions that claim to protect immigrant students, all associated with "social justice unionism." That movement has been strongly backed by the leadership of the CTU, the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), including CTU President Jesse Sharkey, a leader of the now defunct pseudo-left International Socialist Organization (ISO).

It is unquestionable that schools are underfunded and lack basic personnel and services, but while social justice unionism postures as a progressive or left union movement to help solve these problems, it in fact emerged as a retreat from the militant teachers' strikes of the 1960s, with the idea that teachers would give up wage increases in order to help their students and neighborhoods, a concession to right-wing arguments claiming teachers were only out for themselves. This pseudo-left cover for the unions has also long been associated with identity politics, claiming that the real cause of deteriorating schools is racism, not the capitalist system, and boosting illusions in black and Hispanic Democratic Party politicians.

Although the CTU and the national teachers unions have widely touted the charter teachers' strikes as a series of victories, the most significant effect has been the maintenance of a two-tier education system, as well as a two-tier wage system for the teachers themselves.

Details of the agreements at the two schools that came to agreements, as well as at the City Colleges, have not been made available but will assuredly follow the pattern laid out in recent strikes at Chicago International Charter Schools and the Acero charter network, in addition to the sellout agreements in Los Angeles, Oakland and elsewhere, in keeping wage demands to

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a minimum and preventing teachers from making any real gains.

The WSWS Teacher Newsletter covered a press conference and strike rally last Wednesday at ChiArts. Carlene Carpenter, a teacher from Latino Youth High School, told reporters, “It is May, we still don’t have a contract and we have been bargaining since the summer. The process has been insulting to educators… Enough is enough, our demands are simple: fair wages, fair contract, and better resources for our students including mental health services and funded after-school programs.”

Carpenter explained that students in her school experience trauma at a higher level than the average and are in more need of special services. “We want our students to be successful, which requires an environment and resources that are conducive to such goals,” she said, adding, “We will stay, and we will fight.”

Emily Maassen, an educator at ChiArts, told reporters that academic courses have been severely underfunded, causing some of the best teachers to leave for other schools while being replaced by online learning programs. According to Maassen, teachers at ChiArts are paid 54 percent of what teachers at neighboring schools are paid.

Taylee Heltt, a student at ChiArts, said, “I support my teachers. I love learning, I genuinely wanted to be here, and my teachers are what made that happen. Unfortunately, with the high turnover rate at ChiArts I lost my support staff. I lost my favorite teachers.”

Heltt said the school’s administration is constantly preaching to the students about values like “community” but the community at the school is the very thing being destroyed by withholding the funds needed to provide quality teachers and services.

Gema Gaete, a staff member at Instituto Justice Leadership Academy, said, “For the past eight years our staff has been laid off, fired and continuously had resources taken from them. When I started, we had a total staff of 24, now we have a staff of nine.” Gaete said her school has no counselors and students do not have a science teacher. Instead, students are forced to take online classes, which Gaete said could never be provide the same instruction and care as a real teacher.

Gaete said that the school is not even willing to allocate resources for special education mandated by federal law. According to Gaete, the school went so far as to hire a lawyer at 500 dollars an hour to fight having to pay out these funds.

The strike of charter school teachers in Chicago is the latest in an international movement of teachers fighting for the defense of public education. In all these struggles it has been the teachers themselves who are fighting not just for higher pay but for resources to support and benefit the students while those same struggles are sabotaged by the unions.

Among the figures appearing at the Wednesday rally were Randi Weingarten, the President of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and Carlos Ramirez-Rosa, a Chicago Alderman and Democratic Committeeman for the 35th ward who is also a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

Weingarten, whose union salary was $514,000 last year, has been at the forefront of smothering and isolating every struggle of teachers to emerge over the past two years. She and other union functionaries, including Sharkey and CORE leadership of the CTU, have abandoned any struggle against charter schools or their expansion, which they once nominally opposed. The unions see highly exploited charter school teachers as a new source of dues income to replace the tens of thousands of teachers who have been laid off or left the profession due to low wages—all with the complicity of the AFT and the other major teacher union, the National Education Association (NEA).

The CTU is already laying the groundwork for the betrayal of 22,000 Chicago Public Schools teachers and support staff whose contract expires on June 30. After pushing illusions in newly elected Democratic mayor Lori Lightfoot, Sharkey is complaining that Lightfoot wants to drag out negotiations for a new contract and has called for a federal mediator to oversee bargaining. This underscores the fact that the CTU is preparing another betrayal of teachers, and working with district officials and the Democratic Party to close the wage gap between public school and charter school teachers by further driving down CPS teachers’ real income.

The CTU gave the green light to the closing of dozens of public schools, the layoff of thousands of CPS teachers and staff and the vast expansion of charter schools when it betrayed the 2012 strike against then mayor Rahm Emanuel. As a reward for the betrayal, the union was given access to unionize teachers at one of the largest charter school companies, run by one of Emanuel’s largest financial backers.

If charter school teachers are to take their fight forward, they must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the CTU by forming rank-and-file committees and fighting to spread the strike to all charter and public schools. Their slogan should be the call to convert all charters into genuine public schools, and to guarantee full funding for a high-quality public education for all.

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