

“All schools aren’t created equal in Chicago”

Chicago teachers speak on inequality, attacks on public education at downtown rally

Marcus Day
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The Chicago Teachers Union held a rally outside the James R. Thompson Center in downtown Chicago Wednesday under the slogan “Standing strong for the schools Chicago’s students deserve.”

Teachers have grown increasingly disillusioned with the high-flown “social justice” pretensions of the CTU, since it has collaborated for years with the city’s Democratic Party administration and former Mayor Rahm Emanuel in imposing school closings, layoffs, and countless other attacks on teachers and public education.

As the rally took place, former CTU President Karen Lewis and the union’s political-legislative director Stacy Davis-Gates were holding closed-door discussions with newly inaugurated Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot, a former federal prosecutor, to discuss plans for forthcoming attacks on teachers and public education. The labor agreement for nearly 25,000 educators expires on June 30.

Various national and local union officials, along with longtime political charlatans such as Jesse Jackson, took to the stage to offer demagogic speeches paying lip service to teachers’ aspirations, at the same time attempting to promote illusions in the Democratic Party, which has been responsible for attacking public education and teachers’ working conditions no less than the Republicans.

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, who has a salary in excess of \$500,000, was introduced as “she who shuts it down across the country,” unintentionally summing up her role in sabotaging a whole series of teachers strike over the last year. She stated most bluntly the purpose of the event, saying, “So I’m really glad to be in Chicago today with the CTU welcome party to your new mayor.”

Current CTU President Jesse Sharkey, a leading

member of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization, unconvincingly attempted to present himself and the CTU as skeptics and even potential opponents of Lightfoot, at the same time giving credence to her claims to be seeking a “fairer and more just city, not just for downtown but on the South and West Sides too, and the working-class neighborhoods.”

Making it clear that the CTU is opposed to any strike action to fight the new attacks being readied by Lightfoot and district officials, Sharkey has called for the intervention of a federal mediator in the contract talks.

Only a small crowd of 300-400 people were on hand at the rally, reflecting the mass disaffection of teachers with the CTU and the Democratic Party. By contrast, thousands of teachers rallied in November 2015 after working without a contract for five months. A year later, the CTU signed a deal with Mayor Rahm Emanuel, which gutted pension rights for new teachers and increased out-of-pocket costs. It also did nothing to address chronic underfunding, overcrowded classes, shortages of supplies and support staff, and punitive evaluation and accountability schemes.

Many of those present at the rally were part of the union apparatus itself, or the pseudo-left promoters of it. Nonetheless, a smaller number of rank-and-file teachers attended, seeking to express their determination to fight for better schools for their students and working conditions for themselves.

The *World Socialist Web Site Teachers Newsletter* spoke to several of them.

Angela and her friends work at schools on the city’s deeply impoverished West Side. In neighborhoods such as Austin and West Garfield Park, the unemployment and poverty rates have remained well into the double digits in the years following the 2008 recession.

They noted that they are forced to oversee large classrooms on their own, without any assistants. These included those teaching pre-kindergarten, with children as young as three or four years old.

“I think the middle school teachers need support as well; they need an aide too,” said one. “I’m a 3rd grade teacher, but I advocate for the middle school teachers. Just because the kids are bigger doesn’t mean they don’t need more resources.”

The pre-K teacher described how CPS has sought to skirt nominal student-teacher ratio requirements, saying that when her school underwent a federal audit, “I had visitors in my classroom every single day, people from big places I had never seen before. I had a fake assistant so I could meet the correct ratio. Why can’t I get this all day long? It wasn’t right.”

“Teachers feel like we have no voice,” her friend added. “If we say something, we’re scared we’ll lose our jobs.”

They said that their students, many of them living in the deeply impoverished sections of the city, faced a litany of challenges and obstacles. “PTSD, ADHD, autism. Violence. Poverty.”

“We don’t have any librarians, any nurses,” Angela continued. “We’re everything. We’re all they got.”

“And then the lack of support for their parents,” her friend added. “They need resources too.”

Each noted the deep inequality between schools in poorest parts of the city—concentrated on the South and West Sides—and the wealthiest, including not only the North Side, but also growing pockets of the South, such as those surrounding Hyde Park, where former President Barack Obama previously resided. “All schools aren’t created equal in Chicago,” Angela said.

Speaking to the inadequate ability of teachers’ salaries to keep up with the skyrocketing costs of living in Chicago, the pre-kindergarten instructor noted, “I decided in 6th grade I wanted to be a teacher. And I wanted to live in a certain building. But when I got my first job as a teacher, and I saw how much it cost just for a studio [apartment], I realized I would never have my dream in Chicago. And that’s why I live in the suburbs.”

“We drive Uber in the summer because we don’t get paid in the summer,” Angela continued. “We’re doing Uber!”

“You know what we got for teacher appreciation one year? This is a fact. We got coupons out of the paper for Macy’s! Now I work at a school from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m., several times a week, don’t get paid for anything extra or anything over, and that’s what I got for appreciation.”

Each of the teachers indicated regularly working upwards of 12 or 14 hours a day, often 80 hours a week, during the school year.

“So, we do all this work,” Angela said, “from August until June, and then when the summertime comes, we don’t have time to spend with our own kids, ‘cause we don’t have any money. And when we do work in the summer, we’re burned out by the time the new year begins, because we never get a break. After you do five years, for a lot of people, that’s it. It’s too strenuous.”

Angela said she had initially had high hopes for the Obama administration, “but then the mayor came in, and he closed all those schools. It broke my heart.”

Several noted that they faced extended periods of unemployment because of Emanuel’s shutdown of nearly 50 schools in 2013.

The pre-K teacher had worked at a school that closed and said, “My coworkers that were older than me, a lot of them never found new jobs. It wasn’t because they were bad; it’s because they were older.” Another teacher who has worked for CPS for almost 30 years chimed in, “They didn’t want to pay us.”

“They did that on purpose because their salaries were higher,” Angela continued. “They’d rather get a new teacher, instead of a veteran teacher working 20 years because of their salary, and that’s not fair. For one of them, they get two younger teachers. But the veteran teachers are the cornerstone of the school. They dedicated their life. And they mentored me. I wouldn’t be where I’m at if it weren’t for them.”

The three applauded the recent wave of strikes and walkouts by teachers across the country. “I think it’s about time. They’re standing up for the children,” said one. Asked if they would be in favor of a nationwide teachers strike, they all voiced their support. “I think that would be great! I think that would be fantastic,” said another.



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