

Chicago Teachers Union prepares to back new Democratic mayor's austerity demands

Marcus Day
25 May 2019

With less than two months till the expiration of the contract for more than 20,000 teachers and paraprofessionals, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) is conspiring with the city's Democratic Party administration to impose a new round of austerity and attacks on public education.

The CTU has grown widely discredited among teachers, having collaborated with former Mayor Rahm Emanuel in the closures of dozens of schools, laying off of thousands of teachers and support staff and expanding school privatization and charter school schemes. The CTU has also colluded with the Democrats in attacking teacher pay, pensions and health care benefits. Since December, the union has also shut down and betrayed a series of strikes by highly exploited charter school teachers.

On a national scale, the CTU's parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the National Education Association (NEA), have sabotaged one struggle after another, in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, California, Washington, and elsewhere. The unions have made every effort to channel teachers' anger and opposition behind support for the Democratic Party, which under the Obama administration spearheaded the attacks on education and continues to do so in several states and large urban school districts like Los Angeles, New York City and Chicago.

The CTU has been led over the last decade by the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), former union president Karen Lewis and current union president Jesse Sharkey, a leader of the now defunct International Socialist Organization. In Chicago and around the country, CORE and its affiliates have institutionalized the use of hollow rhetoric about "social justice" and fighting for the "schools our children deserve" to cover up the unions' role as the chief prop of the Democratic Party and enforcer of its austerity program.

Aware and fearful of the rising tide teacher militancy and strike actions in the US and globally, the CTU and the AFT are now working out plans in secret with the newly inaugurated Democratic mayor, Lori Lightfoot, to block the aspirations of teachers and prevent a revolt in the US's third-largest city.

On Wednesday, the CTU held a demonstration in downtown Chicago under the slogan of "Standing strong for the schools Chicago students deserve." Billed as a rally for a "fair

contract," the event was in reality a "CTU welcoming party" for Lightfoot, as AFT President Randi Weingarten boasted from the stage.

In a significant indication of the depth of the erosion of support among teachers for the CTU, only a few hundred attended, a tiny fraction of the CTU's roughly 25,000 members and far below the thousands who demonstrated repeatedly during the 2015-16 contract struggles.

Many of those present were union officials or members of pseudo-left organizations such as the Democratic Socialists of America and Socialist Alternative. Those few teachers who did attend described increasingly abysmal schools and workdays, contradicting the claims of the rally speakers that the CTU has fought for and "won" improved conditions (see: "Chicago teachers speak on inequality, attacks on public education at downtown rally").

Along with Weingarten, Jesse Jackson, the longtime Democratic Party stooge, was the most shameless promoter of the new mayor, exclaiming, "We have a new day in Chicago, a new mayor, give it up for Lori Lightfoot!"

Current CTU President Jesse Sharkey who has played a central role in each of the union's sellouts, gave credence to Lightfoot's 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." At the same time, he unconvincingly attempted to present himself and the union as skeptics and even potential opponents of Lightfoot.

Signaling the CTU's intention to do everything possible to block a strike, Sharkey has called for a federal mediator to be brought in to oversee the talks, saying at the rally, "When we come back to school in the fall we'll have an offer for our members to read."

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 Lightfoot. "As our beloved Karen is having a sit down with Lori Lightfoot, the first African American female mayor of the city of Chicago," the rally MC noted, "no matter how we might feel, we can be sure that we made history."

Veteran Chicago teachers will likely feel nothing but dread that Lewis was sitting down for a tête-à-tête with Lightfoot to

discuss the future of public education in the city. The same “beloved Karen” is in fact notorious for leading the sellout of the 2012 Chicago teachers strike, bluntly admitting that the resulting agreement was “an austerity contract.” In the year following the strike, she openly supported the closing of schools, stating, “We understand the whole movement of closing schools and doing it aggressively. We either do this together in some reasonable way or we will always be fighting.”

While the CTU backed Lightfoot’s opponent, Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle, in the mayoral runoff election earlier this year, the union has since been at pains to demonstrate its goodwill towards the victor. Relying on identity politics, the CTU has made much of the fact that Lightfoot is the first female, gay, African-American mayor, thus seeking to burnish her image as a “progressive” and obscure her role as a representative of big business and the ruling class.

In doing so, the union has quickly dropped its previous demagogic criticisms of Lightfoot’s pro-business, anti-worker agenda.

In a March press release promoting Preckwinkle, the CTU noted Lightfoot’s ties to veteran corporate education “reform” operatives; her support for the transformation of shuttered schools into police training academies (Lightfoot previously served as head of Emanuel’s sham police oversight board); and her statement in January that for the 2019 Chicago teachers’ contract, “We can’t negotiate and give away dollars we don’t have.”

All this has been swept under the rug. An election ad produced by the CTU, “Who is the real Lori Lightfoot?” has since been removed from the union’s YouTube channel.

In a press release lauding Lightfoot on Monday, the CTU stated, “The Chicago Teachers Union congratulates Lori Lightfoot on her inauguration as mayor of our great city. She stands on the shoulders of former CTU presidents Karen Lewis and Jackie Vaughn, as well as Ida B. Wells, Willie Barrow and countless other Black women who fought tirelessly for equity and against the vestiges of institutional racism.”

“Chicago citizens demanded a new direction for their collective future, and elected Mayor Lightfoot out of a desire for bold and progressive ideas, and a commitment to building a more fair, just and equitable city.”

Lightfoot’s inaugural address, rife with banalities and vague promises for greater “equity,” at the same time contained the requisite code-phrases intended to reassure the city’s financial elite of her intentions to relentlessly defend their interests:

We must start with getting our fiscal house in order.

Over many, many years Chicago dug itself into a giant financial hole.

We have an outsized structural deficit, a persistent and growing pension debt, and other costs that that threatens

our financial stability.

...We must tackle this problem head on...No doubt some hard choices will have to be made.

Like their counterparts across the world, public school and charter teachers in Chicago and their students confront increasingly impossible conditions. In the midst of claims of a supposedly historic economic boom and the obscene concentration of colossal fortunes, teachers are being told once again that there is not enough money for public education and decent working conditions.

If teachers are being told they and their students must make further sacrifices in the current situation, how much more will be demanded when the inevitable next recession hits?

Without an expropriation of the wealth of the big banks and global corporations, and without an end to war and spending on police and military buildup worldwide, the attacks on education and the growth of social inequality will continue.

Teachers need new organizations of struggle to carry their fight forward, in opposition to both parties of big business. Rank-and-file teachers must break from the CTU and the trade unions and organize independent rank-and-file committees to fight to defend teachers and public education as a whole.

It is necessary for teachers to link up with the broadest layers of the working class—autoworkers, public transportation workers, Uber and Lyft drivers, Amazon and UPS workers, and others—to plan and carry out a general strike to fight for the social rights of the working class. The win these rights, including the right to high quality public education, the working class will have to take political power into its own hands and carry out a radical redistribution of wealth as part of the socialist transformation of society.

The Socialist Equality Party will do everything it can to provide political assistance and leadership for these struggles. We urge all teachers who want to learn more to contact us today.



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