

As new Democratic mayor takes office

Chicago Public Schools lay off hundreds of teachers and staff

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On May 31, 220 Chicago Public School (CPS) teachers and 498 support staff received layoff notices. The spring term ends June 18 with classes set to resume in early September and more school closures may be in the offing.

With grim regularity each summer, layoffs of Chicago Public School teachers and staff are announced. This year, the *Sun Times* took note of that fact, publishing figures over the last 10 years that demonstrate the depth of the cuts and the shocking drop in the total numbers of teachers employed in the CPS.

Since 2009, 8,806 teachers and 8,556 classroom support staff have been laid off. Some teachers are then hired back into CPS, often at a lower pay rate, or work as substitutes for a time. This year, CPS is advertising more than 1,500 open positions for the 2019–20 school year.

The greatest number of teacher and staff layoffs occurred in 2013 after the betrayal of the 2012 teachers strike, which paved the way for the closure of an unprecedented 50 public elementary schools in the poorest areas of the city. That year, 2,239 teachers and 1,716 paraprofessionals and classroom staff were laid off, representing 9.6 percent of the workforce, according to the *Sun Times* report.

The cumulative effect of these policies has been disastrous. According to teachers, these cuts have created dangerously overcrowded classrooms and special education classes routinely operate without the minimum staff legally mandated for safety, let alone optimal learning.

The CPS teachers' contract will expire on June 30 between the roughly 26,000 teachers and staff and the city administration of newly inaugurated mayor Lori

Lightfoot.

Lightfoot, a former federal prosecutor, corporate attorney and public relations agent for the Chicago Police and Emanuel administration operating in the wake of the cover-up of the murder of black teenager Laquan McDonald, took office on May 20. Since then, she has announced the dissolution of the mayor-appointed school board and its reconstitution with appointees of her choosing. During her campaign, she claimed to support a return to an elected school board in Chicago and has said her appointees represent a step in this direction. In 1995, Democratic mayor Richard Daley with bipartisan support established so-called "mayoral control" of the school system, which was a critical feature of its privatization via charter expansion.

Lightfoot also opted to keep CEO Janice Jackson, but pledged to make fewer decisions affecting CPS "behind closed doors."

Lightfoot's appointee to chair the school board is Miguel Del Valle, former city clerk and old hand in the Democratic Party machine, who also once served as chairman of Chicago Mayor Harold Washington's Advisory Commission on Latino Affairs. As a candidate for Chicago mayor in 2011, del Valle told the *Chicago Tribune* Editorial Board, he wanted to "cut personnel deeply." Also appointed to the board was University of Illinois-Chicago professor Elizabeth Todd-Breland, who has written on education in Chicago and on former CTU President Karen Lewis' evolution as a political leader from the standpoint of identity politics.

Despite having backed her opponent in the recent runoff election, CTU has tried to make much of the fact that Lightfoot is the first female, gay, African-American mayor, working to portray her as

“progressive” and obscure her long resume as a representative of big business and the ruling class, including her role in the cover-up of McDonald’s death.

In its previous and completely insincere election-year criticisms of Lightfoot, CTU noted her 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.”

But since her election victory, an ad produced by the CTU, “Who is the real Lori Lightfoot?” has been removed from the union’s YouTube channel.

The CTU is widely discredited among teachers, having collaborated with former Mayor Rahm Emanuel in school closures, layoffs and charter school expansion as well as attacks on teacher pay, pensions and healthcare benefits. Since December 2018, the union has betrayed a series of strikes by highly exploited charter school teachers.

The ever-present threat of cuts and school closures, regular layoffs and severely deteriorated teaching and learning conditions are fueling teacher anger and determination to fight in Chicago, just as they are around the country and indeed worldwide.

This growing disaffection and disgust can be seen in the high abstention in recent union elections and in the low turnout at a recent rally downtown for a “fair contract.” In mid-May, CTU president and member of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization Jesse Sharkey and the Caucus of Rank and File Educators leadership was re-elected with about 66 percent of the vote. Therese Boyle of the Members First caucus, which was making a broad call for CTU to improve pay, benefits and teaching and learning conditions, took about 34 percent of the vote. According to the blog Second City Teachers, vote totals indicate 9,565 CTU members voted for Sharkey and CORE, while 4,840 voted for Boyle and Members First. But the largest bloc of teachers, clinicians and teacher aides did not vote for anyone.

The passive opposition to the CTU reflected in the low vote turnout must be turned to active opposition: new, independent, rank and file organizations are

needed.

Opposition to the intolerable conditions facing teachers is bound up with the defense of public education as a whole. This requires that teachers build rank-and-file workplace committees independent of the CTU and the Democratic Party and its pro-corporate program of budget cuts and charterization. Workers must demand oversight and control of negotiations, raising their own demands for the restoration of concessions, the hiring of thousands of additional teachers and the full funding of the schools.

In conducting this fight teachers must turn out to the working class more broadly, including teachers in neighboring suburban districts, city workers, autoworkers and other sections of workers coming into struggle. The defense of public education is a political fight that raises the necessity for the development of an independent political movement of the working class based on a socialist program. The resources needed to fund education exist in abundance, but this fight requires a frontal assault on the privately accumulated wealth of billionaires and re-ordering society’s priorities in the interest of human need, not profit.



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