

Contract for more than 20,000 Chicago teachers expires

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On June 30, the contract for more than 20,000 teachers and support staff expired in Chicago, the country's third largest school system. Chicago has historically been ground-zero for the Democratic Party's pro-business school "reform," which has turned on across-the-board cost cutting, an assault on educators, including the destruction of seniority and tenure, and privatization through the expansion of charters.

On July 1, Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) President Jesse Sharkey held a morning press conference in which he called for Chicago Public Schools (CPS) officials to speed up the negotiations process that began in January under former Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Sharkey told the press gathered, "We're being studied. We're not being engaged. And that's got to stop."

Earlier this year, the CTU called for the intervention of a federal mediator, one of multiple requirements prior to taking legal strike action established by Senate Bill 7, anti-worker legislation supported by Sharkey's predecessor Karen Lewis that limited what teachers may bargain over (wages and benefits, mainly) and imposed bureaucratic obstacles to strike action.

Now that the teachers' contract has expired, the CTU has given no indication at what stage the negotiations are. Sharkey also told teachers to "start saving" for a strike. This is more of a threat against teachers than the city, however, since it implies that there will be little if any strike benefits forthcoming from the organization that has \$15.5 million in assets. According to the *Sun-Times*, the CTU is asking for a meager 5 percent pay increase along with its routine call for support staff increases and reduced class sizes.

The city's Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot said Monday that the city would respond to the CTU's offer, about which she offered no details. Conditions in Chicago Public Schools are not conducive to teaching or learning. Teachers at multiple Chicago charter schools have walked out on strike over classroom conditions and low wages, only to be sent back to work with no serious improvements in conditions.

The CTU has and will continue to do everything in its power to avoid a strike. In recent years, the union has kept teachers working over a year and a half without a contract as the Democrats and Republicans orchestrated a budget impasse in Illinois in 2015–16, realizing massive statewide funding cuts

through attrition. Echoing the claims by the two corporate controlled parties that there is no money for education—despite massive corporate tax cuts—the CTU pushed through healthcare cost hikes and cuts to pensions for new hires in the last contract in 2016.

Prior to that the CTU shut down the powerful 2012 teachers strike before it developed into a direct confrontation with the anti-teacher and pro-privatization policies of the Obama administration whose secretary of Education Arne Duncan was the former head of CPS. The union conceded on pay and seniority that aided the Chicago Democratic Party's efforts to close 49 schools in 2013 and lay off thousands of teachers. As a payoff for the sellout, the union was given access to "organize" low-paid charter school teachers. Since 2002, more than 200 schools have been closed in Chicago with more than half being replaced by privately-run charter schools.

In 2011, the leadership of the CTU was taken over by a so-called radical "rank and file" caucus, including Sharkey, a leading member of the now defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO). Sharkey has evolved into a conventional union bureaucrat who sees himself as a power-broker in Chicago's Democratic Party political machine.

The CTU was the primary force behind the failed mayoral campaign of Toni Preckwinkle, Cook County Board President and President of the Cook County Democratic Party, and Lightfoot's opponent in the run-off election last April. After Preckwinkle's crushing defeat by Lightfoot, the CTU changed its tune and promoted illusions in Lightfoot, going so far as to remove from its YouTube account an election campaign video critical of Lightfoot's career as a prosecutor and attorney for big business and the Chicago police.

The CTU has recently hosted Joe Biden at their headquarters as part of the Rainbow Push "Labor Luncheon" and county commissioner Brandon Johnson, who was a prominent CTU activist and whose recent campaign was supported by CTU, introduced Elizabeth Warren at a July 28 town hall at Roosevelt University in downtown Chicago.

The CTU—which has become a model nationally for left-talking aspiring union bureaucrats—specializes in issuing demands for "schools our children deserve," denunciations of the rich and corporate tax cuts, and promoting identity politics

by blaming the attacks on education as “racist,” not the result of the capitalist system and the bipartisan war on public education. Behind the scenes, however, the CTU and other unions that follow the same pattern, like the United Teachers Los Angeles, have systematically betrayed teachers and colluded in Democratic Party-led privatization schemes.

The CTU has all but ceased any opposition to charter school expansion, schools whose expansion is rightly seen as an attack on teacher pay and conditions. Over a relatively short time, it has brought the pay and benefits of the better paid district teachers more closely into line with the lower paid charter teachers.

Teachers, parents and students are determined to fight back. This attack on the social right to high-quality public education has provoked an explosion of opposition over the last year and a half. Many of the teachers strikes of 2018 and 2019 emerged in opposition to the unions and the Democratic Party’s right-wing policies. However, various factions of the unions, which all look to the CTU for inspiration, played a key role in preventing teachers from breaking the stranglehold of the unions. Once these struggles were brought back under union and Democratic Party control, the strikes were defeated and teachers told to take their issues to the ballot box and vote for capitalist parties that serve the interests of the wealthy and ignore the needs and desires of the working class majority.

Last week, West Virginia Governor Jim Justice signed a bill to legalize charter schools against the will of the vast majority of West Virginians. One poll found 88 percent public opposition to the bill. The introduction of charters was a central part of the omnibus education reform bill that provoked the 2018 strike of West Virginia teachers across all 55 counties, touching off a wave of teachers struggles internationally.

Agreements for 7,000 teachers in Baltimore, Maryland and 2,700 teachers in Newark, New Jersey also expired in June. In Canada, British Columbia’s 43,000 teachers are locked in a contract battle after their agreement expired last month. In all these districts, teachers are combating low wages, rising costs of living, difficult teaching and learning conditions and poor teacher retention rates.

Former Newark mayor and current Democratic presidential hopeful Cory Booker collaborated with Republican Governor Chris Christie in the effort to make Newark “the charter school capital of the nation,” in Booker’s words. This effort was aided by a \$100 million gift from Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg that was supposed to “turn around” the schools of the economically distressed city of 300,000.

This year’s negotiations are the first since the state of New Jersey—now run by Democratic governor and former Goldman Sachs executive Phil Murphy—placed the district into receivership, implementing cuts that provoked widespread opposition, including student and teacher walkouts. A major issue among Newark teachers is base pay. According to *Chalkbeat*, starting teachers in Newark make just \$53,000 and

must put in about twenty years of teaching before reaching near the top of the pay scale.

Low teacher pay is also at issue in Baltimore where in April 2019, the average teacher salary was \$58,432 and starting pay is just \$49,648. A two-bedroom apartment rents on average for \$1648 per month, having climbed 6 percent from 2018.

In British Columbia, whose most recent contract was six years long and came after a two-and-a-half month strike that was isolated by the teachers union, the 43,000 teachers are fighting for improved pay and smaller workloads. British Columbia teachers’ average wages are among the lowest in Canada, according to the *Toronto Star*.

Throughout the Americas and around the world, there is growing sentiment to put a halt to the subordination of education to the profit interests of the financial aristocracy’s “edubusiness” or what the Democrats, Republicans, or the Canadian NDP say is “affordable.” Workers know there is plenty of money and that the financial elite are cashing in at unprecedented levels and impoverishing the majority.

To fight, educators must build new organizations of struggle which are independent of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association. These rank-and-file committees have to fight to unite teachers with every section of workers to prepare an industrial and political counter-offensive against austerity and social inequality.

The fight to abolish the profit system and reorganize society based on human need—socialism—is the only alternative to the return of a class-based education system where only the children of the affluent have access to high quality schools.



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