

“I want to strike and send a message to the city”

With anger growing, Chicago Teachers Union floats threat of September walkout

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The Chicago Teachers Union has floated the possibility of calling a strike in late September if no agreement is reached with city officials on a new contract for 20,000 teachers and paraprofessional in the country’s third-largest school district.

Last week, CTU President Jesse Sharkey informed Mayor Lori Lightfoot via email that she had one month to make good on her campaign promises to avert a strike. “Those campaign promises mirrored the equity agenda of our movement,” Sharkey said, adding that teachers “deserve a fair contract with equal pay, adequate staffing, class size limits and social justice for their students. Candidate Lightfoot has vowed there will be no teachers strike on her watch. Mayor Lightfoot has a month to make good on that and her campaign promises.”

Chicago’s corporate media largely wrote off the CTU threat as nothing more than political theater but also expressed concern about the opposition of angry teachers. “Now the board’s initial offer as well as the union’s bellicose reacting to it may be nothing more than the sort of preliminary posturing that’s common in the professional wrestling ring,” the business publication *Crain’s* wrote. “And if Sharkey’s talk winds up being just that—talk—that’s fine. He’s made his members happy. But there’s a chance its more than that: an effort to intimidate a new mayor with tactics that echo the run-up to the strike that marked her predecessor’s early tenure in 2012.”

Sharkey, a member of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization, is a known quantity in Chicago. Despite his rhetoric about “social justice,” Sharkey, his predecessor Karen Lewis and their so-called Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) have collaborated with the Democratic political establishment for years in creating the over-crowded classrooms, understaffing and poor pay which Sharkey claims to oppose.

After the union-backed mayoral candidate Toni Preckwinkle was defeated by Lightfoot earlier this year, the CTU cozied up to the new mayor. Now the CTU officials claim Lightfoot has not followed through on campaign promises to expand early childhood education and provide neighborhood schools with additional support staff. In fact, understaffing and poor conditions in special education classrooms—all sanctioned by the CTU—were violating the law so routinely, the district’s special education program has been brought under state oversight and management.

The contract for teachers and support staff expired June 30. In an effort to wear down teachers Sharkey has called for the intervention of a federal mediator in the talks. With anger mounting, the CTU has issued a series of demands which it has no intention of enforcing, such as hiring more librarians and nurses, support for special education and bilingual students, smaller class sizes and a counselor for every 250 students. The CTU has also asked for a 5 percent raise, which would barely keep up with the rising costs of housing and other living expenses in Chicago.

Lightfoot has countered by pointing out that the city has already offered teachers a 14 percent pay raise over the five years of the agreement. But this would be eaten up by the city’s proposal to increase out-of-pocket costs for healthcare and pension benefits. “I hope that they will come to us with a serious evaluation of that and embrace the reality that there’s no reason why we can’t get a deal done well in advance of the time school starts,” Lightfoot said.

Chicago is one of the world’s most unequal cities. Within the corporate and political establishment there is enormous fear that a strike by teachers could become the catalyst for a far broader movement of the working class

against years of government austerity and social inequality. That is why the CTU will do everything in its power to prevent a strike.

In 2012, the CTU shut down a powerful strike by teachers 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 and colluded in the Chicago Democratic Party's closure of 49 schools in 2013 and layoff of thousands of teachers. As a payoff for the sellout, the union was given access to "organize" low-paid charter school teachers.

In 2015-16, the CTU kept teachers working more than a year and a half without a contract as the Democrats and Republicans orchestrated a budget impasse in Illinois that imposed massive statewide funding cuts through attrition. The CTU pushed through healthcare cost hikes and cuts to pensions for new hires in the last contract in 2016 while echoing the claims by the two corporate-controlled parties that there was no money for education, despite massive corporate tax cuts and giveaways.

Since December 2018, the union has betrayed a series of strikes by highly exploited charter school teachers.

Like their counter-parts across the country and internationally who have waged a series of strikes, Chicago teachers are determined to fight against persistent understaffing and starving schools of funds, as well as the casualization of the profession. Decades of cuts have left teachers to outfit their schools and classrooms out of their own pockets, costing thousands yearly, and having to clean facilities themselves due to CPS cost-cutting.

"I want to strike and send a message to the city," Angela, a Chicago Public School teacher on the West Side, told the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter*. "We need to stand up for ourselves."

Referring to the constant cuts by the district, she said, "It's like they put us on an island and expect us to make miracles happen. There should be both libraries and librarians in each school. Some schools have no library. Others have libraries, but no librarians. They float librarians from school to school. Well-to-do schools have libraries and librarians. All schools should have them too."

"We are spending thousands out of our own pockets to resource our classrooms. If every child doesn't have supplies, they cannot learn. If your classroom is under-resourced during an observation, you get dinged. We have to spend a lot on our classrooms."

"Schools also have to share social workers and nurses."

In 2018, CPS' ratio of social workers to students was 1 to 1,200. According to Jennie Biggs of *Raise Your Hand*, a non-profit aimed at getting parents involved in improving public education, a ratio of one social worker to every 250 students is recommended for students living in high poverty areas or who have experienced trauma.

Angela continued, "The 2012 strike was no victory. It was very hard to find jobs. I became a professional interviewer. Schools were closing. No one was hiring experienced teachers when they could get two young teachers for the same price."

"We lost deferred compensation after 2012, and this has contributed to teachers driving Uber, working retail and service jobs, and trying to get their families on assistance over the summer. They've made it so that teaching in Chicago isn't a career. It's a stepping-stone job. There's no support or adequate compensation, especially if you're working in low income areas."

The bitter experiences teachers have repeatedly suffered at the hands of the CTU underscore the need for educators to build rank-and-file workplace committees independent of the CTU and the Democratic Party and its pro-corporate program of cuts and privatization. Teachers must demand oversight and control of all negotiations, raising their own demands for the restoration of all concessions, the hiring of thousands of additional teachers, the full funding of the schools and a substantial increase in wages.

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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