

# Chicago school district and union officials prepare to sell austerity contract to teachers

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On August 26, more than 20,000 Chicago public school teachers and paraprofessionals are scheduled to return to their school buildings, with classes set to begin about a week later on September 3. The previous labor agreement between the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and the school district expired on June 30 and it is increasingly possible that the CTU will send educators back to work without a new contract covering their wages, benefits and working conditions.

Like their counterparts across the US and internationally who have engaged in the largest wave of teachers strikes in decades, Chicago educators are determined to fight for substantial increases in wages and funding to fix and repair decaying school buildings, lower class sizes and hire new support staff. Since the 2016 contract between the CTU and then-mayor Rahm Emanuel, classroom spending has been frozen, and teachers have paid increased out-of-pocket costs for health care.

The Democratic Party establishment, now headed by Mayor Lori Lightfoot, wants teachers to accept wage increases that barely rise above the rate of inflation and more cuts to critical school services, including libraries and nursing staff. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) officials want a five-year, instead of a three-year contract, with a 14 percent pay increase. This translates to less than 3 percent annually, or barely 1.4 percent in real wages when inflation is accounted for. In addition, the district is seeking to further shift the healthcare burden onto educators, with a 0.5 percent rise in cost each year for three years.

Earlier this week, Mayor Lightfoot stated there was “no reason” CPS and CTU could not reach an agreement. She and CPS CEO Janice Jackson announced a \$7.7 billion school budget for 2020, which includes some improvements to school infrastructure and programs. CPS budgets, however, are notoriously opaque and in practice are designed to give away enormous sums to private

firms, including mega-corporations like Sodexo, and no-bid contracts to well-connected “education consultants.” Like Los Angeles and other Democratic-run urban districts around the country, CPS continues to divert public assets to charter schools and other privatization schemes.

Despite the intransigence of city officials, the Chicago Teachers Union has not even bothered to take a strike authorization vote and is downplaying the suggestion of a strike. Asked Monday by reporters on WTTW’s “Chicago Tonight” whether the union was preparing to walk out, CTU President Jesse Sharkey emphasized that he was committed to getting an agreement from the mayor without a strike. “We’re way behind. We need a lot of work at the bargaining table to hammer out agreements... I would like to see the priorities the mayor campaigned on appear in proposals at the bargaining table.”

Sharkey, until recently a leading member of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization, has long functioned as a conventional trade union bureaucrat and advisor to the Democratic Party. While mouthing empty phrases about raising taxes on the wealthy, Sharkey and the so-called Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators that runs the CTU entirely accept the financial parameters set by the corporate and financial elite and enforced by the Democratic Party.

After supporting her opponent in the runoff election earlier this year, the CTU sought to cozy up to Mayor Lightfoot, a former corporate lawyer and police reform frontwoman, taking down a critical video on its web site and promoting illusions in her worthless campaign promises to substantially increase support staff, which she has predictably reneged on.

The CTU has also submitted to the thoroughly undemocratic state laws (which the union endorsed) that restrict the right of teachers to strike and bind them in a drawn out fact finding and arbitration process before they

can walk out. Throughout this process, the CTU has promoted illusions in the mediation and fact-finding and kept teachers in the dark.

The fact-finder's report, drawn up last month, was not to be released to the public until late August but was leaked to local media. Predictably, the so-called "neutral arbiter" has come down on the side of the district, echoing the lying claim that there are not enough resources to pay for improved wages and school funding. This in a city where Boeing, United Airlines, McDonalds and other corporations headquartered in Chicago, along with billionaires like the Pritzker family, have been handed billions in state, local and federal tax breaks.

The report states, "Due to wage increases, pension payments, debt service increases for capital improvements in CPS facilities, programmatic investments and school funding, CPS is still determining how to fill its projected \$141M shortfall for FY20. It will be able to do so, but the Board cannot sustain greater salary costs than it has proposed."

The entire "bargaining process" is a fraud. Behind the scenes, the school district and the CTU have already agreed to a deal and are only discussing how best to ram it past a resistant workforce.

This was all but acknowledged by former alderman and University of Illinois-Chicago political science professor Dick Simpson, who endorsed Lightfoot, in comments to *In These Times*, a publication closely aligned with the union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party. Urging Lightfoot to make some gesture to help the CTU push through another austerity contract, Simpson says, "There just isn't enough money to do things that you might have agreed to. The issue is going to be: Can they find a compromise position that recognizes the financial limits but at the same time makes the teachers feel valued and that they're getting some financial help from the system?"

In fact, the bulk of the CTU's demands would not cost the city or the ruling elite a penny. In addition to its demands for 15 percent wage increase over three years, instead of five, most are centered on racist and identity politics demands, which are in line with the CTU's claims that school closings, teacher layoffs and budget cutting are due to "racism," not the relentless cost-cutting of the corporate and financial elite that impacts teachers, students and parents of all races and nationalities.

The conditions in the public schools are a damning indictment of the Democratic Party and the CTU. The number of school libraries has fallen from 450 to 120

since 2013. Local radio station WBEZ reported in March that no school has the same nurse each day and throughout the week. Instead, nurses in CPS visit on average five schools at different points in the day and week and nursing shortages are filled via a chaotic schedule of "floating" nurses who can visit as many as 39 schools over a four-week period. This has resulted in inconsistent and in some cases dangerously inadequate nursing for students with serious health problems.

In its 2020 budget, CPS officials propose hiring 30 nurses, 35 social worker positions that will not be immediately filled and 30 case manager positions for schools in high-need communities.

To defend public education, Chicago teachers must take the struggle into their own hands. Teachers should form rank-and-file committees, independent of the CTU, and link together the struggles of all school workers, suburban and urban, union and nonunion. These committees should outline their own demands, including a 30 percent salary increase so that all school workers can live in the city without having to drive for Uber. No more funding should be diverted from public schools into the billionaires' charter school movement or tax cuts for corporate interests.

These rank-and-file committees should bring together parents and students to fight for free, high-quality public education for all, including safe, clean and fully funded classrooms with small class sizes, the expansion of libraries and the arts and counselors, librarians and nurses for every school. The fight for these essential rights requires a break with the two parties of big business and war.

The right to high-quality education for all children, black, white, native-born and immigrant—can only be won through a frontal assault on the entrenched wealth and power of the corporate and financial elite and the socialist reorganization of society to meet human needs.



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