

As negotiations drag on

Chicago teachers union sets September 26 date for strike authorization vote

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As classes began this week for more than 20,000 Chicago teachers and paraprofessionals in the third largest US city, teachers continue working for the second week without a contract. In the face of mounting opposition by educators the Chicago Teachers Union has set a strike authorization vote for September 26 following a meeting of the CTU House of Delegates.

According to state law September 26 is the first day teachers could legally walk out. However, the delay in holding a strike vote now means that teachers cannot legally walk out until October 7, even if the strike is authorized by the required 75 percent of CTU members.

The previous agreement between the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and the school district expired on June 30. The Democratic Party establishment led by Democratic mayor Lori Lightfoot wants teachers to accept wage increases that barely rise above the rate of inflation and accept more cuts to school services, including libraries and nursing staff.

In addition, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) officials want teachers to accept a five-year, instead of a three-year, contract with a 14 percent pay increase. This amounts to less than a 3 percent increase annually, or about 1.4 percent in real wages when inflation is accounted for. In addition, the district is seeking to further shift the health care burden onto educators with a 0.5 percent cost increase each year for three years.

Chicago educators, like their counterparts across the US and internationally who have engaged in the largest wave of teachers strikes in decades, are determined to fight for substantial increases in wages and for funding to fix and repair decaying school buildings, improve

staffing levels and lower class sizes. Since the 2016 contract, overseen by then Democratic Party Mayor Rahm Emanuel, classroom spending has been frozen and teachers have paid more out-of-pocket for their health care.

As teachers press for improvements they are facing opposition to their fight from the Democratic Party establishment and its newspaper, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, which is owned in part by the Chicago Labor Federation of which CTU is a leading component.

A recent *Sun Times* editorial stated the following:

“Ensuring a good education for hundreds of thousands of students must be the top priority at the negotiating table. For the union, that means accepting economic reality: Teachers won’t get the raise, or the cuts in health care costs, that they want. The union’s proposal for a three-year contract with annual raises of 5 percent, with no increase in health care costs and a rollback of current costs, sounds great. Plenty of workers, union and non-union, would love a 15 percent increase in pay over three years.”

The *Sun Times* editorial suggests teachers have no right to place demands since their pay and benefits are better than other sections of workers. The fact is, CPS has begun the school year with hundreds of teaching positions unfilled, a problem nationwide due to the unrelenting attacks on public education including huge cuts to teacher compensation.

The attempt by the *Sun Times* editors overtly to sow envy and disunity among workers points to the real fear of the ruling class that teachers, parents, students across districts and workers of all sectors, whose families rely on public education and who wish to defend it as a basic democratic right will rally and join the struggle.

While teachers are determined to improve conditions in schools, the CTU is doing everything possible to avoid a confrontation with Lightfoot as evidenced by its decision to delay a strike authorization vote until near the end of September.

Since the leaking of the “independent” fact-finder’s report earlier this month, it has been clear that an agreement has already been substantially worked out between CPS and CTU. The union now is begging Lightfoot to offer a token “sweetener” in order for the union to be able to push through an agreement. Last week, only after the “official” release date of the earlier leaked document, did the CTU announce it was rejecting the state’s findings and would move to a vote by the House of Delegates to authorize a strike.

The bogus character of the claims by CTU that it is waging a serious struggle is demonstrated by the fact that it is putting forward no specific demands for staffing levels, class sizes or ending the victimization of higher paid senior teachers.

Schools are so profoundly lacking in resources, many do not have libraries or librarians; social workers are overwhelmed by the enormous numbers of students they are individually responsible for; nursing has been privatized and there are dangerous gaps in care. Teachers speaking to the WSWs have made it clear that they want to fight for such critical learning support services.

As in the charter teacher strikes of late 2018 and early 2019, the union made no concrete demands of lowering class sizes in schools that teachers and school workers complained are dangerously overcrowded. They demanded only some “movement” on certain issues on the part of school management. Then CTU trumpeted as a victory when the school agreed to the smallest physically possible class size reduction—one student—and then only in writing. It remains to be seen whether even that will be realized in the classroom.

The powerful wave of teachers strikes worldwide has placed teachers in a leading role in the class struggle. In West Virginia and Kentucky, these strikes temporarily broke through the suppression of the class struggle by teachers unions and the Democratic Party. Only after the teachers unions regained control over the strikes were they put down, with disastrous consequences (see: “West Virginia legalizes charters schools”).

Improving conditions in the schools is critically

dependent on teachers forming their own independent leadership and taking the contract negotiations out of the hands of the CTU. Teachers must assert their own demands, including a 30 percent salary increase so that all school workers can live in the city without having to work part time jobs, such as driving for Uber. No more funding should be diverted from public schools into the billionaires’ charter school movement or for 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, who advance the interests of the financial aristocracy against the working class.



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