

Chicago teachers vote overwhelmingly to authorize strike

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This week, Chicago's more than 20,000 teachers and support staff voted by 94 percent to authorize strike action.

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which has sought to avoid a strike, said that a walkout could take place as early as October 7, but that any strike date will not be set until October 2. The teachers have been without a contract since July 1, and the strike authorization vote, which could have been taken at any point, is being referred to by CTU leaders as a way to "increase leverage at the bargaining table."

The Democratic city administration led by Mayor Lori Lightfoot wants teachers to accept wage increases that barely rise above the inflation rate, increased healthcare costs and more cuts to school services. Lower class sizes and an end to the firings of more senior, higher-paid teachers are major issues for CPS teachers.

There is enormous determination among teachers to fight. Teachers, however, confront both the Democratic Party and the CTU, which has worked closely with the Democrats in imposing the conditions teachers confront.

In the ruling class and the political establishment in Chicago, dominated by the Democratic Party, there is enormous fear over the implications of a strike by teachers, which could spark a wave of social unrest throughout the city.

Just this month, more than 2,000 nurses at University of Chicago Medical Center were locked out and may strike again, having had none of their problems resolved. More than 2,300 Chicago Park District workers and seven thousand Chicago Public Schools staff have voted to strike. Campus bus drivers at Loyola University authorized a walkout by unanimous vote. College of DuPage faculty, just west of Chicago, are

also in the midst of a contract fight in which the school administration has placed advertisements for large numbers of adjunct faculty to serve as strikebreakers.

The strike authorization vote also takes place in the second week of a strike by 46,000 General Motors workers. The United Auto Workers union, mired in a massive federal corruption scandal, is deliberately isolating the strike by limiting it to GM.

In an editorial published this week, the *Chicago Sun-Times* put its opinion on the front page: "Take the deal, teachers. You've won." The newspaper, speaking for the Chicago Democratic Party, asserts that most people would be thrilled to have what Chicago teachers have.

These attempts at intimidation are belied by the fact that a chronic teacher shortage has several hundred CPS classrooms without permanent teachers, due to the relentless political attacks on public education led by the Democratic Party.

The media component of the contract fight, aimed at wearing down teachers' resolve and demeaning their courageous fight for schools, has emboldened some teachers and alerted them to the real character of their opponents in the Democratic Party.

In a *Sun-Times* column, school board president Miguel Del Valle claimed that the board's current offer will result in a 24 percent pay increase for most teachers, a ridiculously inflated number. Teachers immediately took to social media to denounce the lie. Some wrote that they plan to staple their tax forms to their strike pickets to combat the city's misinformation campaign.

The role of the CTU is to somehow contain the opposition of teachers and impose another rotten agreement. In 2018 and 2019, strikes by teachers were systematically isolated by the teachers' unions, which shut down one after the other, in some cases only after

recapturing control from independent groups of teachers.

A concessions deal has been substantially worked out for many weeks between CTU and Lightfoot's board of education. The CTU leadership's vague demands for more support staff is the critical means to push through the contract so that teachers can be made to feel their burden has been lightened and the CTU can further expand its dues base.

The CTU was instrumental in shutting down the powerful 2012 teachers strike before it developed into a direct confrontation with the privatization plans of the Obama administration, whose Secretary of Education Arne Duncan once headed CPS.

The CTU's shutdown of the strike on the basis of the demands of the city paved the way for Democratic Party Mayor Rahm Emanuel's plan to close 49 schools in 2013, laying off several thousand teachers and staff. In exchange for their cooperation with the Obama "reforms", CTU's parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, was given the green light to "organize" low-paid charter school teachers.

The CTU is now headed by Jesse Sharkey, who was once a leading member of International Socialist Organization, which dissolved itself earlier this year with most of its members filing directly into Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the Democratic Party. Over the past year, the DSA has played an increasingly prominent role in assisting the unions in shutting down working class opposition, particularly among teachers.

Sharkey is now playing the leading role in attempting to subordinate workers to the Democratic Party. On Tuesday night the CTU, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the DSA hosted a presidential campaign rally for Senator Bernie Sanders at CTU headquarters on the west side of Chicago.

At the rally, Sanders told city leaders to negotiate with the teachers and support staff: "Today I say to the city of Chicago, sit down and negotiate a contract that substantially reduces class sizes."

Tuesday's rally was not the first time in recent months the union transformed events ostensibly in support of teacher contract struggles into rallies for Democratic candidates.

Sanders, however, predictably said nothing about the

role of the Democratic Party—at a national level through the Obama administration and at a local level through the administrations of Emanuel and Lightfoot—in spearheading the attack on public education.

A powerful wave of teachers strikes has placed teachers in a leading role in the class struggle worldwide. In West Virginia and Kentucky, these strikes temporarily broke through the suppression of the class struggle by teachers' unions and the Democrats. Only after the teachers unions regained control over the strikes were they put down, with disastrous consequences, as in West Virginia where charter schools are now legal.

These experiences underscore the need for teachers to build rank-and-file workplace committees, independent of the CTU and the Democratic Party. 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 to the working class more broadly, including teachers in neighboring suburban districts, college faculty and graduate students, autoworkers, healthcare and city workers, 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 the re-ordering of society's priorities in the interest of human need.



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