Chicago teachers, schools staff and parks district workers set joint October 17 strike date

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The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) house of delegates has set a strike date of October 17 for its 25,000 member teachers and staff, coinciding with the strike date set for roughly 2,500 Chicago Parks District workers and about 7,500 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) staff members, both organized under the Service Employees International Union.

The Democratic city administration led by Mayor Lori Lightfoot and CPS CEO Janice Jackson announced a plan to keep some schools and parks facilities open and staffed in the event of a walkout and is asking parents to register their children on the CPS website. The teachers' contract expired June 30.

Lightfoot wants teachers to accept wage increases that barely rise above the inflation rate along with increased healthcare costs and more cuts to school services. Large class sizes and the routine lay off of more senior, higher-paid teachers are major issues confronting CPS teachers.

The joint strike announcement is aimed at creating substantially more time for CTU negotiations with the Chicago Democratic Party and mayor Lightfoot in order to avoid a strike and cut a concessions deal that the union can enforce on educators who are determined to fight for better wages and improved conditions in their schools. The earliest date Chicago teachers could legally walk out is October 7.

CPS teachers face the very real danger of once again being betrayed by the CTU, which has agreed to every contract that has led to the intolerable conditions in the schools teachers are seeking to change. Union leaders have, over the last seven years of deepening attacks on public education and growing social anger, done everything possible to avoid a walkout since the Chicago teachers strike of 2012.

The CTU was instrumental in shutting down that powerful struggle before it developed into a direct confrontation with the privatization plans of the Obama administration, whose secretary of education, Arne Duncan, once headed CPS and whose former chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, directly oversaw the attacks as Chicago mayor.

Lightfoot sounded the same note this week that she had throughout the summer, telling the *Sun Times*: "There's no reason why we can't get a deal done. When we think about the possible disruption, cancelling of extra activities, kids who are applying for early college admission, the hardship and burden it'll put on parents and students, we should get a deal done."

What is not said aloud but is evident is that a deal has already been substantially worked out for many weeks between CTU and Lightfoot's board of education. The CTU is making vague demands for more support staff and smaller class sizes as the means to push through the contract so that teachers can be made to feel their ever-growing responsibilities are lessened and the CTU can expand its dues base. For her part, Lightfoot does not want to make any commitments that impinge in any way on the mayor's enormous power to control the budget.

The Democrats and the teachers' unions are highly sensitive to teachers' determination to fight. At the CTU sponsored campaign rally last week, Bernie Sanders warned Lightfoot's administration to negotiate with the teachers.

Sue Sadlowski Garza, former school counselor and CTU member, now city councilwoman, spoke at the

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rally for Sanders last week, where she encouraged support for the teachers vote to authorize a strike.

Lightfoot appointed Sue Sadlowski Garza to her leadership team, where she currently heads Lightfoot's committee on workforce development. For decades, committees on the city council are vehicles for political favors and payment schemes. Garza was a prominent supporter of Lightfoot in the viciously competitive race for mayor earlier this year, fought between Lightfoot and Cook County Democratic Party and County Board chair Toni Preckwinkle.

When asked later about her support for the strike vote, Garza explained her role to the press: "Of course I support the teachers. ... I support the mayor as well in this issue. They both have to come to a compromise. If both people leave the table unhappy, then you did something right."

The setting of a joint strike date represents a threat neither CTU nor SEIU want to make good on. The social discontent of teachers and other workers is very real and has an increasingly well-defined class character, with workers struggling to escape the straitjacket of the unions, as has been shown by teachers' walkouts over the last two years across the US, from West Virginia to Arizona. The bipartisan attacks on public education are pushing millions of US teachers into conflict with both big business parties and the unions that support them.

Teachers' long experience with the CTU and the Democratic Party underlines the urgent 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.

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