

Chicago teachers expected to strike Thursday, as union pledges to limit it to a “short-term” walkout

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16 October 2019

Chicago Teachers Union President Jesse Sharkey announced Tuesday night that he was “overwhelmingly certain” CTU delegates will vote today for over 20,000 teachers and support staff to strike on Thursday. “We are going to tell them that we cannot recommend postponing a strike. We cannot recommend it,” he said.

Sharkey immediately conditioned this statement by pledging that any strike will be “short-term.”

Teachers voted last month by 94 percent to authorize a strike, an expression of their determination to beat back the decades-long attack on public education and teachers’ living and working conditions. This is part of a wave of teachers’ strikes over the past two years, involving nearly a quarter million educators in Los Angeles, Oakland, Denver, West Virginia, Arizona, the Carolinas, Kentucky and other locations.

The CTU has been working aggressively behind the scenes to prevent a walkout and reach an agreement with the school district. However, it evidently decided that it would not be able to push through the contract demanded by the Democratic administration of Mayor Lori Lightfoot.

Feeling that it had no choice but to call a strike, the CTU will try to shut it down as soon as possible. It is also possible that the CTU will announce a last-minute agreement in advance of the strike deadline.

At a late-night press conference Tuesday, Sharkey said the CTU had to get an agreement by Tuesday in order to hold a quick vote at a CTU House of Delegates meeting on Wednesday.

This followed Sharkey’s statement on Saturday that the CTU had found a “path to settlement” with the school board. As part of the “path” to a settlement, Sharkey announced that the CTU had agreed to modify

its demands for the hiring of library, social worker, nursing and other support staff.

On Monday, the CTU held a rally of about 1,000 people that was addressed by Randi Weingarten, the millionaire president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT); Nina Turner, spokesperson for Democratic Party candidate Bernie Sanders; and Melissa Conyears-Ervin, city of Chicago treasurer.

The rally was a united front of the Democratic Party and the teachers’ unions against educators. “We’re about to teach the new mayor a lesson,” Weingarten declared. In fact, the AFT along, with the National Education Association (NEA), has played the central role in isolating and shutting down the series of teacher strikes over the past two years and imposing the austerity demands of both big business parties.

Sharkey’s “path to settlement” is not a path to victory, but a path to defeat. None of teachers’ main demands—appropriate class sizes, needed support staff, better pay, increased funding for public education, the hiring of thousands more teachers—can be won on the basis of the CTU’s behind-the-scenes maneuvers with the Democratic Party.

The conditions that teachers face today are the product of an endless series of agreements between the CTU and a succession of Democratic Party administrations.

In the powerful Chicago teachers’ strike of 2012, it was precisely at the point when the strike challenged the Democratic Party’s pro-business “school reform” policy, right before Obama’s re-election, that the CTU ended the walkout (under the leadership of Karen Lewis, with Sharkey as vice president), and a concessions contract was imposed.

The CTU then maneuvered with then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel to allow the shutting down of 49 elementary schools. In return for its services, the AFT, CTU's parent organization, got the green light to unionize the lower-paid charter school teachers. Since then, the union has dropped its opposition to the expansion of charters.

The role of the teachers unions nationally has been to drive the opposition of teachers, students and parents behind the Democratic Party. Every one of the strikes that have taken place has been isolated by the AFT and NEA, whose leaders have told teachers to "remember in November," i.e., vote for Democratic candidates, who would supposedly restore school funding and teacher salaries cut after the 2008 financial crash.

Yet it is the Democratic Party, no less than the Republicans, that has spearheaded the attack on public education. This is particularly true of Chicago.

There is a path to victory, but it requires a completely different strategy.

First, teachers should immediately form rank-and-file committees in every school, independent of the CTU, to fight for what teachers and their students need, not what the Democrats, the corporate media and the unions claim is affordable.

If there is a strike, committees must be on guard against any effort to ram through an agreement before teachers have the right to study it and vote on it.

In opposition to the back-room negotiations of the CTU, with no information provided to teachers, the rank-and-file committees will raise the demands of the teachers themselves for the strike, including the restoration of all concessions, the end of the expansion of charter schools and the reversion to public schools of existing charters, an end to the school closures, the hiring of thousands of additional teachers, nurses, librarians and social workers, and a substantial increase in wages.

To carry out this struggle, teachers must break any isolation imposed on the strike by the CTU, turning broadly to all sections of the working class, including GM autoworkers currently on strike. The defense of public education is essential to the entire working class, and the conditions facing teachers are common to all workers.

The fight for the right to high-quality public education is not possible without a frontal assault on

the entrenched wealth of the corporate and financial elite. This is possible only if the fight to defend public education is transformed into a broad social movement of the working class against austerity, social inequality and the capitalist system that produces these conditions.

What is needed is a political struggle against the Democrats and Republicans, the twin parties of the capitalist ruling elite, and the fight for socialism. Only through a radical redistribution of wealth can the resources, now monopolized by the super-rich, be found to raise the material and cultural level of the entire population.



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