

Tens of thousands of Chicago teachers and staff rally as Lightfoot administration announces austerity budget

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The strike by 32,000 teachers and school workers in Chicago is at a critical juncture. The powerful strike, which is completing its first full week today, has shut down the third-largest school district of more than 300,000 students.

In the face of a protest of tens of thousands of striking teachers, workers and youth in downtown Chicago yesterday, the administration of Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot doubled down on its insistence that there is “no money” to meet teachers’ demands.

On Wednesday evening, after presenting a new austerity budget in City Hall, Lightfoot arrogantly declared to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, “We won’t bail out CPS, pay for everything [that] teachers” want. She continued, “What we’ve been very clear about, is they’ve got to live within their means, whatever those means are and they can’t exceed that, and look to the city to bail them out. There is not an unlimited pot of money to fund everything they want.”

Lightfoot’s new budget calls for an increase in regressive taxes that will hit the working class. Most significantly, it calls for an increase of funding for the police department by more than \$120 million while cutting funding for the Department of Family and Support Services by over \$100,000.

Lightfoot also called for budgetary “sacrifices,” implementing a “zero-based budgeting” system. While the city budget is different than the budget for CPS, the money she has promised to transfer from the city’s Tax Increment Financing funds to the school district, a total of \$160 million, is wholly inadequate for the needs of Chicago teachers and students.

In other words, teachers will get nothing, and public education will be further undermined and privatized in

one of the most unequal cities in the United States.

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which did not want to have a strike, and insisted prior to beginning it that it would be “short term,” is clearly having difficulty shutting it down. The CTU has been working closely with the Lightfoot administration to reach an agreement, but it is not able to get anything that it thinks it can sell to angry teachers.

Lightfoot and CPS CEO Janice Jackson have called for a 16 percent pay increase over five years, which will not keep up with inflation or the wage stagnation teachers in Chicago have faced for more than a decade, as well as increased healthcare costs after the third and fourth year.

The CTU has called for a 15 percent raise over three years, which is completely inadequate to meet the needs of teachers and school workers. The vast majority of teachers’ aides also make less than \$30,000 a year, a poverty wage in a city like Chicago.

Central issues in the strike are lower class sizes, additional support staff and higher pay for staff. The CTU is seeking language in the contract about smaller class sizes they claim can be enforced by the contract. However, the city has a record of flaunting state laws for class sizes and teacher-student ratios. As CTU President Jesse Sharkey admitted this week, such terms may only apply to 15 percent of CPS schools, excluding high schools.

On Wednesday evening, CTU Vice President Stacy Davis Gates said the union reached agreement on 80 issues, with the five major ones still outstanding. However, these include teachers’ central demands for lower class sizes and additional staffing.

The CTU is above all determined to prevent a

political confrontation between teachers and the Democratic Party. The teachers unions nationally have worked closely with the Democrats in implementing the assault on public education and have benefited from the expansion of charter schools and privatization.

The rally Wednesday morning of many thousands of teachers, staff and students near City Hall was held to coincide with Lightfoot's budget address. Remarks from the CTU, the Service International Employees Union (SEIU) and various Illinois Democratic senators were marked by demagoguery and empty rhetoric.

Aldermen backed by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), such as Carlos Ramirez-Rosa and Rosanna Rodriguez Sanchez, sought to prop up the CTU. "It was only because of the CTU that we are here today connected and fighting for the city that we deserve," Ramirez-Rosa declared.

In fact, Chicago teachers confront worse conditions today than ever before as a result of the actions of the CTU. In shutting down the 2012 teachers strike, the CTU helped impose the education "reform" policy of former mayor Rahm Emanuel, part of Obama's "Race to the Top" program. Under the leadership of then President Karen Lewis and then Vice President Sharkey, that contract was declared "a victory," as it cleared the way for nearly 50 schools to be closed in Chicago and thousands of teachers to be laid off.

The American Federation of Teachers (parent union of the CTU) has done everything possible to isolate the mass strikes of teachers across the country over the last two years. On Tuesday, presidential candidate Senator Warren, who has a record of supporting charter schools, stopped by the pickets and was all but endorsed by AFT President Randi Weingarten.

On Monday, CTU's Davis Gates pleaded with Lightfoot to treat the union "as partners, as co-equals in educating students in Chicago." The Lightfoot administration is not a "partner" of teachers, but an intransigent enemy representing big business and the financial industry. The CTU is no less an enemy of the teachers and public education in imposing their terms.

Teachers confront in the CTU, and the teachers' unions more broadly, organizations that are determined to smother their fight and channel it behind the Democratic Party. To win the strike, teachers must take it into their own hands, through the formation of rank-and-file strike committees.

Rank-and-file strike committees, democratically controlled by the teachers themselves, must take control of the strike and develop it into a broader struggle to defend public education and oppose the dictates of the ruling elite.

This would mean an immediate appeal to all sections of the working class to support their fight, including uniting with the 48,000 GM autoworkers who have been on strike for more than a month. The autoworkers currently confront the efforts of the United Auto Workers to shut down their struggle on the basis of a contract that paves the way for a massive restructuring of the auto industry.

This must be connected to the development of a political movement against the Democratic and Republican parties and the capitalist system they defend. None of the fundamental issues teachers confront, including a massive increase in funding for public education, can be resolved within the framework of a social system that subordinates everything to the profit interests of a tiny oligarchy.

As the conditions in the schools have reached a breaking point, the state of Illinois is home to 18 billionaires—including billionaire Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker (net worth of \$3.4 billion)—whose combined fortunes alone could provide the resources for public education and social programs in several states.

The success of this struggle requires a new strategy. Chicago teachers should not wait for the inevitable betrayal being prepared by the CTU. Form rank-and-file committees at every school to discuss a strategy to win this strike! Turn the strike by teachers into a broader counteroffensive of the entire working class against social inequality and the corporate oligarchy!



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