

Walkout enters seventh day

Striking Chicago teachers confront Democratic Party machine and union's effort to isolate their struggle

Kristina Betinis
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The strike by 32,000 Chicago Public Schools teachers and support staff entered its seventh day on Friday. The central demands in the strike are for smaller class sizes, increased staffing and higher pay for school workers, some of whom make as little as \$30,000 a year in the country's third largest school district.

Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot, who earlier in the week called on the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73 to end the strike while continuing contract talks, once again attacked the unions for the slow pace of negotiations.

Chief Education Officer Latanya McDade told the *Chicago Tribune* on Thursday, "This cannot go into next week." When asked, she said she did not intend her statement as an ultimatum.

In 2012, when the powerful strike by more than 30,000 CPS educators reached seven days and threatened to disrupt the reelection campaign of Barack Obama, whose "Race to the Top" education program marked an escalation of the assault on public education, then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Obama's former chief of staff, threatened an injunction against the teachers. The CTU, with the current president Jesse Sharkey serving as vice president, shut down the strike on Emanuel's terms, paving the way for the closure of 49 schools in 2013, the layoff of thousands of teachers and the expansion of charter schools.

The conditions against which teachers and staff are striking today were imposed by the Democratic Party, with the aid of the CTU. Now, the CTU and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers

(AFT), are once again seeking to derail a strike by channeling it behind the election campaigns of Democratic politicians. On Tuesday, AFT President Randi Weingarten appeared on a picket line with Democratic presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren. Weingarten touted the AFT sellout of this year's Los Angeles teachers' strike as a "victory" and model for the Chicago teachers.

On Wednesday, tens of thousands of striking teachers, support staff, parents and students protested in downtown Chicago during Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot's 2020 budget address, in which she doubled down on her insistence that there is "no money" to meet the teachers' demands.

Lightfoot, a corporate attorney and Emanuel's point person for managing the fallout from the police murder of Laquan McDonald and its official cover-up, is continuing the austerity policy of the Emanuel administration. From the start of the strike Lightfoot has taken a hard line, winning praise from both the Republican-aligned *Chicago Tribune* and the pro-Democratic *Chicago Sun-Times*.

Unveiling her 2020 budget, designed to wipe out an \$838 million deficit, Lightfoot told the press that the public school system and teachers could not "look to the city to bail them out."

The CTU's current contract costs \$2.6 billion annually. Lightfoot's offer to the CTU would reportedly add \$500 million per year in a five-year deal. Official estimates put the cost of the teachers' demands for staffing guarantees and smaller class sizes in a three-year contract at \$2.4 billion.

Lightfoot's proposed budget includes \$1.9 billion in debt payments, money sent directly to Wall Street. This tribute to the banks and hedge funds would by itself largely cover the cost of the teachers' very modest demands.

Teachers and staff picketing William Goudy Elementary on the far north side early Thursday morning spoke about Lightfoot's claim that "there is no money." A staff worker said, "That's her chance to fill up her pocket. She says no money, no money. It's the City of Chicago. It has a lot of money. We need everything, we need a raise, we need good benefits."

A teacher added, "This is terrible. I hope it gets resolved quickly, because it's getting long. There's definitely more money, just not for education."

Another CPS worker spoke about the kinds of services they are fighting for. She said, "When I went to the hospital yesterday, I was talking to people. They asked 'Why are you striking?' I said, 'Does your child have a library at your school? No, that's why. Do you have a sick child at school who needs a nurse in the school?' Even us as adults need a nurse here."

When a WSWs reporter raised the issue of widening the strike and discussed the GM strike in the US and the mass protests and strikes in Chile, Ecuador, Jordan, Lebanon and Catalonia, the worker contrasted these struggles to the strategy of the CTU, saying, "In Europe, don't they do this? When one strikes, they all strike together."

On Thursday, the CTU made a show of putting the concerns of special education professionals at the center of the day's negotiations. The conditions for special education teachers and students in CPS are abysmal. The district has flouted state laws governing staffing for special education classrooms so brazenly that in 2018 the state took the special education program out of the hands of CPS. In addition to breaking staffing laws, CPS was also found to have routinely denied or delayed services for special ed students, including speech and occupational therapy.

In the evening bargaining update, CTU chief of staff Jennifer Johnson announced, "We've made good progress. Today was a good day. Special education teachers and staff were brought in to be updated on bargaining."

The SEIU bargaining team criticized CPS for not being present for negotiations with support staff since

they walked out with the teachers on October 17.

On Thursday evening at CTU headquarters, the CTU, Illinois Federation of Teachers and SEIU held a "civil disobedience" training session with about 500 teachers and staff. Channeling teacher determination into isolated acts of symbolic protest is precisely the function of the CTU and its parent union the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which have deliberately isolated, weakened and defeated the series of teachers' strikes over the last two years, helping to impose the austerity demands of both big business parties.

It is critical that teachers and staff pursue an independent strategy to expand the strike. Teachers enjoy broad support in the working class in Chicago and beyond. To carry forward the struggle, teachers must break through the isolation imposed by the CTU and turn to all sections of the working class, including area educators, autoworkers, service and logistics workers. The defense of public education is essential to the entire working class, and the exploitative conditions facing teachers are common to all workers.

Teachers and support workers must form rank-and-file strike committees at every school to take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the CTU and SEIU and adopt a strategy to win the strike. The immediate task is to turn the strike by teachers into a broader counteroffensive of the entire working class against social inequality and the corporate elite.

The fight for the right to high-quality public education requires a new political strategy, independent of and opposed to both big business parties. The defense of education cannot be achieved simply within the boundaries of Chicago. It requires a direct assault across the country and internationally on the entrenched wealth of the corporate and financial elite. The fight for decent schools must be made part of a broad social and political movement of the working class against austerity, social inequality and the capitalist system that produces these conditions.



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