

The way forward in the Chicago teachers strike

# The defense of public education and the fight for socialism

The Socialist Equality Party  
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The strike by 32,000 Chicago teachers and support staff, now in its second week, is at a crossroads.

Repeatedly over the past week, Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot has declared that the city will not provide additional resources to meet teachers' demands or to improve the crisis conditions in public schools. Lightfoot released an austerity budget on Wednesday that includes \$150 million in new social cuts and a raft of regressive taxes that will fall most heavily on the working class, along with demands for pension "reform," i.e., cuts.

While claiming there is "no money" for public education, Lightfoot's budget includes as its biggest expenditure \$703 million in "bond redemption and interest liabilities," a tribute to Wall Street.

The strike places teachers, staff, students and families in a direct confrontation with the Democratic Party and the capitalist system it defends. Teachers are broadly supported by the working class, who want to secure high-quality education for the younger generations.

Despite the militancy and solidarity of the workers, the strike is in peril. This is due to the treachery of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which is opposed to a real fight against the Lightfoot administration and, behind it, the Democratic Party and the capitalist system.

CTU President Jesse Sharkey admitted on Tuesday that the "substantial progress" he had hailed last weekend involved staffing improvements at just 15 percent of the city's schools, with no enforcement language.

This followed repeated calls by CTU Vice President Stacy Davis Gates for a "partnership" with Lightfoot and CPS. In other words, the union is begging for a

"seat at the table" during implementation of further cuts.

When it called the strike more than a week ago, the CTU intended it to be "short term," according to Sharkey. Yet the city has clearly refused to give it anything that it can use to end the strike.

What is required to meet the demands of teachers for quality pay and benefits and the right to education for all students? Lightfoot's response, backed by the ruling class and Wall Street, makes clear that to secure these rights means a political struggle, mobilizing the entire working class in the fight for a vast redistribution of wealth and an end to the subordination of every social right to the endless accumulation of private profit.

The teachers unions, including the CTU, are absolutely opposed to this. As in 2012, the CTU has isolated teachers, opposing any effort to link up teachers with Chicago Ford workers, who face a contract battle and possible strike, the 40,000 state and city workers in AFSCME Council 31, and the 103,000 IFT members in the state. The Illinois Education Association called off a strike set for Thursday by several hundred teachers in the western Chicago suburb of Addison.

The CTU is following the same playbook used by its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), to isolate and betray the wave of teachers' strikes over the last two years against both Democratic and Republican governments. Their two-part strategy is to prevent any broadening of the struggle to other sections of workers and to divert the teachers' fight behind the electoral campaigns of Democratic Party politicians.

This was spelled out by AFT President Randi

Weingarten, who organized a picket line appearance on Tuesday by Democratic presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren. In praising Warren, who calls herself a “capitalist to the bones,” Weingarten touted the Los Angeles teachers’ strike in January of this year as a “victory” and model for the Chicago teachers. In fact, the union called off the strike after a week and pushed through a contract that met none of the teachers’ demands.

Yet the Democratic Party is intimately involved in the assault on public education. The Chicago Democratic Party machine has produced key figures in the bipartisan offensive against public education over the past decade. They include Barack Obama and former CPS chief executive Arne Duncan who pushed for charters, merit pay, teacher evaluations and privatization nationwide.

It also includes former Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel, who went from being Obama’s White House chief of staff to leading the offensive against Chicago teachers and students that included the closure of 49 public schools following the sellout of the 2012 strike, which then-Vice President Sharkey hailed as a victory.

The Democratic Party controls all of the political levers in the city and the state of Illinois. The Democratic governor, J. B. Pritzker, has a net worth of \$3.2 billion.

Both big-business parties agree on the destruction of social programs, wages and benefits; attacks on immigrants; the attack on democratic rights and the massive buildup of the military. In the midst of the civil war raging in Washington, the Democrats passed Trump’s record budget for defense spending and smoothed the way for his tax cuts for the wealthy.

The CTU may announce a settlement over the weekend and order an immediate end to the strike. Teachers should reject a return to work without a rank-and-file vote on any tentative contract. They should demand a full week to read, study and discuss the full text of any deal between CPS and the CTU.

To counter the capitalist attack on education, teachers need a new strategy and new organizations:

- Form rank-and-file strike committees in every school to take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the CTU. Through the strike committees, the teachers will forge fighting links with autoworkers, municipal and state workers, students and parents.

Establish networks to inform workers and coordinate actions.

- Expand the strike to other sections of the working class, with the aim of shutting down the city in a general strike and appealing for support from workers nationally and internationally.

- The fight to defend education is a fight against the entire capitalist class and all its political representatives, including both major parties, the Democrats and Republicans. This fight cannot be won simply at the local level, or on the basis of futile appeals for reforms from the bribed mouthpieces of the corporations and banks.

A new political leadership must be built in the working class to arm the growing struggles of workers with an independent and revolutionary socialist program. The fight for the most basic social rights of the working class, including education, requires a struggle for workers’ power and the transformation of the banks and major corporations into publicly owned and democratically controlled utilities.

The trillions squandered on the greed of the super-rich must be expropriated and used to provide for the social needs of the population and the development of a society based on equality and workers’ democracy.

The *World Socialist Web Site*, the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party are building this new leadership. We will do all in our power to assist teachers in building rank-and-file committees and urge all those who agree with our program to join the SEP.



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