

Union-backed Chicago Sun-Times attacks Chicago teachers

Michael Walters, George Gallanis
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In the leadup to, during and after the 11-day strike by 32,000 Chicago teachers and school staff, the media lined up with Chicago's Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot to browbeat teachers into accepting a concessionary contract. The corporate press, acting as the mouthpiece of the financial elite, along with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), was determined to contain the strike and keep workers from linking their struggles with those of other sections of workers including striking autoworkers at General Motors.

The CTU rushed a vote by its delegates to pass a tentative agreement and then sent teachers back to work before they voted on the deal. The agreement mirrors the initial austerity contract put forward by the Lightfoot administration, which insisted there was "no money" to meet the demands for more staffing, smaller class sizes and increased pay. The tentative agreement is being voted on by the CTU rank-and-file membership this week.

To most workers, the media publishing smear articles and outright lies to stifle strikes and protests is nothing new. The local Chicago periodicals *Chicago Tribune* and *Crain's* published several attacks on teachers. But it was the Chicago *Sun-Times*, which is co-owned by the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) and whose chairman is former CFL President Jorge Ramirez, that played a leading role in maligning and smearing teachers.

In its articles, editorials and guest opinion pieces, the *Sun-Times* articulated the interests of Chicago's ruling class, the trade union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party.

In a September 23 op-ed piece, Chicago Public Schools Board of Education President Miguel del Valle claimed that under the proposed contract Chicago public school teachers would "see pay increases of 24 percent or more, far outpacing what teachers have received in other major cities in recent years."

Although the teachers no doubt deserve this and more,

the 24 percent figure cited by del Valle was deliberately inflated and added teachers' health insurance and retirement benefits to their salaries. Teachers immediately took to social media to denounce this lie. Some wrote that they planned to staple their tax forms to their picket signs to combat the city's misinformation campaign.

Del Valle is a former city clerk and long-time cog in Chicago's Democratic Party machine. He served as chairman of former Mayor Harold Washington's Advisory Commission on Latino Affairs and was a delegate for Barack Obama in 2008. Far from being an objective commentator, del Valle is a co-author of the miserable conditions teachers, students and parents face.

After del Valle's statement, the *Sun-Times* editorial board weighed in, telling teachers in a September 25 editorial that they "should declare victory. They've won. They should accept the latest contract offer from the Board of Education, a sweet deal that most Chicagoans would just love to get."

The editorial worked to portray teachers as greedy and lazy and to pit other workers—whose wages and conditions have deteriorated due to the betrayals of the unions and attacks of the Democratic Party—against teachers.

Speaking of the city's offer of barely above inflation raises over a five-year contract, the board continued, "That's a locked-in raise every year of 3 percent to 3.5 percent, more than what most workers are getting—if they're getting raises at all." The editorial board added: "With a deal like this on the table, the union is going to have a hard time explaining to the rest of Chicago why teachers might strike. If they're looking for sympathy, we predict they won't find much. Take the deal, CTU. You've already won, lucky you."

Last week, the *Sun-Times* editorial board published a second editorial attacking teachers for taking sick days. This comes after the *Sun-Times* quoted a false figure in a previous article put out by the Chicago Public Schools

(CPS) administration that use of sick days by teachers had grown by 150 percent. The CPS later admitted this figure was incorrect, stating the actual figure was 27 percent.

While the *Sun-Times* offered a cynical apology for using the distorted figure, it continued to castigate educators, saying, “The fact remains that Chicago’s teachers, as a group, treat sick days like personal days—and that has to stop. Even the 27 percent increase reflects poorly on the teachers.”

Of course, the *Sun-Times* did nothing to explain why teachers would need to take more time off. Faced with overcrowded and understaffed classrooms, the horrific problems associated with poverty, homelessness and other social ills, long work hours after the school day, and an administration constantly pushing standardized tests and punitive evaluation schemes, many teachers face symptoms close to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

According to a 2017 national survey of teachers by the American Federation of Teachers, 61 percent of teachers reported being stressed out, while 58 percent said their mental health is not good.

In Chicago, a city of 15 billionaires, collectively controlling over \$53 billion in wealth, teachers are working in buildings with asbestos and bug infestations. Even necessities such as desks and copy paper are in short supply. All the while, teachers are tasked with trying to maintain a learning environment.

According to its website, the CFL has over half-a-million members and is part of the AFL-CIO, acting as an “umbrella” organization for some 320 unions in the Chicago area. This includes the CTU.

In 2017, the CFL, along with private investors including businessman Edwin Eisendrath, former CEO of the *Sun-Times* and former alderman to Chicago’s 43rd ward, acquired the daily newspaper. At the time the *New York Times* published the article “At Chicago Sun-Times, New Owners Vow Return to Paper’s Working-Class Roots,” which stated, “Labor unions now share ownership of a news organization that covers them closely, in what is still one of the nation’s strongest union towns.”

In an interview with reporter Robert Feeder, Eisendrath stated that the paper’s new slogan, “The hardest-working paper in America,” was intended to reflect “our mission as a news company—that we have the backs of working men and women in Chicago.”

The CFL and the rest of the trade unions, however, are entirely hostile to the working class. Politically integrated into the Democratic Party and profiting from their investments in the stock market, the trade union

bureaucracy fears nothing more than the eruption of a powerful movement of the working class against the Democratic Party establishment.

The hardened bureaucrats in the CFL—who have not called a strike of public sector workers in decades—were no doubt angered that the CTU called the strike, fearing that it could be a catalyst for a far broader mobilization of the working class in a city already boiling over with social discontent. For their part, the officials who run the CTU, including President Jesse Sharkey and other members of the now defunct International Socialist Organization, the Democratic Socialists of America and other pseudo-left organizations, felt they had to call a strike in order to prevent a potential rebellion. But the CTU isolated the strike and then imposed a deal dictated by Lightfoot and the wealthy municipal bondholders.

Jorge Ramirez, CFL president at the time of the *Sun-Times* acquisition, is a former member of the AFL-CIO’s executive council and worked closely with the administration of Rahm Emanuel to maintain poverty wages and slash employee benefits. He left the AFL-CIO executive board in 2018 to join Michael Sacks’ financial firm, GCM Grosvenor. Sacks was a close friend and top campaign donor of Mayor Emanuel.

Appointed as managing director of GCM Grosvenor’s labor strategies, Ramirez stated at the time that it was “an incredible opportunity to continue my life’s work, which is to promote organized labor’s values, but this time from the private sector.” In March of this year Sacks, along with billionaire Rocky Wirtz, purchased a stake in the *Sun-Times* maintaining Ramirez at its helm.



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