

School closures threatened as Chicago teachers vote on widely-hated tentative agreement

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More than 25,000 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teachers began to vote Thursday and Friday on a five-year tentative agreement that is widely opposed by educators. Working with the Democratic Party and Mayor Lori Lightfoot, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) suspended the 11-day strike in late October and brought back an agreement that will accelerate the attack on teachers, students and public education.

On Thursday, CTU President Jesse Sharkey wrote a letter to teachers threatening that school closures are expected from the Lightfoot administration, on top of the concessions agreed to by the union in the new agreement.

“The writing’s on the wall,” Sharkey warns in the letter. “We expect the mayor to propose her own round of school closings, hitting neighborhood high schools in Black and Brown communities especially hard. The ink wasn’t even dry on our agreement before the *Chicago Tribune* began demanding this, claiming that school closings are needed to promote equity and protect students.”

“He’s been using fear as a tactic,” said Esperanza, a veteran teacher who is opposed to the CTU agreement, in response to Sharkey.

Sharkey’s letter on possible school closures presented the agreement that the CTU is attempting to push through as a great victory. In fact, it merely demonstrates that the CTU’s shutdown of the strike is paving the way for another massive attack on public education.

The deal does nothing to address the fundamental needs of teachers who face stagnant salaries, and students and educators who have to contend with overcrowded and dilapidated classrooms.

While the CTU and Sharkey have hailed the agreement on class sizes and staffing as “historic” gains, the terms are entirely in line with the demands of Lightfoot. The CTU claims that the new tentative agreement will maintain caps on class sizes and increase staffing through the formation of at least a dozen joint CTU-CPS committees. Far from alleviating overcrowding in classrooms, the joint committees give the CTU a seat at the table to oversee the horrendous conditions teachers face and maintain the privileges of its union bureaucracy.

Widespread teacher opposition to CTU agreement

There is enormous opposition among teachers to the contract. A survey of CPS teachers by the publication *Chalkbeat* found that “58% of respondents reported that they felt like the strike did not achieve their desired results and was not worth it to them personally.”

Comments made by teachers on social media since the strike was suspended are an indication of deep opposition. Michelle said of the

agreement, “CTU played us as pawns!”

“This is not fair to the students or the teachers,” Homero said, adding, “CTU folded like superman on laundry day.” Angie wrote, “CTU and CPS are in cahoots!”

“Feels like they gave up on the big issues. My heart hurts,” said Hannah.

Brian, a veteran teacher, said, “I would like to know why we should ratify a contract that sets us up to have to constantly fight to have it enforced when the language is full of loopholes. All these legal challenges cost the union thousands in legal fees which come from members’ dues. This contract has too many holes and items to interpret, and the class size stuff is not what we wanted and joint committees don’t work!”

According to the agreement, an overcrowded classroom will be defined as 32 students for kindergarten through third grade next year. Grades four through eight will be defined as overcrowded if they have more than 35 children. A meager \$35 million will be spent each year, according to the agreement, so that the board “shall aspire to stay within class limits.”

Such “aspirational” language is a green light for the city and the CTU to keep class sizes abysmally high.

On staffing, the agreement states that the city will provide “adequate social workers and nurses,” with one per school “provided there are a sufficient number of qualified candidates,” yet another loophole for the city. CPS will spend only \$500,000 to recruit clinicians through the life of the contract, and there will be only one case manager for 100-175 students at every school. A joint staffing committee will determine which schools have high needs to phase in additional positions over the next five years, which will be at the discretion of principals to fill.

“The board has ignored hundreds of grievances this past year,” Brian added, “and missed deadlines due to being short staffed, and we can’t do anything about it. So why sign this five-year contract with them to file more legal actions? This contract is not economically smart for us.”

In a city filled with more than a dozen billionaires (including Illinois governor J.B. Pritzker) and numerous Fortune 500 companies, the CTU’s deal and the pitiful funding allocations are woefully inadequate to resolve the social crisis facing vast sections of the city’s working class population. More than 16,000 CPS students are homeless or live in transient living conditions, while teachers confront the social crisis daily in their classrooms.

Stagnant salaries for veteran teachers, aides

On salaries, teachers and school staff will continue to face stagnant pay.

The CTU's agreement is no different than what Lightfoot proposed, with a 16 percent raise over the five-year contract. The last two years will also see a 0.75 percent increase in health care costs.

A first-year teacher will start at \$54,547 in 2019 and make only \$61,990 by 2024. Adjusted for inflation, teachers across Illinois made \$70,499 in 2003, and by 2016 they made \$61,602, a nearly 13 percent pay cut according to data from the National Education Association. Moreover, the cost of living in a city like Chicago is astronomical.

The conditions are even worse for paraprofessionals and school-related personnel (PSRPs) who will receive poverty incomes. The CTU claims to have won historic gains of 40 percent or more for PSRPs, including teacher aides and other staffing aides. In fact, a first-year aide will only make a salary of \$30,862 this year, equivalent to less than \$15 an hour. After 25 years, a veteran PSRP will only see a salary of \$52,824.

"I'll speak for myself as I can't speak for the rest: but as a PSRP, after reading the contract I was upset and thought it was unfair," said Cynthia.

There is also enormous anger among veteran teachers and aides. "Veteran teachers got the shaft," said veteran teacher Ricardo.

Esperanza told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Newer teachers are being pitted against veteran teachers. This is done strategically by CTU and CPS to ensure there are no real increases because 'they don't have enough money.'" Esperanza also noted that veteran teachers were told they would be compensated for the creation of a two-tiered pension system in 2016. Instead, teachers were forced by the CTU to give up raises in 2012 and 2016 to maintain their pensions.

Union censorship of teachers

When Esperanza and other teachers denounced the union on social media, their posts were censored or taken down. Multiple teachers have had their posts taken down.

Brian complained on Facebook, "So my post about the contract along with the article I posted with it seems to have been removed from the CTU Members Only page! How interesting."

Another teacher responded, "My comments have been removed, and I am being censored just for expressing my view. I had one removed about lanes and steps." Later, she noted, "I have been removed from the Members Only Group. And they deleted my post and the 64 comments. They must think we have a political agenda. I don't think it is a good tentative agreement. That is all. I pointed out some negatives with the agreement. I did not violate any 'rules' of the [group]. I reported the censorship to Facebook."

Moreover, the CTU has worked to ram the deal through. "To prevent teachers from having additional discussions around the TA, early voting started to happen at some schools, going against union protocol," Esperanza said.

"Delegates themselves sent out emails to teachers saying they could vote early, even though that is not legal."

Wall Street and school closures

While rank-and-file teachers are furious at the agreement, the CTU, with the aid of the Democratic Party, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the media, defended the latest sellout agreement as a historic victory for teachers. In fact, the agreement accepts all the terms set by the Lightfoot administration and the dictates of Wall Street.

Chicago Sun-Times article noted that the deal "passes" with a bond rating agency. The bond agency in no uncertain terms acknowledges that the agreement is an austerity contract which it notes is "highly positive as it affords labor cost certainty and greater precision in financial planning."

Now, the looming threat of school closures hangs over teachers, parents and students. While Sharkey frames the possibility of school closures in racial terms in his letter, such closings will have a devastating impact on the entire working class, as they have over the last two decades.

According to a 2018 report by WBEZ, nearly 200 schools have been closed or "radically shaken up" since 2002 in Chicago, as thousands of teachers lost their jobs. More than 70,000 students saw their schools closed, and entire working-class neighborhoods were traumatized.

In 2012, after the CTU hailed the shut-down of the seven-day strike as a "victory," nearly 50 schools were closed by then mayor Rahm Emanuel with the union's help the following year. The 2013 school closings in Chicago were the largest number in a single year in the history of the United States.

The CTU held joint public meetings with CPS board members to let off steam as thousands of teachers, parents and students denounced the school closings and the devastation they would unleash. The stage-managed affair by the Democratic Party and the union extended over months and failed as intended. The CTU did nothing to defend the schools.

Emanuel, a former investment banker and White House chief of staff in the Obama administration, implemented the dictates of the financial aristocracy and the bond markets. Moreover, the Emanuel administration's attacks on teachers and public education in Chicago was part of a broader assault on public education.

The Democratic Party and the Obama administration oversaw the layoffs of hundreds of thousands of teachers and numerous school closures across the United States following the 2008-2009 financial crisis.

A new strategy

Whatever the outcome of the vote by Chicago teachers, there is immense opposition among teachers in Chicago and across the country to the ruthless attacks on public education by both parties of big business. The threats by Sharkey and the CTU that school closures are coming should be taken as a warning that more intensified assaults on public education and teachers are coming under the Lightfoot administration and the Democratic Party.

Teachers need an entirely new strategy to defeat the sellout CTU agreement and the attacks on public education. The *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* calls on teachers to immediately form rank-and-file committees of teachers and school workers in every school, independent of the CTU and the Democrats, to discuss such a strategy and oppose the sabotage of the strike by the unions.

Rank-and-file committees of teachers must mobilize other sections of the working class, including autoworkers, city and state workers, logistics workers, students and parents. There is immense opposition to the state of social life today, including vast levels of inequality, the growing threat of fascism and the deepening political crisis in Washington.

Above all, the fight for public education pits teachers and educators against the capitalist system and its political representatives, Democrats and Republicans. A new leadership must be built across the country and internationally to link up with the mass struggles of the working class around the world, from Hong Kong to Chile.

Trillions must be allocated toward funding high-quality education for the working class with good salaries for teachers and educators. The vast

resources of society, squandered by the financial aristocracy on their own personal fortunes and for endless wars, must be used to meet such pressing social needs and to fight for social equality. Such a struggle is above all the fight for socialism.

Contact the WSWS Teacher Newsletter today to get involved and take up this fight to build rank-and-file committees in your schools.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact