

Chicago Teachers Unions pushes through austerity contract, paving way for school closures

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Last Friday, the Chicago Teachers Union announced the ratification of a new five-year deal for 25,000 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teachers and support staff. The contract, which continues the underfunding of schools, is the outcome of the CTU's betrayal of the 11-day strike by educators in the nation's third-largest school district.

The deal meets none of teachers' central demands and instead phases in inadequate additional staff in some schools over the five-year contract, maintains bloated class sizes, provides no additional prep time and increases out-of-pocket healthcare costs.

On average, the six days of lost pay due to the strike is enough to cancel out the miserable three percent wage increase during the first year of the contract. CPS refused to pay teachers for all the strike days and CTU offered no strike pay.

In a letter to teachers published Thursday, CTU President Jesse Sharkey admitted that the deal does nothing to stop a new wave of school closures being planned by the administration of Democratic mayor Lori Lightfoot. "The writing is on the wall. We expect the mayor to propose her own round of school closings, hitting neighborhood high schools in Black and Brown communities especially hard."

Combining bureaucratic complacency with contempt for the intelligence of teachers, Sharkey declared, "We won the best contract that we were able to get given the balance of forces that we have." If the "balance of forces" was stacked against teachers, it wasn't because they lacked public support. On the contrary, teachers enjoyed widespread support and there was growing sentiment for broadening the strike to other sections of municipal as well as industrial and other private-sector

workers. But the "balance of forces" of the corporate and political establishment was strengthened because the CTU and other unions deliberately isolated the strike and colluded with Lightfoot and the Democratic Party to smother the struggle and impose a new round of school closures and austerity measures.

It only reluctantly called a strike, and openly pledged to limit it as much as possible. There is little doubt that Sharkey and the rest of the CTU had already signed off on the school closures and called the strike to dissipate social anger.

This would mark the second time in a decade that the CTU's betrayal of a citywide strike paved the way for mass school closures. After the last strike in 2012, the administration of former top Obama aide Rahm Emmanuel closed 49 schools in the course of a single year. A subsequent five-year moratorium on school closings ended in late 2018 and has not been renewed. Since 2000, hundreds of Chicago public schools have been closed and thousands of teachers laid off as publicly funded, privately run charter school networks have been expanded.

Lightfoot and CPS CEO Janice Jackson issued a joint statement over the weekend, which declared: "This historic, fiscally-responsible agreement includes investments and initiatives that will build on the incredible progress our schools have made and support our commitment to equity." Corporate and financial interests signaled their approval, with credit ratings agencies Fitch and Kroll declaring the costs of the new contract "manageable."

As of Friday, the CTU claimed that the contract had passed by 81 percent, although the full tallies for all schools had not been released. Even if the count is

accurate, the ratification of the deal does not signal an endorsement of the contract terms or the CTU. On the eve of the vote, polls before vote showed widespread dissatisfaction with the contract among teachers. If teachers reluctantly voted in favor of the deal it is only because they were aware that the CTU would not come back with anything better.

The CTU forced teachers off the picket line and back to work as soon as the tentative agreement was approved by the union's House of Delegates on October 30, before teachers had a chance to vote on it. Contract talks continued afterward and were still ongoing last week during the vote itself. The voting process was rushed through as quickly as possible. While voting was scheduled for both Thursday and Friday, the CTU demanded teachers finish voting by Thursday night.

Throughout the strike, the CTU paraded one Democratic Party presidential hopeful after another on the picket lines. Sharkey, a former member of the now defunct International Socialist Organization, participated in a campaign ad for Joe Biden, who played a leading role in the Obama administration's war on public education and historic transfer of wealth to the Wall Street banks and Pentagon war machine. In the end, the rhetoric of Sharkey and other pseudo-left groups like the Democratic Socialists of America was aimed at blocking teachers and the working class as a whole from preparing a political counteroffensive against the bipartisan assault on teachers and public education.

Last Tuesday, the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* held a national online meeting with teachers from Chicago and across the country to discuss the building of new organizations—rank-and-file workplace committees independent of the unions—and a new strategy to defend public education. Teachers explained that the CTU was removing posts calling for a “No” vote from its CTU Members Only Group Facebook page. “Those who have spoken out are being censored, blocked, or had their posts deleted,” said a veteran teacher. “A conversation is not being allowed.”

On the intimidation of opposition by the CTU, one newer teacher said, “There is so much fear instilled in our teacher base that instead of continuing the fight, we succumb to those fears... I think there will be a split vote and the TA will be ratified.”

Teachers from Colorado, Arizona and California shared their own experiences and called for the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association, who impose the dictates of the Democrats and the corporate and financial elite.

The defense of public education pits teachers and educators against the capitalist system and its political representatives in both Democratic and Republican parties. Trillions must be allocated toward funding free, high-quality public education for the working class with good salaries for educators and other school workers. This is only possible if workers conduct a frontal assault on the vast fortunes and political dictatorship of the financial aristocracy through the fight for socialism and a workers' government.

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



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact