

Sanders fails to get endorsement from Chicago Teachers Union

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The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) House of Delegates voted February 5 on a motion supported by the union's executive board to endorse Bernie Sanders for US president in the 2020 elections. The proposal failed, however, with 136 voting against, 121 backing the endorsement and 28 delegates abstaining.

To avoid any further embarrassment for Sanders, CTU Vice President Stacy Davis Gates, the union's former legislative director, immediately pushed through a vote declaring the CTU would remain "neutral" in the presidential race.

Several unions have already endorsed the Vermont senator, including the American Postal Workers Union, National Nurses United, United Electrical Workers, National Union of Healthcare Workers, the Clark County Education Association (Las Vegas) and the teachers' unions in Los Angeles, Oakland and Richmond, California.

The union endorsements serve two purposes. For the labor bureaucracy, which is widely hated for its decades of collusion with the employers, endorsing Sanders provides them with a "left" cover as they continue to impose the dictates of the corporations and the government on their members.

Sanders, in turn, promotes the unions as legitimate "representatives" of the working class because, like him, they subordinate workers to the Democratic Party and its capitalist program of austerity, economic nationalism and war. Sanders has made increasing the membership of the unions a major plank in his election platform. The purpose of this is to block a rebellion of the working class against these corrupt organizations.

Teachers have been the most common donors to the Sanders campaign, attracted by his claim to be leading a "political revolution" against inequality and the "billionaire class." Sanders, however, is promoting the capitalist Democratic Party, which spearheaded the attack on teachers and public education under the Obama administration after funneling trillions to the billionaires who crashed the economy in 2008. Sanders has pledged to support any

Democrat who gains the nomination, moreover, including the billionaire Michael Bloomberg.

Sanders' failure to gain CTU's endorsement is particularly striking because of the union's efforts to promote him. Last September, as teachers were voting to take strike action, the CTU hosted a campaign rally for Sanders at its headquarters. "Well it's a big deal obviously," CTU President Jesse Sharkey told the local ABC News affiliate in Chicago. "I mean national Democratic Party candidate, going to be putting a lot of media attention on the fact that teachers in Chicago are fighting for staffing, are fighting for class size, fighting for fair pay and benefits."

Sharkey and the other CTU leaders have said little or nothing after the defeat of the endorsement, and it is not clear what position they took before the vote. There are a series of factors, however, that no doubt contributed to this debacle for Sanders and his pseudo-left backers in the CTU leadership.

Sharkey, once a leading member of the now defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO), is being groomed by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) for a national leadership role. Last month, he appeared alongside AFT President Randi Weingarten at a mass teachers' rally in Florida. Having for the time being proven himself a reliable policeman of teachers, Sharkey—now free of the organizational encumbrance of the ISO—may be seeking a position in the national union bureaucracy or directly within the Democratic Party itself.

Under these conditions, Sharkey certainly wants to avoid any clash with the AFT and Weingarten. While neither the AFT nor the National Education Association (NEA) have endorsed any of the Democratic candidates yet, Weingarten, a member of the Democratic National Committee, has made her hostility to Sanders known. Last week, she praised the Culinary Workers Union (CWU) in Las Vegas, which ahead of the February 22 Nevada primary denounced Sanders's "Medicare for All" proposal for allegedly undermining union-negotiated health care benefits. The CWU controls a multibillion-dollar health care fund.

This is a reprise of Weingarten’s role during the 2016 elections, when she served as Hillary Clinton’s attack dog in the unions, promising to punish National Nurses United for its endorsement of Sanders. “We will go after NNU and there [sic] high and mighty sanctimonious conduct,” Weingarten wrote in an e-mail uncovered by WikiLeaks.

During the 11-day teachers strike in Chicago last October, Sharkey starred in a groveling campaign advertisement for Joe Biden, who along with the rest of the Obama administration spearheaded the expansion of for-profit charter schools and the attack on public school teachers.

Sharkey, CTU Vice President Davis Gates and other CTU officials are also deeply integrated into the Democratic Party in Chicago and the state of Illinois. Wide layers of the corrupt state and local party machine are also hostile to Sanders, not because he is any threat to capitalism, but because they fear his nomination would raise the expectations of workers and youth angered over decades of Democratic rule and the social inequality, austerity and police violence it has produced.

On Tuesday evening, two prominent Democratic donors in Chicago with long ties to Barack Obama—investor John Rogers and former DreamWorks Animation chair and current Ariel Investments CEO Melody Hobson—co-hosted an event for Michael Bloomberg. It was addressed by Steve Benjamin, the first black mayor of Columbia, South Carolina, and Kimberly Peeler-Allen, co-founder of Higher Heights, which seeks to elevate African American women into the chambers of political and corporate power. The two were the latest black officials and businesspeople to flock to Bloomberg and his money after the release of the tape of the then-New York mayor’s racist diatribe in support of the New York Police Department’s “stop-and-frisk” policy.

After the defeat of the CTU endorsement, Davis Gates said the union’s priorities were “state legislative races” and “racial justice initiatives.” She added, “We don’t have many enemies anymore. They just say yes and don’t want to fight us.” After failing to back Sanders, the CTU delegates endorsed incumbent Democrats Thaddeus Jones and Andre Thapedi for re-election to the Illinois House of Representatives.

Last fall, Sharkey and Davis Gates worked with Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot to shut down a powerful strike of more than 30,000 Chicago teachers and school staff, forcing through a rotten sellout that addressed none of the teachers’ central concerns. The 11-day strike ended with a deal that paves the way for additional school closures in addition to increasing teachers’ health care costs and maintaining overcrowded classrooms.

Davis Gates’s comments indicate the CTU is seeking even closer relations with the Democrats, which in Chicago, Los

Angeles and other major urban areas has spearheaded the attack on public education. Illinois’ billionaire governor J.B. Pritzker has already signed CTU-sponsored legislation to hire a more “diverse” body of new teachers and substitutes.

The pseudo-left figures who run the CTU’s leading faction, the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), have long peddled racist politics to conceal the class character of the attack on public education and line teachers up behind various factions of the Chicago Democratic Party establishment led by African-American and Latino politicians.

The CTU is currently a partner to the *New York Times*’s reactionary 1619 Project, which claims that all of American history has been characterized by an irreconcilable struggle between the black and white races. Many proponents of identity politics have denounced Sanders for not endorsing the call for reparations for slavery.

Other CTU delegates reportedly backed Elizabeth Warren, who carried out a #MeToo style attack on Sanders last month.

The defeat of the Sanders endorsement was a public embarrassment for the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which has led the campaign for Sanders. Last weekend’s gathering of the Young Democratic Socialists of America was held at a conference center owned by the CTU Foundation and was addressed by several CTU officials who promoted Sanders and falsely claimed that last fall’s teachers strike was an unmitigated “victory.”

Whatever the specific conflicts going on behind the scenes, the pro-Sanders wing and their opponents in the CTU are simply employing different means to achieving the same end: the political subordination of teachers and the working class as a whole to the Democratic Party and its capitalist program. The starting point for defending the rights of teachers and to vastly improve public education is rejecting these dead-end politics and fighting for the political independence of the working class and socialism.



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