

Chicago charter school teachers begin strike after unanimous authorization vote

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On Monday, 34 teachers at three Urban Prep Academies in Chicago began a strike against the charter schools after three years of negotiations that have failed to produce a contract. Urban Prep manages two all boys' schools located in the Bronzeville and Englewood neighborhoods on Chicago's south side and one campus in the downtown loop area, serving a combined total of roughly 1,500 students.

At the end of May, the teachers unanimously voted to authorize a strike against the charter school operator, animated by a desire for higher wages and improved benefits. In addition, teachers are demanding that the Urban Prep management provide the federally mandated resources for special education students.

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) officially represents the Urban Prep teachers, but the middle-class bureaucrats that run the CTU are thoroughly hostile to the interests of rank-and-file teachers. The union has not publicly listed its demands for the contract, instead issuing a press release that simply states, "Management continues to reject language protecting special education students, classroom needs, student resources."

Despite the fact that the starting salary for Urban Prep teachers is an estimated \$11,000 less than the average Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teacher represented by the CTU, the union is not publicly making any demands for pay parity with other CPS teachers. The CTU's press release notes that in the past year Urban Prep received a \$3 million Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan funded by the CARES Act, which was not utilized for its express purpose of funding teachers' salaries, but makes no demand that this siphoning of teachers' pay be reversed.

In 2018, CTU leadership pushed through a vote to merge with the union that represented charter school

teachers at the time, the Chicago Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff. The merger took place after years in which the CTU hemorrhaged dues-paying members, and was meant to shore up the union bureaucracy's income stream, while keeping strikes and contract negotiations more closely under the thumb of the Democratic Party.

Since the merger, conditions for educators in charter schools and traditional public schools have only declined further, reaching their nadir during the pandemic. In February, despite overwhelming opposition from teachers to returning to classrooms in deadly conditions, the CTU negotiated a deal with CPS that sent unvaccinated teachers and students into classrooms with no protection from the virus.

The CTU has worked hand in glove with CPS and Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot to rapidly reopen the third largest district in the US amid the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in an untold number of infections and deaths throughout the city. Remarkably, the CTU statement on the Urban Prep strike says nothing at all about the pandemic. This is an expression of the fact that union leaders like Jesse Sharkey have fully committed to the propaganda efforts of the Democratic Biden and Lightfoot administrations to claim that the pandemic is over and completely lift all remaining safety measures.

The unanimous strike vote by the Urban Prep teachers is a clear indication of the growing militancy and determination of educators, which the CTU leadership will do everything in its power to stifle and betray, above all by isolating the 34 teachers from the rest of their roughly 25,000 members.

The Urban prep schools have recently come under fire for poor student performance and misuse of funds. In 2018, CPS attempted to revoke the charter of one of

the network's schools, Urban Prep West. However, a commission run by the state government overturned the city's plans and allowed the school to remain open. This has created an unusual situation, in which Urban Prep West is overseen by the Illinois State Board of Education, while the other Urban Prep campuses are answerable to CPS. During the state commission, it was reported that 87 percent of students at Urban Prep were not meeting college readiness standards.

More recently, in January of this year, CPS gave Urban Prep Englewood a warning that if it did not improve performance the school's charter would not be renewed after 2022. Bing Howell, CPS' chief portfolio officer, then reported that the charter school had "consistently troubling performance" in its academics and financial management.

Charter schools are notorious for their poor management and misappropriation of resources. Despite the pretense of being "non-profit" organizations, the publicly-funded but privately-run schools make money by gutting essential classes and programs for students and severely underpaying teachers. Then, the leftover funds are used to pay executive salaries to the charter school administrators.

Ever since the 2018 merger of the charter school union with the CTU, the union has worked to isolate and smother the opposition of charter school teachers who are determined to fight to improve their conditions. This is epitomized by the fact that the contract for the charter school teachers is negotiated separately from the vast majority of the CTU membership.

In May of 2019, roughly 80 teachers at three other charter schools went on strike just before the public school teachers' contract was set to expire. The CTU quickly wrapped up the negotiations, pushing through a sellout contract for the charter teachers to avoid a situation in which charter teachers and public school teachers could unite their struggle and combine their demands.

Urban Prep teachers must study the lessons of the CTU betrayals and link their struggles with rank-and-file public school teachers and other sections of workers. The fight for better wages and conditions in schools is not isolated to the Urban Prep network, but is bound up with the decades-long drive to dismantle public education.

Whatever agreement the CTU reaches will be a concessions contract that does nothing to address the central demands of teachers. Rank-and-file educators must take matters into their own hands and fight to build the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was formed in January to oppose the reckless reopening of Chicago schools and to secure the right to free, high-quality education. This committee is part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and has powerful allies among educators and other sections of workers in the US and globally.

On the same day that the Urban Prep teachers announced their strike, Volvo autoworkers in Virginia rejected a sellout contract presented to them by their union, the United Auto Workers (UAW), by 90 percent, with the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee playing a major role in determining the landslide "No" vote. These autoworkers have now returned to the picket line to continue their fight for better conditions.

Chicago charter and public school teachers must connect your struggle with that of the entire working class. We call on Urban Prep teachers to take up your own independent program and join the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today to broaden your struggle as widely as possible.



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