Chicago Teachers Union rushes to end charter school strike as new struggles develop

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After only two days, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) is rushing to end the strike by 34 teachers at Urban Prep Academies in Chicago, announcing Wednesday that they had reached a tentative agreement with the network of charter schools. The tentative agreement (TA) is said to be for three years, with a reopening of the deal next summer, while the date when teachers will vote on the agreement has not been reported. Basic facts about the TA have also not been made public, with the *Chicago Tribune* noting, "Neither side has provided details on what the tentative contract provides in pay and benefits."

Teachers began striking on Monday after bargaining between both parties dragged on for the past three years, leading to a unanimous strike authorization vote last month. Rank-and-file teachers demanded proper funding for special education students and programs, wages equal to that of other CTU members teaching in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), and other conditions and benefits.

The announcement of the TA is being presented by the CTU and the corporate media as a done deal, despite teachers not yet having time to study or vote on the contract. The CTU characterized the TA as a "win" for adding language to the contract that mandates Urban Prep provide funding for special education. However, according to the CTU's press release, this does not go further than to request that the school follow federal special education law.

The union's press release also mentions that the TA will include "improvements" to teacher evaluations and new teacher provisional periods, although the CTU did not specify what these changes would include. Urban Prep maintains long "provisional" periods for teachers in order to keep wages low and hold the threat of arbitrary firing over teacher's heads, establishing what is essentially a two-tier salary system. The CTU also claims that the agreement includes a limit to classroom sizes but does not specify the new limit.

CTU stated that the agreement will give "salary increases moving them closer to other teachers throughout the district." This is a thinly veiled way to say that the contract will not pay the charter teachers as much as public school teachers, who earn on average roughly $11,000 more annually.

The rapid conclusion of the strike is a deliberate move by the CTU to isolate the Urban Prep Teachers and sign an agreement just as more Chicago charter teachers are coming into struggle against the private charter school companies. On Wednesday, students and teachers at Epic charter school on the South Side held a rally to demand that four teachers—KeShawn Williams, Priscilla Dixon, Lawrence Marshall and Erik Thibault—be reinstated after they were arbitrarily fired.

The Epic teachers have also been in contract negotiations. The CTU recently reached a TA, but teachers have put off voting on the contract until the victimized teachers have been reinstated. Three of the four fired teachers are members of the schools bargaining committee and are suspected of being targeted as a threat to others who oppose the poor conditions in the classrooms. In a press release, the CTU also alleges that Williams was targeted for being the adviser of the school's LGBTQIA+ club.

Teachers at Epic demanding the reinstatement of their colleagues have been threatening to strike if the firings are not reversed. For this reason, the CTU made sure to wrap up the Urban Prep strike as quickly as possible to avoid any joint struggle across several charter schools.

The isolation of strikes has been a tool used by trade unions like the CTU for decades to browbeat workers back on the job. Rather than mobilizing the largest

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number of workers possible in a united strike against the wealthy charter administrators, the CTU works to ensure that no two strikes occur simultaneously so that they can be easily smothered.

Teachers should reject this framework entirely and form their own rank-and-file committees to organize themselves and mobilize the immense strength of educators and the broader working class in Chicago and the surrounding region. Educators, parents and students at Urban Prep, Epic, and all other charter schools and public schools must join together in a united struggle against low wages and dilapidated conditions in the schools, which have become hotbeds for COVID-19 infections. Significantly, the CTU's own website tracking COVID-19 infections at Chicago schools has been down during the Urban Prep strike, while the union issued no demands pertaining to safety in the schools.

Conditions in Chicago's charter schools are abysmal, mirroring those of the poorly funded public schools, most of which are located in working-class neighborhoods that face an immense social crisis. Just in the past year, three Urban Prep students have been shot in unrelated incidents, with one student, Rashad Verner, being killed. The working-class areas where the charter schools are located were the most heavily affected by the pandemic over the past year.

The CTU functions not as a "union" but as an ally of the city and management in forcing teachers back on the job in hazardous conditions. Furthermore, the union accepts the basic framework in which privately run charter schools are able to siphon millions of dollars in public education funding each year.

In their own statement, the CTU admits that they fundamentally accept the privatization of public schools, writing, "Throughout bargaining, Urban Prep families, teachers and staff remained deeply committed to the company's mission to nurture and support young Black men—and to holding management accountable in *embracing and enacting its charter vision and mission* " (emphasis added).

The press release goes on to note the immense corruption of the Urban Prep management, noting that they "paid out over $1.6 million in 2020 to merchant cash advance businesses," and acknowledging that "Lenders have raked in profits as high as 50% on Urban Prep's sale of future revenue." The CTU offers no means of fighting this setup, which is geared toward enriching a tiny layer of corporate managers.

The way forward for Urban Prep teachers is to join and help build the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, which was formed by Chicago teachers in January to organize themselves independently of the pro-corporate CTU and the Democratic Party that conspired to reopen schools amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In their fight, teachers can look to the example of the Volvo autoworkers in Virginia, who returned to the picket line this week after voting overwhelmingly to reject a sellout contract presented by the United Auto Workers (UAW).

The Volvo workers have formed their own rank-and-file committee, which is calling for full income for striking workers, mass picketing, unification with all other striking workers, and no return to work until the minimum demands are met and voted on by the workers themselves.

Urban Prep teachers should follow this example and organize themselves to study the contract, reject it if it does not meet their demands, and stay on strike until their own demands are met. To sustain their fight, they must demand that the CTU provide strike pay equal to workers' salaries for as long as necessary. The *World Socialist Web Site* will help facilitate the building of the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, and we urge all Urban Prep teachers who wish to deepen their struggle to sign up today to join this committee .

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