

Significant opposition to CORE leadership emerges among Chicago teachers in latest CTU election

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The Chicago Teachers Union's (CTU) pseudo-left Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) won re-election to a fifth consecutive term in a vote held on May 20. Despite winning the election, CORE received just 9,484 votes, its lowest vote total since 2010 when CORE was first elected to lead the union.

Garnering 57 percent of votes cast, current CTU Vice President Stacy Davis Gates won election as president, replacing outgoing president Jesse Sharkey, while CORE co-founder and power behind the scenes Jackson Potter will be the new vice president. Given its record of betrayals, especially in the school reopening drives during the pandemic, CORE leaders must be feeling intense relief to have been able to avoid a run-off by winning an outright majority of votes.

In any case, the vote for CORE is hardly a decisive show of support from teachers. Its vote total constitutes just 38 percent of the union's total active membership of around 25,000. Votes for CORE fell slightly from 9,565 in 2019 to 9,484, continuing a slide in support from the faction's highest vote total of 13,599 in 2013—a 30 percent decrease.

CORE accession to the union's leadership more than a decade ago prompted an outpouring of jubilation from pseudo-left satellites of the Democratic Party, who claimed that the election of this supposed opposition faction was the beginning of a wave of democratization within the corrupt, pro-corporate American trade unions. CORE leader Jesse Sharkey, who recently stepped down as CTU president, was a prominent member of the International Socialist Organization, now defunct and largely absorbed by the Democratic Socialists of America. But almost immediately, CORE began engineering one betrayal after another, including the shutdown of a strike in 2012 which paved the way for dozens of school closures. Its sellout of another strike in 2019, on the eve of the pandemic, led to a five-year deal with pay increases of barely more than 3 percent a year, less than half the current rate of inflation.

But the final nail in the coffin of CORE's claim to represent a "progressive" or "democratic" alternative is its role in forcing through the reopening of schools during the pandemic, against overwhelming opposition from rank-and-file teachers. In 2021 and 2022, the union actively collaborated with Chicago Mayor

Lori Lightfoot and the Biden administration to reopen schools, demanding only token and worthless safety agreements. CORE and the CTU as a whole thus bear direct responsibility for mass infections and deaths not only in Chicago schools, but in the city as a whole, given that schools have been one of the main vectors of transmission for COVID throughout the pandemic. The vote itself occurred amid an explosion of cases of COVID-19 at CPS, as a result of the abandonment of any pretense at mitigating the spread of COVID.

CORE's betrayals to reopen Chicago Public Schools (CPS) were vital to the success of the nationwide campaign to reopen schools led by the Biden administration, whose aim was to facilitate parents' return to work. At the national level, the campaign was spearheaded by the American Federation of Teachers and its president Randi Weingarten, against whom CORE was once presented as a militant opposition.

The deep anger and alienation felt by teachers towards the union bureaucracy found a certain reflection in the election results. The vote total of the main opposition faction, the Members First caucus, running against CORE for the second election in a row, fell even more sharply, from 4,840 to 4,428. Opposition to CORE did not translate to support for this faction, which ran an overtly right-wing campaign promising to "work collaboratively with all stakeholders," including Mayor Lightfoot, and to engage in fewer strikes. Lightfoot ally Lisa Schneider Fabes, a former member of Lightfoot's transition team and a school board member in suburban Wilmette, launched a social media campaign on behalf of Members First which was quickly abandoned when her identity was discovered.

While the combined total for both CORE and Members First fell from 2019, the newly formed Respect, Educate, Advocate, and Lead (REAL) caucus garnered 2,778 votes, or 17 percent of the total. As a result of votes for REAL, turnout in the election climbed from 14,405 votes in 2019 to 16,690, that is, from 58 percent to 67 percent.

Formed largely by former CORE members, REAL ran on a platform claiming to aim for a return to CORE's purported principles of rank-and-file democracy and transparency. REAL

also ran on a platform of less direct political spending on Democratic Party politicians and for an expansion of the union's grievance-handling department as a recognition that "working conditions are untenable and unsustainable in too many of our buildings."

REAL's campaign was centered on criticisms of CORE's role in school reopenings in 2021 and 2022, on the grounds that this has seriously damaged the credibility of the CTU. As REAL presidential candidate Darnell Dowd put it, "We have witnessed a show and been peddlers of wolf tickets at our own expense. Money and resources that some of us will never recoup. The weight that our voice used to carry within ranks, and the community at large has dropped to an all-time low. We have been made a spectacle with our leaders cast as the head jesters while we, the members, become the targets of hecklers."

The REAL caucus itself, however, was founded and is led by former top CORE officials who have played their own roles in the engineering of sellouts over the years. Vice presidential candidate Joseph "Joey" McDermott is a former CTU field rep who helped play a role in shutting down the 2018 strikes by charter school teachers. Alison Eichhorn, financial secretary candidate, is a member of the CTU's Executive Board and was on the CTU's "big bargaining team" during contract negotiations in 2016 and 2019.

The vote by teachers for REAL was clearly motivated by a class anger at the betrayals of CORE. But REAL itself is not an expression of this legitimate anger but an effort at damage control by a section of the union bureaucracy. Its aim is to prevent the growing opposition among Chicago teachers, parents and students from taking an independent form, outside of the control of the union bureaucracy.

REAL's explanation for CORE's record is entirely subjective, claiming that it has "lost touch with the difficulties that educators face." As a solution, REAL calls for a return to CORE's "core principles."

These principles, however, are themselves the cause of CORE's betrayals. Its "rank-and-file" unionism always served to deliberately conceal the basic class hostility of the trade unions to the workers which they claim to represent. Controlled by bureaucrats earning six-figure salaries, resting upon financial assets running collectively into the tens of billions of dollars and enjoying the closest ties to management and the capitalist state, the trade unions suppress the class struggle because its institutional interests are fundamentally threatened by it.

For decades, every attempt at "reforming" the unions has succeeded only in creating a new layer of corrupt bureaucrats. Earlier examples include Miners for Democracy, which produced future AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, and Teamsters for a Democratic Union, which entered the Teamsters leadership in the 1990s under President Ron Carey. Carey came to power in the first direct elections in Teamsters history, following the federal takeover of the union under anti-

corruption laws, but was later brought down himself in a corruption scandal after betraying the 1997 UPS strike. Today, TDU is a major backer of new president Sean O'Brien, a notorious thug who once threatened physical violence against TDU campaigners.

Expressed through its connection with pseudo-left groups such as the former ISO and the DSA, CORE also represents the interests of a layer of privileged middle class professionals and academics, with no connection to the class struggle, who increasingly inhabit positions in and around the union bureaucracy. CORE's "social justice unionism," a non-class abstraction, amounts to throwing its support behind campaigns centered around race and gender which such layers regularly employ in their struggle for greater access to privileges. This is entirely compatible with CTU's support for the mass infection of impoverished minority students and parents.

REAL "opposes" the record of CORE in the same way that CORE "opposed" the previous ruling factions of the CTU, employing radical and populist demagogy in order to defend the same basic program and orientation of its predecessors. Should it end up in the leadership of the union, it would only end up following in CORE's footsteps.

But rank-and-file opposition to the union bureaucracy is developing rapidly among workers around the US and the world. Entering into struggle under the blows of the pandemic and the spiraling cost of living, workers increasingly view the bureaucracy with hostility and are convinced by their betrayals of the need for new organizations. This is expressed above all in the rapid growth of rank-and-file committees, established with the assistance of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Chicago teachers must learn the lessons of their own struggle and those of workers around the world. This means building the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee as part of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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