

Who is Karla Hernandez-Mats?

Florida Democrat Charlie Crist taps Miami/Dade teachers' union head as running mate in gubernatorial election

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Karla Hernandez-Mats, a former educator and current president of the United Teachers of Dade (UTD) union, has been tapped as the running mate of Democratic Congressman and former governor of Florida Charlie Crist in Crist's bid to regain the governorship against the fascist Republican incumbent, Ron DeSantis.

UTD is the local union, affiliated with the National Education Association and its state-wide branch, the Florida Education Association (FEA), which covers more than 30,000 educators in Miami/Dade County. Miami/Dade has a population of over 450,000.

Charlie Crist was a Republican when he began his term as Florida governor in 2007, became an independent in 2010 and switched to the Democratic Party in 2012, one year after the end of his tenure as governor.

In 2012, he ran unsuccessfully for the US Senate from Florida against Marco Rubio, and then lost in his bid to regain the governor's office against Rick Scott in 2014. In the 2016 Congressional elections, Crist defeated the Republican incumbent US House member from Florida's 13th Congressional District, David Jolly.

Crist defeated Florida Agricultural Commissioner Nikki Fried in this year's Democratic gubernatorial primary election by a margin of 59 percent to 35.3 percent, an outcome driven largely by Crist's three-decade-long history within the political establishment and Fried's acceptance of substantial contributions from sugar and utility corporations. Hernandez-Mats was chosen from among 18 potential running mates whom Crist had floated in his campaign.

Crist began his lengthy political career as a Republican official in the state beginning in the early 1990s. He spearheaded brutal attacks against democratic rights

through repressive law-and-order legislation and acquired the moniker "chain gang Charlie" for restoring the infamous system of forced labor for convicts in Florida's prison system. He also sponsored an arduous law that required inmates to serve 85 percent of their sentence before being eligible for parole.

The Republican-turned-Democrat exemplifies the masquerading and cynicism one finds in the American two-party system. He has frequently flipped-flopped on issues when it proved expedient to the furtherance of his political career.

Crist's running mate, Hernandez-Mats, running for lieutenant governor, is by all accounts a political novice. Raised in Miami as a first-generation American of Honduran descent, she received a bachelor's degree from Florida International University in emotionally handicapped education and worked for 10 years teaching special education before ascending the ranks of the UTD bureaucracy to become the union's secretary/treasurer from 2013 to 2016. She began her first term as union president in 2016 and won a second term in 2019.

The promotion of Hernandez-Mats has drawn speculation that Crist and the Democrats will make education the focal point in their campaign to oust DeSantis, which is given little chance to succeed.

DeSantis has launched fascist attacks against education this year, with legislation targeting freedom of speech and democratic rights more generally, from banning school textbooks and restricting historical teaching about struggles against inequality, to ramming through a law prohibiting discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in classrooms.

The Democratic Party-aligned media has lauded her

tenure as UTD president for leading the Miami-Dade school district's campaign to pass a tax referendum in 2018 in support of teacher pay, advocating to keep health care premiums frozen and removing the union from debt.

The elevation of Hernandez-Mats to the governor's race alongside Crist, however, is not an expression of the growing popular opposition to the Republicans. Rather, it confirms the right-wing character of the electoral strategy of Florida Democrats and the Democratic Party nationally. In appointing Hernandez-Mats, the party is boosting a well-heeled union bureaucrat who was entrusted with carrying out the demands of the Biden administration, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) that schools be reopened at the height of the Delta and Omicron surges of COVID-19.

It is in line with Biden's corporatist strategy of promoting the pro-corporate trade unions as an industrial police force to suppress the mounting struggles of the working class against inflation, austerity, heightened exploitation and social inequality.

Throughout the pandemic, Hernandez-Mats has operated as a faithful steward of the political establishment, the national union bureaucracies, and the corporations, which prematurely imposed in-person learning and then abandoned contact tracing, quarantining, isolation and other COVID mitigation measures altogether.

All of the teachers' unions, staffed by bureaucrats with salaries well over six figures, toe the line dictated by Wall Street that children be placed in classrooms so that parents can return to work to pump out profits for the ruling class and make society safe for the stock market, regardless the cost in the health and lives of educators and students.

The contrast between the praise heaped on Hernandez-Mats and what the former teacher has accomplished is striking. A critical detail that was added to the 2018 referendum following its passage was that teachers would see a paltry 1 percent rise in their salaries each year.

A repeated promise during the referendum campaign was that the average salary of Miami/Dade teachers would rise above the national average, but about two-thirds of Miami/Dade's educators saw their salaries fall below that average. Many mid-career teachers, some with decades of experience, have salaries that barely exceed those of entry-level teachers.

The referendum was undermined in March of this year when Florida's 3rd District Court of Appeals ruled that charter schools were eligible for a share of the

referendum's proceeds. Charter schools would now receive roughly \$65 million of the approximately \$230 million the referendum generated. According to district officials, public school teachers would suffer a 6 percent, or \$3,900, cut to their supplemental pay.

Both the district and the UTD blamed the state's Republican legislators for the measly sum, but the union bureaucracy followed its long tradition of not waging any fight for better pay and organized no opposition.

The contract negotiated by Hernandez-Mats' bargaining team for the 2021-2022 school year did not even address the reopening of schools, even as the Delta variant of COVID-19 was rapidly spreading across South Florida and killing thousands.

The UTD and district officials agreed to handle all policies related to the pandemic separately in a so-called "letter of understanding." The same procedure had been agreed to the prior year, but instead of temporarily moving to remote learning as in the fall 2020, the union agreed last year to reopen schools outright.

The betrayals of the UTD and FEA demonstrate the further integration of the unions into the Democratic Party, with the unions pouring millions of dollars into the coffers of Democratic politicians.

The ruling class is relying on the increasingly discredited corporatist unions to counter the growing wave of militant struggles and strikes, from Pacific Northwest educators to nurses around the country and rail workers.



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