

Democrats place policing and “public safety” at center of Chicago municipal elections

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On February 28, voting will close in the 2023 municipal elections for mayor and city council (50 seats, one per ward) in Chicago, the country’s third largest city. Early voting began January 26, with mail-in ballots reportedly increasing turnout over previous elections.

Eight candidates are challenging the widely unpopular Mayor Lori Lightfoot, formerly a police accountability board official under mayors Richard M. Daley and Rahm Emanuel. The main contenders are Democratic Representative Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, Cook County Commissioner and the Chicago Teachers Union’s political and legislative official Brandon Johnson, and former Chicago Public Schools CEO Paul Vallas, who has oriented himself to the police and the far-right in the Chicago region.

Since it is unlikely any mayoral candidate will take a majority of the vote outright, given the number of candidates, the vote which ends February 28 will be a primary, with a runoff election between the two top candidates to take place in April. A significant portion of the city council is expected to turn over, with 16 of 50 aldermen retiring and 39 total seats contested. Several city council seats are expected to go to runoff as well. The full results of the primary may not be known for several days.

The election will also seat 66 individuals, three in each of the 22 police districts, on a newly-created police districts council, aimed at refurbishing the image of the police after a seemingly endless series of exposures of police frame-ups, torture, violence and murder. The council members are to offer recommendations and advice, and receive \$500 a month. Their recommendations carry no real weight and the body itself is yet another attempt to make it appear the city is taking steps to improve the long-standing problem of police violence, while the Democratic Party as a whole clamors for more cops and more funding.

The most significant feature of the election is its extraordinarily right-wing character, with a near-total emphasis placed on crime, and “public safety.” The campaigns and news media claim this singular focus is supported by public polling, but the polls published also indicate deep fear of and hostility to the police going back many years, sentiments which are fully justified.

In 2022, police murders in the United States reached a new record of 1,176, as the administration of President Joe Biden budgeted a staggering \$30 billion to shore up local and state police forces. Repudiating the demands of the 2020 mass protests against police violence after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Biden declared in his 2022 state of the union address, “The answer is not to defund the police. The answer is to fund the police.”

There is unanimity among the nine candidates in this law-and-order propaganda, from the openly right-wing Paul Vallas and Willie Wilson, who claimed at a debate that a “police officer should be able to hunt [people] like a rabbit,” to the so-called “progressives” Chuy Garcia and Brandon Johnson. Whoever is elected in the spring will be responsible for leading an aggressive effort in Chicago to repress social opposition and beat back social demands in the interests of capital, supported by the

Democratic Party at all levels.

There has been virtually no discussion in the election campaign of the pressing issues of social and health services, and jobs for young people; replacing hundreds of lead water service lines across the city; improving public transit service; substantially increasing the stock and availability of affordable housing; school closures; and establishing meaningful environmental regulations.

The election takes place amid a rising tide of class struggle in the US and internationally. There have been recent strikes in the city by health care workers and University of Illinois faculty. Deteriorating conditions in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) have charter schoolteachers poised to take action. Three thousand workers in several city agencies under AFSCME Local 31, including clerks, 311 operators, librarians, and public health workers are now working without a contract, after months of extensions. Large numbers of workers are concentrated in Chicago in auto and manufacturing, schools, health care, logistics and airline industries, facing years of cuts and deteriorating conditions, compounded by the brutal effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is the real significance of the elevation of policing in the elections, and the class dynamic it expresses. The police are being built up, not to “fight crime,” but to fight the working class.

No expense is being spared on the elections. Tens of millions are pouring into the mayoral race, with the *Sun-Times* reporting last week an estimate of \$22 million. Significant financial contributions have come from well-connected “super PACs,” large political action committees often referred to as “dark money” because they conceal the individuals and organizations intervening in the election and skirt financial reporting rules.

At least one of the organizations supporting Democratic Rep. Jesus “Chuy” Garcia is called “Get Stuff Done” and has close ties to former mayor Rahm Emanuel. Vallas and Lightfoot are also benefiting from similar donations, and the PACs are intervening in about 15 competitive city council races as well. In the 48th ward race, Get Stuff Done has paid for overt red-baiting mailers.

The election has also been marked by political violence. Earlier this month, the campaign office of Daniel La Spata, first ward alderman, Democratic Party committeeman and member of the Democratic Socialists of America, was smashed up in what he attributed to “political retribution,” for delivering a defeat to a disgraced Democratic rival who enjoys the support of sections of the business community and powerful members of the corrupt city council.

The four candidates deemed by the media to have chance to enter into a spring runoff include:

Lightfoot’s term in office has been marked by ruthless pursuit of the interests of capital and brutal acts of police violence, including the murder of 13-year-old Adam Toledo, the beating and intimidation of protesters, the shutting down of the city center, and later the imposition of a curfew on youth in the wealthy downtown area. She has also attempted to block

the release of footage of a 2019 police raid made in error on the home of social worker Anjanette Young, who was forced to stand naked in her living room as police ransacked her home.

She refused to negotiate with the Chicago Teachers Union in a 2019 strike over critically low staffing levels in Chicago Public Schools, a district that regularly violates special education mandates and infamously denies children library access due to low staffing. After blocking back pay for striking teachers, Lightfoot twice led national campaigns to reopen Chicago Public Schools at high points of COVID-19 infection, promoting the racialist fiction that black and Hispanic youth were worst affected by remote learning, as COVID-19 death and disability ravaged working class households.

In the 2019 election, Lightfoot benefited from those who portrayed her race, gender and sexual orientation as evidence of her “progressive” political orientation. But she positioned herself as a political “outsider” who would rein in city council corruption and hold police accountable. Prior to taking office she worked as a U.S. Attorney and later led the Police Accountability Task Force for the previous mayor, Rahm Emanuel, to whitewash police violence in the wake of protests against the police execution of teenager Laquan McDonald.

During her 2019 campaign, Lightfoot pledged to reopen the six municipal mental health clinics closed by Rahm Emanuel, which she has not done. But she allocated \$281.5 million in federal COVID-19 relief funds to police payroll costs. This was 70 percent of the \$403 million in discretionary funding the city received from the federal government, and about one-third of the city’s annual police payroll costs of roughly \$862 million.

In recent days, she has made overt racialist appeals to try to boost support for her flagging campaign, although Brandon Johnson is, like her, an African American. Last Saturday at an event supported by Rep. Bobby Rush, Lightfoot called on black residents to vote for her or not at all, saying, “Any vote coming from the South Side for somebody not named Lightfoot is a vote for Chuy Garcia or Paul Vallas. If you want them controlling your fate and your destiny, then stay home. Then don’t vote.”

Lightfoot has come under criticism for allowing two Chicago Police officers involved with two different far-right extremist groups, Robert Bakker with the Proud Boys and Phillip Singto with Oath Keepers, to remain on the force.

Though she enjoys no funding advantage over her rivals, she has support from the right-wing Ricketts family, and a vocal section of businesses. A section of the Democratic Party is backing Lightfoot, including Bobby Rush, Danny Davis, and Robin Kelly, but only a few of the 15 city council committee chairs, those responsible for pushing the mayor’s agenda through the council, have endorsed her. Others have backed Johnson and Vallas.

Fourth District Representative Jesus “Chuy” Garcia’s campaign has been characterized primarily by his attacks on Lightfoot from the right, accusing her of failing to crack down hard enough on crime and promising to hire about 1,600 police, filling vacancies, and hiring a new superintendent. His debate appearances have been laced with pro-police provocations including, “There’s an 85 percent chance you can commit murder in Chicago and get away with it.”

In his television ads, Garcia positions himself as tough on crime, intoning, “I’m Chuy García, and enough is enough. It’s time to get back to a safer Chicago now by getting more cops on our streets and illegal guns off of them.”

Garcia was the mayoral candidate endorsed by the Chicago Teachers Union’s Independent Political Organization in 2015 and promoted by the CTU’s pseudo-left CORE leadership faction as a progressive. His intervention pushed then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel into Chicago’s first mayoral runoff in 2015, which Garcia lost. Previously, he served as Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle’s floor leader.

The supposedly “insurgent” candidate of 2015 has become the choice of what remains of the Democratic Party machine in 2023, a lesson in itself of the fraudulent character of the labels attached to various candidates by the corporate media.

Garcia’s political record goes back to the mid-1980s when he served under Mayor Harold Washington. Since then, he has occupied nearly every elected position possible, and operated a non-profit community organization. Garcia’s main endorsement is the International Union of Operating Engineers, a major building trades union.

Born 1953, Vallas is a seasoned “crisis manager” for the ruling class, leading Chicago Public Schools as CEO under Richard M. Daley, and later moving on to the Philadelphia, Bridgeport, and New Orleans Public Schools systems, leading substantial turnaround and privatization efforts. He also worked in Haiti and Chile after earthquake disasters. In this election he is adding the support of the extreme right to his record. His tenure in the Bridgeport, Connecticut school system, where he was denounced as an authoritarian leader, was ended by a judge who removed him from the position for lack of qualification, calling his purported leadership credentials a “sham.” Teachers and parents have vocally opposed his campaign.

Vallas is running a far-right campaign, denouncing criticisms of police, and employing racist tropes, pledging to “take back our city.” Therefore, he has the endorsement of the *Chicago Tribune*, and a substantial portion of the financial aristocracy, including the investment bankers leading Madison Dearborn Partners, billionaire Sam Zell, chicken magnate Joseph Grenys, and the head of Waste Management Inc., which once contracted with the city but was found to have fraudulently double-charged for its processing services.

Vallas has pledged to hire at least 1,700 police officers, and for armed police to be placed on the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA).

While boasting of his Democratic Party bona fides, Vallas has for many months cultivated a following among far-right extremists, including a close relationship with the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) in Chicago, headed up by the fascist John Cantanzara. Vallas represented the FOP in the latest contract negotiations with the Lightfoot administration.

Vallas also appeared as a featured guest at “Awake” Illinois events in March 2021 and June 2022. Awake opposed remote learning during the period that governments undertook limited measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The Awake organization, which has significant overlap with “Moms for Liberty,” opposes public education, promotes Christian nationalism, and anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ prejudice. At the March 2021 event, Vallas encouraged Awake leader Shannon Adcock to run for governor. On July 11, 2022 Vallas served as co-host on the program of far-right AM radio pundit and Trump family associate Mark Vargas. He also appeared on far-right Illinois Republican Jean Ives’ podcast.

The pretense that such a figure opposes crime is absurd, as the privatization schemes he has overseen are notorious for graft and corruption, at a level remarkable even in the Chicago Democratic Party. After former mayor Richard M. Daley consolidated mayoral control of CPS in the 1990s, Vallas led aggressive privatization of CPS via charter schools. He began this process by campaigning within neighborhood and ward organizations for “school choice” programs that would benefit local ward and construction bosses. These politically connected, privately managed school deals were ripe for corruption. Just one high profile example is Juan Rangel, finance lead for former mayor Rahm Emanuel’s election campaign. Rangel created a charter network called UNO (now known as Acero) that took in around \$250 million in public money with little to no oversight. Rangel left in disgrace after Emanuel took office.

On February 8, independent news site *The Tribe* reported one of Vallas’s sons, a police officer in Texas, was involved in a fatal shooting of a black man.

His campaign has taken in large sums, more than \$400,000 from Madison Dearborn Partners, and \$100,000 from the head of Waste Management, Inc. Some \$17,500 came from Deborah Quazzo, a venture capitalist in education technology and disgraced former member of the Chicago Board of Education, and her husband. Vallas has also benefited from a \$165,000 television and digital ad buy from a PAC with undisclosed individuals using campaign media and phrases in apparent violation of campaign finance law.

Brandon Johnson, the candidate supported by much of the Chicago Democratic Socialists of America, claims to be “tough and smart” about reducing crime, and supporting alternatives to police where mental health and other social problems are at issue. In no way has he repudiated the Democrats’ right-wing political framework of the election, that crime and public safety are number one, instead opting to respond to it with proposed increases in social services, from the standpoint that they deal with causes of crime and conflict.

Johnson, who served as the CTU’s political and legislative director, was elected as Cook County Commissioner in 2018, mainly responsible for the union’s legislative agenda in Springfield, the state capital. As early as November 2019 Johnson was identified by *Politico* as the CTU’s choice for a mayoral challenger, noting that he takes in six figures for his legislative work on behalf of CTU. Johnson is a protege of current Cook County Democratic Party chair and County Board Commissioner Toni Preckwinkle, who lost to Lightfoot in the 2019 mayoral runoff.

Johnson’s campaign is endorsed and supported by the Chicago Teachers Union and United Working Families, and generously funded by the national, state and local teachers unions. He has received at least \$1 million from the American Federation of Teachers, \$350,000 from the CTU, \$90,000 from the Illinois Federation of Teachers, \$50,000 from the Cook County College Teachers Union, \$250,000 from SEIU Local 73, and another \$300,000 from SEIU Healthcare. Johnson enjoys the support of most of the Democratic Socialists of America alderpersons, as well as former Lightfoot allies in the city council.

In his time as commissioner, Cook County spent \$181.7 million, or 42 percent of its \$428.5 million in coronavirus relief funding, on the sheriff’s office, of which \$176 million went to payroll costs. The sheriff’s office is responsible for the enormous Cook County Jail, infamous for being the country’s largest “informal” mental health institution, along with electronic monitoring and policing in parts of the county which do not have their own police department. Cook County Board also passed a non-binding Justice for Black Lives resolution calling for the county to “redirect funds from policing and incarceration to public services not administered by law enforcement that promote community health and safety equitably,” which received support of 15 of the 17 commissioners.

In recent days, Johnson has roundly rejected any association with political radicalism or left-wing politics. He instead compared himself to Lightfoot at the time of her election, saying: “Everything she pretended to be in 2019 is everything we truly are, today.”

The claims that support from the teachers unions means Johnson’s campaign expresses the interests of working people is a fraud. The American Federation of Teachers, spearheaded by the CTU leadership’s spectacular betrayals in winter 2021 and 2022, suppressed and defeated two strike efforts by CPS teachers and parents, sending teachers back into schools at the behest of Lightfoot and the corporate interests she represents.

The CTU blocked two strikes by Chicago teachers who, with parents and others, fought to keep schools remote and children protected from COVID-19. After Biden—whom former CTU President Jesse Sharkey campaigned for—took office and declared that schools must reopen in 2021, the AFT’s president Randi Weingarten turned to the same right-wing forces Paul Vallas has associated with, holding joint panel events with proponents of mass infection with COVID-19.

On a recent interview ~~proposed~~ Johnson also right to vote to undocumented immigrants, but cynically claimed there should be participation for undocumented families in making decisions about public education, a position also taken by Garcia.

Speaking with *Sun Times* senior political reporter Fran Spielman in autumn last year, Johnson assured her podcast listeners his campaign could be relied upon to support machine favorite Chuy Garcia in a runoff. As the race became tighter, Johnson struck a more combative pose, publicly proclaiming that his campaign is serious and accusing Garcia of “abandoning the progressive movement.”

Political theatrics aside, Johnson’s comments clearly indicated he is willing to play a role similar to that of Bernie Sanders, on a smaller scale, advocating for the most meager reforms, winning electoral support on that basis, and then shepherding his supporters in the direction the Democrats choose, inexorably to the right.

Polls now indicate Vallas will make the runoff, and Lightfoot may not, and thus Johnson has gained support, and could be the other choice on the ballot in April, instead of Garcia. Given Johnson’s record, public statements and the extraordinarily right-wing character of this election, it would be a grave mistake to think a Johnson administration will represent a progressive alternative to Vallas, Garcia, or Lightfoot. All of these individuals are in the same party.

Also running to unseat Lightfoot are perennial candidate and local millionaire Willie Wilson, a businessman whose main customer is McDonalds; Ald. Sophia King, who led the education committee in city council; Ald. Roderick Sawyer, son of the former mayor Eugene Sawyer; and Ja’mal Greene, a small businessman.



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