

Chicago mayoral forums mark Democratic Party's sharp shift to the right

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17 March 2023

The mayoral run-off election between two Democrats, Cook County Commissioner and Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) legislative rep Brandon Johnson and pro-corporate “crisis manager” Paul Vallas, who has recently taken on the role of CEO at an Arkansas military school, marks a sharp lurch to the right in capitalist politics.

This has been underlined in a series of mayoral forums and debates, in which nearly exclusive attention and emphasis has been placed on questions of crime and “public safety” amid a rising tide of class struggle.

On Thursday, Vallas supporters disrupted a Johnson campaign event at Rainbow/PUSH headquarters, where speakers from Philadelphia and New Orleans came to testify to Vallas’ destructive tenure in their cities. They were interrupted by a group of Vallas supporters, apparently led by former 911-dispatcher turned right-wing activist Keith Thornton. Members of the Vallas group tried to take over the microphone and the event devolved into a shouting match.

Vallas has used this month’s election forums to reiterate his promise to hire 1,700 police officers. At the Chicago Women Take Action forum on Saturday, March 11, Vallas claimed the Chicago Police Department was “degraded, demoralized,” a signal that a Vallas administration would give the police further impunity to terrorize the city’s working class population.

At the Public Safety Mayoral Forum at UIC on March 14, former federal Education Secretary and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) CEO Arne Duncan, now head of Chicago Cred, a violence intervention organization funded by Laurene Powell Jobs, opened discussion. He told the audience, “We need much more effective policing. Chicago has twice as many police per capita as the nation as a whole. We have more police than New York and way more than LA, based upon population. Please keep this in mind as you hear from our candidates today.”

Duncan, who succeeded Vallas as CEO of Chicago Public Schools and was later appointed Secretary of Education in the Obama administration—where he oversaw a massive attack on public education through pro-corporate “reform”—explored a mayoral campaign himself in the 2023 municipal elections. Though he decided against a run, his media appearances last year were a high-profile early intervention into the election that Democrats have defined by a single issue, violent crime, and setting the stage for aggressive law and order campaigns, like that of Vallas, who is backed by the fascist Fraternal Order of Police.

In his remarks, Vallas has called for “community-based policing,” that is, drastically increasing police presence in public places, including regular beat assignments for officers. While he claims he

will implement the 2019 federal consent decree for police reforms, enacted in the wake of the police execution of Laquan McDonald, Vallas has worked closely with the FOP and its fascist president, John Catanzara. Vallas volunteered to negotiate the FOP’s latest contract with the city and boasts of a police and military family. His son, Gus Vallas, was one of three San Antonio, Texas, police officers who killed the fleeing Kevin Donel Johnson, Jr. in March 2022.

Johnson has entirely adapted to the law-and-order approach in the election by essentially disavowing any previous support for “defunding” the police, and instead calling for “smart policing.” At the UIC forum, Johnson claimed only that defunding “was a political goal. I never said it was mine.” In response to criticism of his plans, Johnson replied, “My plan is an investment plan,” and referred to the immediate promotion of 200 detectives.

While endorsed by the pseudo-left groups like the Democratic Socialists of America, Johnson has systematically abandoned any association with radical or left-wing politics in the run-off, even comparing himself to outgoing mayor Lori Lightfoot, saying, “Everything she pretended to be in 2019 is everything we truly are, today.”

In the forums, Vallas has outlined his plans for a massive attack on the public schools. As he put it, “The first order of business is really to decentralize the district so the money follows the students to the local schools.” As the Democrats pushed for under Obama’s Race to the Top and Common Core, Vallas aims for school management and curriculum to be dominated by local corporate interests, with education tailored to narrow workforce needs. He is an advocate for school vouchers, which he refers to as “scholarships,” and has called for “empowering” the Local School Councils which oversee every Chicago public school to invite charter schools into their school buildings.

On the basis of Vallas’s education and policing platforms, the extreme right and Christian fundamentalists, as well as far-right big-business figures like hedge fund billionaire Griffin and the Illinois Policy Institute, are supporting his candidacy.

Blaming temporary school closures during the pandemic for increased crime, Vallas has proposed, “Opening the schools during the dinner hour, on holidays, and bringing community-based programs and community-based organizations to those schools to provide safe and secure places for the young people so they could be fully engaged in work-study programs and mentoring programs.” In other words, school facilities are to be fully opened up to all kinds of private and religious organizations, and indeed could even serve as hubs for companies to employ student labor.

Expanding on this, at the March 11 forum, Vallas said, “We have to move in the direction of providing universal work-study. There’s no reason why every city agency, every single department, every contractor, the labor unions can’t all create paid work-study jobs for our young people so we’re engaging them, whatever school they come from, whatever community they live, we’re connecting them directly to the workforce, and putting them in a safe, secure environment where they’re surrounded by the best role models in the community, working men and women.

Neither candidate speaks about how the party of which they are both now leading members has created social conditions in such an immensely wealthy city where a substantial section of youth in the poorest neighborhoods are neither in school nor employed.

While Johnson portrays himself as a supporter of public education, he fundamentally agrees with making CPS a pipeline for students to go directly into local corporations. At the March 11 forum, Johnson said there was a gap between education and job opportunities, saying, “That’s why I’ve worked hard as an organizer to bring the trades into the schools. CPS has rejected those opportunities. I’m going to expand those opportunities. There are 55,000 vacancies right now in manufacturing positions alone where the average salary is \$85,000.”

Remaining unspoken is the fact that American manufacturing plants have become ever more lethal, while wages and benefits are being slashed by contracts enforced by the unions which fail to even keep pace with surging inflation, underscoring the class exploitation at the heart of the candidates’ politics.

Vallas, the first CEO of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), appointed by Mayor Richard M. Daley, was a central figure in the Democratic Party-led school “turnaround” and privatization efforts beginning in the 1990s and throughout the 2000s. After his time at CPS, he worked in several public school districts including Philadelphia, New Orleans, Haiti, and Bridgeport, Connecticut, where he left a trail of fiscal and institutional devastation.

With social tension at a boiling point, Vallas is running a far-right, authoritarian campaign that has won the support of the banks and major corporations, as well as billionaires including former *Chicago Tribune* owner Sam Zell and Ken Griffin, the CEO of Citadel. His statement at the March 11 forum on how he would lead is a warning that a Vallas administration would be dominated by representatives of the financial aristocracy.

“What we’re offering, what I’ve been offering, is quality leadership, and not the type of leadership that is a solo act, but rather a leader who can bring people together, a leader who can draw people from the community, who can build a coalition, who can bring people into all levels of government, who have the skills, who have the stamina, who have the incentive, who have the track record to get the city back on track.”

Vallas has cultivated links to the far-right, including Awake Illinois, a group founded to oppose vaccine and other public health mandates in response to COVID-19. Awake Illinois, which has received financial support from reactionary billionaire Dick Uihlein, has significant overlap with “Moms for Liberty,” opposes public education, promotes Christian nationalism, and anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ prejudice.

He has also won the support of a substantial section of the Democratic Party establishment, which sees in Vallas a steady and reliable hand with the ruthlessness to confront any developing social explosion. Among the more notable endorsements he has received from prominent Democrats include former Illinois Secretary of State

Jesse White, former Illinois Senate President Emil Jones, former Democratic Party operative and Vallas associate Gery Chico, former mayoral candidates Ja’Mal Green, Roderick Sawyer and Willie Wilson, as well as a number of city aldermen.

Vallas has also lined up the support of a number of the building trades unions, including IBEW Locals 9 and 34, Plumbers Local 130 and International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Locals 150 and 399, whose leaders support whichever candidate is closer to wealthy real estate developers and banking interests.

That Vallas is seen as the front-runner in the race is due in no small part to the enmity earned by the CTU over its failure to protect students or teachers from COVID-19 by reopening schools in close collaboration with Lightfoot and the Biden administration. The betrayal of the struggle by teachers against an unsafe reopening was only the latest in a long string of such betrayals, the most notable of which was shutdown of the 2012 teachers strike which led to the closing of 49 schools, but also includes numerous broken promises about the supposed “wins” achieved through its supposed “social justice unionism.”

Indeed, in response to Vallas’ accusations that he supported closing schools during the pandemic, rather than defending this as a necessary public health measure, Johnson used the excuse that it was a “100-year pandemic.”

Johnson, a former public school teacher, is employed as a staff organizer by the CTU, and is mainly responsible for the union’s legislative agenda in Springfield, the state capital. Johnson is a long-time member of the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE). Johnson was elected as a Cook County Commissioner in 2018. While on the county board, he has worked closely with Toni Preckwinkle, the chair of the Cook County Democratic Party, who has a long record of austerity and attacks on the wages of county workers.

Although he has received fewer aldermanic endorsements, Johnson has received endorsements from former mayoral candidate Rep. Chuy Garcia, Preckwinkle, Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul, and US Representatives Danny Davis, Jonathan Jackson, Delia Ramirez, and Jan Schakowsky, as well as South Carolina’s Jim Clyburn.

The endorsements from sitting national and state figures in the Democratic Party indicate that they see the unions as critical partners in managing the developing political and social crisis and evince a degree of unease about the alliance with the far-right that Vallas has developed.



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