

Chicago Democrats promote racialist politics during mayoral election

Alexander Fangmann
26 March 2023

All indications are that the run-off election for mayor of the city of Chicago, the third-largest in the country, is an extremely close contest. In the latest poll by Victory Research, CTU staffer and Cook County Commissioner Brandon Johnson and former Chicago Public Schools (CPS) CEO Paul Vallas, registered 44.2 percent and 46.3 percent support, respectively, among those polled. This is well within the poll's margin of error.

Reporting in local and especially national media has emphasized the support for Johnson and Vallas, both Democrats, among different racial voting blocs, with Vallas gaining the support of the predominantly white areas in the northwest and southwest of the city, along with the wealthy downtown, while Johnson has the support of liberals on the predominantly white Northside, as well as many black voters. Under this conception, the voters up for grabs are Latino voters, especially those who supported US Democratic Representative Chuy Garcia's failed mayoral bid, as well as black voters on the South and West Sides who supported one of the six other black candidates in the first round, primarily current mayor Lori Lightfoot and right-wing businessman Willie Wilson.

In keeping with this general framing of the election, Chicago Democrats of all political stripes, but particularly those aligned with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) have spent the present campaign season promoting racialist politics. For its part, the Vallas campaign, which politically is close to the Biden wing of the party, has been pioneering an alliance with the fascist far-right through the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) and Awake Illinois/Moms for Liberty.

Vallas' racial appeals are more indirect, telegraphed through a series of "likes" by his campaign's social media accounts that referred to Chicago in Trump-like terms as a "hellhole" and "Shiticago" and of derogatory comments about Lightfoot. Though he blamed the likes on campaign volunteers and even "hacking," his fascist supporters well understand they will be given a green light under a Vallas administration.

For its part, the campaign of Brandon Johnson, a long-time CTU staffer and Cook County Commissioner, has not raised the alarm or made a class appeal to all workers to oppose Vallas's right-wing campaign. Instead Johnson has increasingly emphasized the language of identity politics, including black nationalism. Like Lightfoot before him, his political supporters have largely allowed his race to become a stand-in for an examination of his actual political views, many of which remain unknown.

The irony in Johnson's appeal to identity politics is that he has had much higher support in predominantly white upper-middle-class areas, where his strongest base of support is located, with much of that support based on a mistaken belief that Johnson and the CTU represent some alternative to the right-wing Democratic Party establishment.

All sections of the Democratic Party, however, are unwilling and incapable of mounting a class-based appeal, understanding quite clearly the danger to class rule posed by a united working class. The Democrats

have long understood that the best way to keep the working class in major cities under control is to divide workers based on race or ethnicity. Indeed, the retrograde conceptions on race expressed by Johnson throughout his campaign have also been expressed by several aldermen, including Jeannette Taylor, a member of the DSA, who has expressed xenophobic and chauvinistic attitudes towards immigrants reminiscent of those of Donald Trump.

A recent biographical account of Johnson's life in the *Sun-Times* makes clear that many of Johnson's conceptions derive from his upbringing as the son and grandson of pastors in the Church of God in Christ, a Pentecostal church with a largely black membership. Although his family split off from that church to form their own church, Community Center Christian Ministries in Elgin, and Johnson decided to become a teacher instead of becoming a pastor, he has described his campaign as a "faith walk."

Having spent some time as a missionary in Cuba, Africa and South America, Johnson emphasized the importance of these experiences in racial terms while downplaying the reactionary political implications of missionary work, saying, "We didn't go around proselytizing the world. That was not our objective. It was more about just understanding the unique qualities and the makeup of our people in the commonality. That even though we had been separated physically, that we are still very connected spiritually, ideologically, emotionally."

Claiming that the experience of seeing Brazilian favelas allowed him to understand the public housing projects of Cabrini-Green, Johnson said, "It's a very powerful display and mechanism to highlight not just the conditions in which we have been forced to live in, but the resilience and the political power that we are seeking all over the globe to eradicate the torment and the torture of white supremacy, and that's not missionary work. That's liberation work, and that's why I became a teacher."

Johnson's racialist conceptions were on full display during their first televised debate on March 21. Attempting to rebuff a Vallas criticism that the CTU had wreaked havoc on schools by keeping them closed during the pandemic, Johnson said Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker, "did the right thing by shutting down everything to save Black and Brown lives." Even his objection to standardized testing was couched in this way, with Johnson saying, "A standardized test that has roots in eugenics to prove the inferiority of Black people should not be the measurement."

Setting aside the completely inadequate character of Pritzker's public health measures, Johnson and the CTU have long used the high proportion of African-American and Latino students in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) as an excuse to talk about the district's students and parents in exclusively racial terms and evade the central question of class. Far from offering a political solution to the attacks on education, these conceptions serve to stifle the emergence of a unified struggle of the working class against the capitalist system and make it easier to push workers into the arms of right-wing figures like Paul Vallas.

Johnson's racial rhetoric was even noted by former Black Panther

turned Congressman Bobby Rush as he endorsed Vallas for the latter's "experience" and "sound, independent judgments." Alluding to Johnson, Rush said, "There are some who seek to polarize and divide us with rhetoric that is intended to pit the North Side against the South Side or the West Side or the East Side. Or those who attempt to pit Black vs. white, white vs. Latino or Black vs. Latino."

Johnson backer and CTU President Stacy Davis Gates gave further expression to the politics of race and gender as she noted that the largest union backers of Johnson's campaign, CTU, SEIU and SEIU Healthcare, have black leaders and memberships that are mostly women, as opposed to the building trade unions, which have largely endorsed Vallas. Davis Gates said the support of the teachers, health care and building service unions showed union membership isn't just "white guys in hard hats."

Johnson has a long history of expressing these kinds of views. In a 2014 interview with *Jacobin's* Micah Uetricht and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Johnson addressed how the CTU "made racial inequality in Chicago a central part of its campaigns." Johnson said, "We're popular because we've been vocal and up-front about calling things what they are and saying that many of these policies are just plain old racist. And the reason why it's necessary for us to call it out that way is because black folks in particular live under the misery of racist policies all the time."

Completely distorting the history of the civil rights movement and leaving out the part played by the working class, including white workers, Johnson credited black nationalism, and claimed all of the Great Society legislation passed under the administration of US President Lyndon Johnson "happened because you had a black radical left agenda that brought Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. All of that came out of the black consciousness movement."

More recently these nationalist conceptions among the union officials and pseudo-left in Chicago have veered into outright xenophobic and chauvinistic attitudes. Interviewed on the Maze Jackson show in February, Johnson was asked whether he supported allowing undocumented immigrants to vote in elections for the CPS school board, a position disingenuously supported by Mayor Lori Lightfoot in a bid to retain formal mayoral control over schools. While saying he supported input into education by undocumented immigrants, Johnson answered, "You know, our democracy, for better or worse, was designed to provide enfranchisement to individuals of course who have the legal presentation of being here. I think that should be maintained."

Days after the interview with Jackson started getting wider attention, Johnson reversed his position, calling for the state to revise legislation in order to "allow all parents and taxpayers to vote in school board elections, regardless of citizenship status."

Johnson is not the only Democrat driving a wedge between the black working class and other racial and ethnic groups.

On March 16, Chicago 20th ward alderman Jeanette Taylor tried to defer a vote by the city council to accept \$20 million in state funding to address the needs of immigrants bussed to Chicago from other states. The funds would be paid out to social service organizations providing food and other services to the immigrants.

Taylor, a DSA member who came to prominence for her 30-day hunger strike against the closing of Dyett High School on the South Side, used the debate on the vote to express her opposition to the placement of immigrants in the predominantly black Woodlawn neighborhood, a part of the 20th ward, claiming it would anger residents who themselves need assistance. The administration of Mayor Lori Lightfoot had placed immigrants in a shelter opened in the shuttered Wadsworth Elementary, which was closed in 2013 as part of the largest school closure in US history.

Around 5,150 migrants have arrived in the city since August 31, when Texas Governor Greg Abbott started bussing immigrants to cities led by

Democrats.

Claiming the city had thrown "a grenade into our community," Taylor made clear her views in language reminiscent of Trump's rhetoric about dangerous immigrants:

"I made it clear to this administration in October, I had a part of the ward that I felt could accommodate [the migrants], because they're Latinx-speaking folks, and part of my ward is Latinx. But I wasn't listened to. It felt like nobody heard me and it went on deaf ears. So when do we have the conversation about where it's safe, where people should actually be, where they can get the support that they need in the community?"

She was supported in her comments by alderman Jason Ervin, who on Monday came out in support of Johnson's campaign for mayor. Ervin, the chair of the city council's black caucus, said, "We've got to figure a way out to satisfy more than a narrow group. Yes, we are a welcoming city, but we also have to think about those who are here."

Ervin himself has a long history of opposing measures that would apply to all workers regardless of race. In 2021, he opposed a city council resolution advocating a \$30 million pilot of a universal basic income (UBI) program. Ervin said, "Until we deal with the issue of reparations in the city of Chicago, there's no way in hell we can support direct payments to anybody other than the American descendants of slaves in the city of Chicago."

Continuing his denunciation of UBI, Ervin claimed, "These conversations are a slap in the face to people that have suffered great atrocities over time in this country. ... We have all these conversations about other communities. But when it comes down to dealing with Black folks—not only in the city of Chicago but in America—we're always in the back seat."

Nothing progressive can emerge from these sentiments. An effective fight against the bourgeoisie's policy of class war can only happen through a rejection of these retrograde conceptions and the unification of all workers on the basis of class. Whether Vallas or Johnson wins the election, the next mayor will be tasked by the ruling class to carry out a campaign of austerity and attacks on workers. The working class must prepare to defend itself against the attacks by forming Rank-and-File Committees to coordinate its struggle, and building its own political movement, independent of the capitalist two-party system.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact