

The three lies of the Brandon Johnson campaign for Chicago mayor

Kristina Betinis
28 March 2023

The April 4 runoff election for mayor of Chicago, the third largest city in the US, is a contest between rival factions of the Democratic Party, pitting Paul Vallas, a former CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, against Brandon Johnson, an official of the Chicago Teachers Union. Vallas has the all-out support of the Chicago police, while Johnson is backed by the CTU, the United Working Families organization and the Democratic Socialists of America.

Johnson, a Cook County Commissioner and CTU legislative representative, claims to be a “progressive” and “real Democrat” who “understands the value of working class people,” while attacking Vallas as a thinly disguised Republican who has cozied up to the extreme right and Fraternal Order of Police (FOP).

Both candidates and corporate media have maintained a relentless focus on policing and “public safety,” as the main issue in the election, to conceal the real agenda of the next mayor—whichever candidate wins—to impose massive cuts in social spending, particularly the schools, the Chicago Transit Authority, and city pensions. Thus the support for Vallas, dubbed “Chainsaw Paul” by *Forbes*, among business leaders and a powerful section of the Democratic Party. Most recently, US Senate Majority Whip Richard Durbin, who is close to President Biden, announced his support for Vallas.

Brandon Johnson has been endorsed by the American Federation of Teachers union, as well as its state and local affiliate, the Chicago Teachers Union, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). His campaign has taken in a reported \$7.1 million from AFT, IFT [Illinois Federation of Teachers] and SEIU.

In the last week, Johnson has added Bernie Sanders, James Clyburn, Elizabeth Warren and Ayanna Pressley to the local and state politicians endorsing him, who include Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul, and US Representative Chuy Garcia.

Johnson’s candidacy is also being promoted by the Democratic Socialists of America’s publication *Jacobin*, which declares “Johnson’s agenda represents a profound break from the corporate-friendly politics that have dominated Chicago in the neoliberal era.” In a December 2022 interview with Micah Uetricht, Johnson claims, “As mayor of Chicago, I’m confident that the will of the people will prevail, because they’ll have one of their own in City Hall.” In *These Times*’ Kari Lydersen claims Johnson’s candidacy represents “a new direction.”

Former International Socialist Organization leader and current DSA affiliate Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor, who holds an endowed chair in African American Studies at Northwestern University, promoted Johnson’s candidacy in the *New Yorker* magazine, writing, “Johnson’s claim to the progressive mantle has come through years of community activism and organizing, as part of the CTU.”

The pseudo-left and the unions seek to give the population the impression that Johnson is a “progressive” candidate, while Johnson himself is seeking to curry favor with big business and reactionary pastors

and church leaders, like Bishop Larry Trotter, who earlier in the primary endorsed the far-right candidate Willie Wilson, now a Vallas ally.

There are three big lies at the heart of the Brandon Johnson campaign.

The role of the Democratic Party

The first is that the Democrats are in any sense a party of “the people,” let alone the working class. The Democrats are a party of Wall Street and war, and this is what cannot be said by its pseudo-left supporters in the DSA, whose sole aim is keeping young people and workers tied to this capitalist party.

The Johnson campaign is constantly drawing attention away from the fact that both he and his opponent are in the same party, which has ruled Chicago for more than 80 years, and is responsible for the conditions of immense inequality, exploitation and danger that prevail in working class and poor neighborhoods—the same conditions he claims to want to change.

The second lie is that his backing by the unions, and longtime employment as a legislative official, essentially a lobbyist, for the CTU, is evidence of his fidelity to the needs and interests of the working class. Johnson, who taught in CPS from 2007-2011, has spent more than twice the time working for CTU as he did in the classroom. He takes in \$93,000 in salary on the CTU payroll and another \$80,000 as a Cook County commissioner.

But an income placing him in the top 15 percent in the city is not unusual among union leaders and politicians. Johnson went to work for CTU in 2011, as part of the Caucus of Rank and File Educators leadership of the CTU. CORE has a staggering record of betrayals. It shut down the 2012 teachers strike, imposing a contract that paved the way for shuttering of schools and layoffs of teachers and staff. 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, and toothless staffing agreements that remain unfulfilled.

CORE’s claim to represent a “progressive” or “democratic” alternative was shattered decisively when it forced through the reopening of schools during the pandemic, against overwhelming opposition from rank-and-file teachers, supported by parents and students. In 2021 and 2022, the union collaborated with Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the Biden administration to reopen schools, providing a model for the nationwide reopening and mass infection of children.

Far from representing the interests of teachers or working families as a whole, the teachers unions are controlled by affluent representatives of Democratic Party politics, whose occasional posturing as “left” makes

them more effective at enacting cuts.

Johnson argued that he is in fact best positioned to impose the coming cuts. At a forum last week he said, “There will be some tough decisions to be made when I am mayor of the city of Chicago. And there might be a point within negotiations that the Chicago Teachers Union quest and fight for more resources—we might not be able to do it. Who is better able to deliver bad news to a friend than a friend?”

The Johnson campaign’s argument to the business class is that the unions and pseudo-left can be relied upon to enact cuts without provoking as much social opposition as Vallas. But corporate Chicago is skeptical of his ability to accomplish this, given the rising militancy in the working class, and more inclined to rely on the police thuggery promoted by Vallas.

The third lie of the Johnson campaign is that any of the most pressing issues facing working families in Chicago can be resolved in a mayoral election in which the only choice is two capitalist politicians, both long-time members of the Democratic Party.

In reality, the differences between Vallas and Johnson on such questions as policing, education, housing and the development of the economy are entirely secondary. Both candidates defend the profit system, which is the source of the crisis affecting every area of social life, the cause of rising violence, the fiscal crisis in the schools and other public services, and the colossal decline of jobs and living standards.

Johnson, along with the rest of the Democrats, appeals to the reactionary racist politics of the upper-middle class, which can be found at every level of government and in the unions. In the city council, DSA Alderman Jeanette Taylor compared immigrants sent to Chicago from other states to “a grenade” thrown “in our community.”

Police violence

Adapting entirely to the reactionary emphasis on policing throughout the election, Johnson promotes the racist fiction that Chicago needs an even more diverse police force. On Monday, Johnson told the City Club of Chicago, which is made up of business and political leaders, “I wouldn’t reduce the CPD budget one penny.” He also pledges to “have the most robust youth-hiring programs that the city has seen. Not just over the summer, year round—we have to commit ourselves to that. Young people have to know that people actually care and are willing to invest in them,” in response to violent crime.

At a debate on March 21, Johnson answered the claim that he wants to defund the police by presenting this as a Republican slander against all Democrats, saying: “The Republicans said that President Biden was going to defund the police, Republicans said that Gov. Pritzker was going to defund the police, Republicans said that Nancy Pelosi was going to defund the police and now the Republican is saying that I’m going to defund the police. He’s a Republican.”

Later he commented, “My public safety plan is an investment plan. I want to hire 200 more detectives.” At the debate he said, “One of the greatest deterrents to crime is to make sure we’re catching people. The strained relationships [with the police] particularly in black and brown communities is something we have to repair.

“On day one, we’re going to promote 200 more detectives. We’re going to work with the district council members who have just been elected to come up with strategies at the very local level, and we’re going to work with police and the new superintendent to come up with a plan...

He spoke of a plan of “support on the front line, social workers, counselors, EMTs, so that frees up law enforcement to deal with where 60

percent of the violence happens, which is in 6 percent of the city. That’s smart policing.”

Taking a serious look at the history of policing and in particular the issue of closing of murder cases, or the “murder clearance rate,” in the city of Chicago means facing the extreme brutality and exploitation that the Democratic Party has overseen here for decades in pursuit of false and fraudulent results at the expense of the most vulnerable sections of the population.

This has included repeated exposures of torture and frame-ups by Chicago cops like Jon Burge and Reynaldo Guevara. The city has paid out \$288 million in compensation for such police atrocities.

The crisis in education

The crisis facing Chicago Public Schools and its pensions came into fuller view on Wednesday at the last school board meeting before the election. After short-term federal emergency funding to the Chicago Public Schools, the district is only funded to about 75 percent of its budget based on contributions from the state of Illinois. For decades, CPS has taken out bonds to fund improvements, and this year the district will pay \$762 million toward debt, according to the *Sun Times*.

Following the CTU, Johnson avoids any reference to the class character of the decades-long attacks on public education, and instead frames the erosion of this fundamental democratic right in any modern society, free high quality public education, in narrowly racial terms.

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, led by the CTU leadership’s atrocious 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, backed by the CTU and AFT, took office and declared that schools must reopen in 2021, AFT President Randi Weingarten spent 15 hours a day suppressing teachers’ struggles and pushing for the return to in-person classes.

In a December *Jacobin* interview, Johnson closed on the following note: “For too long, we’ve had representatives in government who run on our platform but don’t believe in it. They run on it to win, but they don’t deliver on it.” If he wins he will be able to write a book on this.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact