

Chicago election rally with Bernie Sanders gives left cover as Democrat Brandon Johnson moves to the right

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With the latest polls showing the April 4 mayoral election in Chicago effectively deadlocked between two Democrats—Brandon Johnson, the candidate of the Chicago Teachers Union and the Democratic Socialists of America, and Paul Vallas, the candidate of the Chamber of Commerce, the Fraternal Order of Police, and Democratic Party establishment—the Johnson campaign held a get-out-the-vote rally at the UIC’s Credit Union 1 Arena Thursday.

The purpose of the event, headlined by US Senator Bernie Sanders, was to provide Johnson a left cover and shore up support among young and working class voters, while Johnson moves sharply to the right, particularly on the issue of crime and policing.

The Northwestern University poll which showed the candidates at a dead heat also revealed the skepticism of working class voters toward both Democratic Party candidates. Likely voters with incomes under \$80,000 per year expressed higher levels of indecision, at 29 percent, versus the 12 percent who were undecided overall. Young people are also largely alienated from both campaigns. Analysis of turnout in the first round of the elections shows that only 3 percent of voters were 18-24 years old.

The rally, attended by about 4,000, was the largest of the campaign. Speakers besides Sanders included Alderman Carlos Ramirez-Rosa, a member of the DSA and dean of the DSA caucus on the city council, US Representative Jonathan Jackson, the son of Jesse Jackson, US Representative Delia Ramirez, and Martin Luther King III, the son of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The most notable appearance, besides Sanders, was put on by American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten, who has played a central role in sabotaging teachers’ struggles across the country, and who works feverishly in Eastern Europe as a representative of American imperialist foreign policy, particularly on the war in Ukraine.

Speaker after speaker implored audience members to get others out to vote, each making claims about a future Johnson administration that were increasingly untethered to reality. Martin Luther King III’s role was primarily to invoke the spirit

of his father’s “I Have a Dream” speech in order to allow Johnson to absurdly claim that his campaign was the embodiment of that same dream.

Weingarten, in a revealing comparison, noted “the last time I saw this kind of energy in Chicago, it was when Barack Obama was elected president. He was an organizer. Brandon is an organizer.” She did not make reference to the fact that Vallas, the more overtly right-wing of the two Democrats, has the support of the political operatives of both Obama and former mayor Rahm Emanuel, who was Obama’s White House chief of staff.

The AFT president then claimed that she had seen Johnson fight against school closures, food deserts and health deserts, and for “community schools, counselors in schools, nurses in schools,” all things the CTU actually worked with the city to systematically cut through concessions contracts.

Sanders’ claims about the Johnson campaign were grandiose and brazenly untrue. He began by declaring that Johnson’s campaign “is about bringing the working class together,” when the record shows that the candidate, who is African-American, has run his campaign on the divisive politics of racialism.

He tried to burnish Johnson’s credentials by saying, “The fundamental issue is which side are you on. Are you on the side of working people or are you on the side of the speculators and the billionaires, and I know which side Brandon is on.”

While kowtowing to the law-and-order demagoguery of both the corporate media and the two candidates, saying the next mayor would have to tackle the issue of crime, Sanders claimed that Johnson would be better able to provide “high-quality and non-racist law enforcement.”

He further suggested Johnson would defend public education, improve child care, solve the housing crisis, that he would “negotiate decent contracts,” reopen closed city mental health facilities and raise the city minimum wage. He did not say how a capitalist candidate, who defends the profit system, would accomplish these miracles under conditions of a huge fiscal crisis. Instead, Sanders vowed to work with Johnson to make sure “public higher education is free and accessible to all.”

Johnson’s concluding remarks to the rally again appealed to

black nationalism, with the empty claim that “black liberation makes us all free.” This “liberation” was merely the promotion of black businesses within the framework of the capitalist system, as he went to say, in regard to the large corporations who supported Vallas, “there’s room at the table for them. Your chair might be a little smaller, but there’s room.”

The contest between Vallas and Johnson is not, as the media portrays it, a struggle over opposing strategies for “fighting crime.” It is actually a conflict over which tactics the Democrats, who have long dominated Chicago, will pursue against a resurgence of working class struggle.

The section of the ruling class backing Vallas, the former CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, includes much of the Democratic Party’s “establishment” or Biden wing, including US Senator Dick Durbin and former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, as well as the fascist Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) and the Republican Party. They favor a campaign of privatization and austerity backed up by unrestrained police terror and repression.

According to the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability (CTBA), the next mayor will face a \$500-\$600 million budget deficit for the next fiscal year as a result of the disappearance of federal pandemic funds, lower tax revenue from tourism and downtown business and a fall in pension assets. Separately, CPS is expected to see its own deficit increase to \$628 million for the 2025-2026 school year. Regardless of who wins, either Vallas or Johnson will be tasked with carrying out widespread cuts to education and social services at the behest of the financial aristocracy.

The section of the ruling class backing Johnson, the Chicago Teachers Union legislative director and Cook County Commissioner, includes the DSA and other Democratic Party “lefts,” such as Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, are concerned that such outright repression, without a “reform” fig leaf to cover over the attacks on workers’ living standards and social services, risks setting off a social conflagration. This faction hopes to use the unions to carry through the same cuts demanded by the ruling class, while suppressing or at least containing opposition from workers.

Hoping to prove his reliability on the crucial questions of class rule, Johnson moved to the right, particularly in the runoff after he finished second to Vallas in the primary. Johnson even boasted that his long-time association with the CTU’s entire record of betrayals under the leadership of the pseudo-left Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) would help him temper workers’ expectations. 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?”

Similarly, in a video supporting the Johnson campaign produced by the pseudo-left *In These Times*, Johnson compared

himself favorably to Vallas on his ability to produce a responsible budget, repeating the claim that the latter “has never seen a dollar he wasn’t willing to spend three times.” Johnson claimed that coming from working class, “we can’t afford to play around with our budgets like that.”

Johnson has also made clear his administration would make no inroads on the roughly \$3 billion per year the city spends on policing. Having already backtracked on the question of “defunding” the police, Johnson now claims, “I wouldn’t reduce the CPD budget by one penny.” He has called instead for “smart policing,” and for hiring 200 detectives because, “One of the challenges we have in Chicago is we are not solving crime here.” In line with his racist politics, he has even floated the idea of ending credit checks and psychological screening to boost the number of black and Hispanic officers.

Aligning himself with one of the bedrock positions of American imperialist foreign policy, Johnson even claimed anti-semitism amounted to “Any speech or any effort to delegitimize Israel and its right to exist.” Speaking at a recent candidate forum held by the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, Johnson disavowed the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, saying, “The divestment movement is not aligned with my values.”

The entire record of the Johnson campaign, as well as the CTU and CORE faction of which he has been a part, has been that of a loyal partner to the ruling class, and shows the dead end of working for reforms within the Democratic Party. A Johnson administration would carry out far-reaching attacks on the entire working class. Workers must begin preparing to organize their own independent organizations of struggle to fight against these plans, whether they come from Johnson or Vallas.



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