Educators at Acero charter schools in Chicago authorize strike action: “There’s overwhelming support for a strike”

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Are you a teacher or an educator at Acero charter schools, or at Chicago Public Schools? Tell us more about the conditions you face and what you’re fighting for. Fill out the form below.

Over 500 teachers and paraprofessional educators at 15 Acero charter schools in Chicago voted to strike by an overwhelming 95 percent this week, according to information released to rank-and-file members by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). The strike authorization vote at Acero schools takes place amidst a wave of educators strikes across the country against attacks on public education, low wages and intolerable working conditions.

As Acero educators gear up for their fight, the newly elected Democratic mayor, Brandon Johnson, former legislative director for the CTU, will take office in Chicago on Monday. Johnson had already made threats of cuts to education prior to getting elected.

“There will be some tough decisions to be made when I am mayor of the city of Chicago,” Johnson said in one of the mayoral forums. “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.”

The Chicago Teachers Union leadership, for its part, is doing everything it can to prevent a strike. They are preparing to suppress the struggles of rank-and-file Acero educators and collaborate with the new city administration in implementing Johnson’s “tough decisions.” Covering for the new mayor, CTU President Stacy Davis Gates declared, “The mayor-elect and his team … will lead the transformation and sustainability of our public school system.”

To prevent their struggle from being sold out by the CTU bureaucracy, however, it is urgent that Acero teachers and educators form rank-and-file strike committees in every school to fight for substantially higher pay, better working conditions and safety measures related to the pandemic. Rank-and-file committees should appeal to CPS educators and workers in different industries for a joint struggle to build rank-and-file power in every workplace and demand the resources necessary to overcome the crisis conditions in education today.

“We have been working without a contract for almost a whole year”

An educator in the Acero schools network who asked to remain anonymous spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the issues teachers and staff confront, including the CTU’s role in keeping educators working without a contract for nearly an entire school year.

“The contract expired in July of 2022, but the CTU did not submit all of its articles for the proposed contract until March of 2023,” the Acero educator explained. “We have been working without a contract for a whole year. It’s adding insult to injury to work during the pandemic, and work nearly four quarters without a contract.

“There’s overwhelming support for a strike with 95 percent voting to strike, according to the CTU communications we received. At some schools the strike authorization was over 100 percent, such as Acero-Clemente and Tamayo.”

In response to the strike authorization vote, Acero put out a provocative press release stating the vote is “unwarranted” and that the “CTU is engaged in bad-faith bargaining.” The statement continues, “Since December 2021, CTU has sought to force all unionized charter schools into a single contract.”

According to the educator, the CTU’s communications claim that Acero responded to the strike authorization vote by increasing salaries for teachers and paraprofessionals, but are unwilling to budge on staffing metrics. The CTU communication also stated they would “strategize next steps” over the weekend.

But educators are rightly suspicious of the CTU bureaucracy’s role, as the Acero educator points out, “On the eve of the strike authorization vote, the CTU held a webinar. But they kept saying, ‘It does not mean we are striking. We have not set a strike date’ They also said the ‘strike authorization is a tool to push Acero further on economic proposals.’

“In one of the slides they presented they told us the main goals are to: ‘Finish the school year’ and ‘Prevent a strike if possible.’ They had another slide implying that we could lose our health insurance. I know many coworkers have expressed concerns about this because a lot of us have health issues and we also had concerns about losing summer pay and wish we had gone on strike earlier in the year.”

“We’ve had special ed teachers last only a few months”

The Acero charter school network is one of more than 35 charter school operators in the city of Chicago. There are over 6,500 students from kindergarten through high school. Charters have proliferated

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across the city after two decades of school closures led by the Democratic Party, with more than 200 schools in the Chicago Public Schools district closed since 2000. The largest school closures took place in 2013 under Mayor Rahm Emanuel with nearly 50 schools closed.

Acero was formerly called UNO, a charter school network formed by the politically-connected United Neighborhood Organization, but the name was changed following a major corruption scandal that forced the resignation of its CEO Juan Rangel, a close political ally of Rahm Emanuel. Privately run and publicly funded, charter schools have grown enormously over the last two decades accompanied by a wave of attacks on public education nationally under the fraudulent banner of "school reform" led by both the Democratic and Republican parties in major cities, especially following the 2008 financial crisis.

Pointing to the dire conditions in the schools, the educator said,"One of the big issues that educators are faced with at Acero schools is understaffing—the lack of sufficient staffing in particular in special education and bilingual literacy and the lack of nurses (full time or otherwise). In terms of bilingual literacy we are getting more and more students for whom English is not a first language and their needs are not being adequately met.

"Every day there also seems to be a mental health crisis in our classrooms in our school buildings, and they're not being addressed," the educator added. "We've seen students express suicidal thoughts, and from what I've heard from coworkers, it's gone up this year."

Teachers and educators work very long hours for low pay at Acero, the educator noted. "For Acero schools, the working day is from 7:30 a.m. to 3:40 p.m., and that can vary. Special education teachers end up working at home, buying materials, prepping for projects on their time. It's rare for them to not take their computer home for the weekend. Home room teachers are also doing a lot of work. Special ed teachers have to also cover a range of grades.

"For paraprofessionals, the salary is at the bottom of the totem pole and it's very low, making the same income as someone making minimum wage. Teachers have also talked about wanting raises that keep up with inflation.

"Retention is also an issue. We've had special ed teachers leave, or last only a few months. They went somewhere else for better pay."

Teachers at Acero were among the first charter school educators in the country to strike in 2018. Their primary demands were higher pay, lower class sizes and better conditions for staff and students. But the CTU bureaucracy imposed a sellout agreement on rank-and-file educators that they hailed as a victory. The agreement contained substandard pay raises that did not keep up with inflation or address any of the crisis conditions created by large and unmanageable class sizes.

Since the first Acero educators strike, the CTU has repeatedly blocked a joint struggle of charter school educators with their counterparts in the Chicago Public Schools. Charter schools strikes during the pandemic were rapidly shut down following the sellout of the 2019 CPS teachers strike that lasted 11 days.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the parent organization of the Chicago Teachers Union, has done nothing to stop the drive to privatize education in order to dramatically reduce pay for teachers and educators and provide substandard education to working class students. While teachers have left public education in Chicago and nationally in droves due to terrible working conditions and the trauma of the pandemic, the AFT and CTU moved to unionize charter schools to offset the loss of dues money from public school educators, including a series of charter school union mergers with the CTU.

"Students say they're getting COVID multiple times"

At the height of the Omicron surge of the pandemic in January 2022, the CTU also sent teachers back to unsafe classrooms. The CTU prevented a joint action of public school educators with the charter schools to fight for pandemic safety, eventually abandoning a series of safety measures even as the virus spread in the schools and classrooms, the Acero educator explained.

"During the Omicron surge, the CTU did not call for any action by Acero or the whole charter division to fight the return to unsafe schools and isolated us from CPS teachers. We saw the most reported cases in our schools then. At Acero, well in advance of the expiration of the Memorandum of Understanding, the CTU agreed to cut the quarantine days in half. The original MOU was 10 days off, then they agreed to cut it in half to 5. We could have kept the MOU till it expired, but they willingly cut it in half.

"Now we're seeing students say they're getting COVID multiple times and since they've gotten COVID they're getting sick more often, with other illnesses. The spread was preventable and schools were a primary source of transmission.

"The CTU actively contributed to the community spread of the deadly virus. Since then reporting of COVID cases has been suppressed. We used to get school wide numbers, but this year we don't get that, only if it's the classrooms you work in. There's been underreporting even then."

If there is to be a real fight for substantial gains in educators pay, staffing, working conditions and safety, Acero educators must take the initiative to build rank-and-file strike committees in every school site immediately to prevent the CTU bureaucracy from suppressing their struggle yet again. They must link up with CPS educators, Oakland teachers on strike and the growing network of rank-and-file committees being built among rail workers, autoworkers and educators as part of the emerging global counteroffensive of the working class.

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