Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson, backed by DSA, takes office, pledging to “work together” with political establishment

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On Monday, former Cook County commissioner and Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) legislative official Brandon Johnson took office as mayor of Chicago. Under conditions of an escalating social crisis, the longtime Democratic Party official, backed by the CTU and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), is being brought forward in an effort to contain and suppress the class struggle in the country’s third-largest city.

In his inaugural address, Johnson began by praising Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker, Senator Dick Durbin, Senator Tammy Duckworth and other Democratic Party operatives in Chicago and Illinois for attending. “The people of Chicago are counting on us to work together,” he said, “and I will always do my part to find common ground.”

The pledge to “work together” with businesses, the “private sector,” the trade union apparatus and the political machine that dominates Chicago politics was the main theme of Johnson’s speech. This framed his demagogic and empty promises to address the escalating social crisis that characterized his election campaign.

Johnson won 52 percent of the vote in an April 4 run-off election against Paul Vallas, also a Democrat, who ran a right-wing law-and-order campaign supported by the Fraternal Order of Police. He replaces outgoing mayor Lori Lightfoot, who was elected in 2019 but came in third in April after four years of right-wing policies.

The ruling class has already made clear that it will not accept any of Johnson’s proposals for moderate increases in taxes to pay for social services. Just days after the election, Governor J.B. Pritzker, billionaire scion of the family that owns Hyatt Hotels, said that he would not support a proposed $1 or $2 financial transaction tax on securities trading. “Obviously, what we all want is a thriving financial services economy in the state and the city,” Pritzker told the *Chicago Tribune*.

Prior to his inauguration, Johnson made a number of appointments aimed at assuaging the concerns of businesses and the police.

His chief of staff, Rich Guidice, is the former executive director of the Office of Emergency Management & Communications, who has spent decades working in City Hall. His “public safety” record includes the official response to the 2020 George Floyd protests against police violence, during which Mayor Lightfoot raised the bridges leading into downtown, trapping protesters and workers with police. As chief operating officer, Johnson selected John Roberson, who held numerous positions under former Mayor Richard M. Daley and Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle.

“The selections of Guidice and Roberson,” the *Chicago Sun Times* commented, “were designed to reassure a business community that backed and bankrolled Vallas and the nearly two dozen Council members who also supported Johnson’s runoff opponent.”

Johnson’s transition team is being directed by SEIU Health Care chief of staff Jessica Angus and includes former Chicago Police Department (CPD) Chief of Detectives Brendan Deenihan; Michael Fassnacht, president and CEO of World Business Chicago; Cabrera Capital Markets CEO Martin Cabrera; and Richard Price, executive chairman of the financial services firm Mesirow; along with various union officials.

During his campaign, Johnson also sought to dampen opposition from the fascistic Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) by pledging that he would not “cut one penny” from the CPD budget, while claiming to support policies that address the root causes of crime.

Notably, Johnson has appointed a 34-year veteran of the CPD, Fred Waller, as interim police superintendent, ahead

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of the selection of a permanent replacement. In his announcement of his appointment, Johnson indicated that Waller will oversee plans for police response to youth gatherings in the downtown area.

Waller's appointment immediately raised protests from police violence watchdogs who noted that he worked alongside and supervised Sgt. Ronald Watts, who led a protection ring for drug dealers in public housing. The uncovering of their crimes of intimidation, extortion, entrapment and forced confessions has resulted in more than 180 exonerations, according to journalist Jamie Kalven. Johnson refused to answer direct questions on the appointment of Waller.

In his inauguration speech, Johnson issued a further sop to the FOP and CPD when he declared, "The tears of Adam Toledo's parents are made of the same sorrow as [the tears] of [police officer] Preston's parents." Toledo was a 13-year-old boy murdered by police in 2021, for which no charges were ever filed. Johnson turned the brief mention of this atrocity into a paean to the police, accompanied by standing applause from all those in attendance.

In the weeks before he took office, Johnson remained silent on the April 15 police killing of 24-year-old Reginald Clay, Jr. The young man's family held a protest at City Hall last week, expressing their anger at the refusal to take action after Clay's murder by police officer Fernando Ruiz.

The main difference between Johnson and his predecessors will not be in the content of his policies, but in his more direct reliance on and integration of the Democratic Socialists of America and union officialdom into the institutions of the state.

As budget cuts loom, Johnson argued during his campaign that his long history with the CTU positioned him to impose cuts more effectively. "There will be some tough decisions to be made when I am mayor of the city of Chicago," he said. "And there might be a point within negotiations that the Chicago Teachers Union request 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?"

In his inauguration address, Johnson focused particular praise on the late president of the CTU, Karen Lewis, who will be principally remembered by teachers for her role in shutting down the 2012 teachers strike and forcing through a concessions contract, which paved the way for the closure of dozens of schools. The CTU also played the central role in reopening schools amid the spreading pandemic, in opposition to protests by teachers and students.

The role of the DSA in particular is to provide a phony left cover and attempt to stabilize class rule under conditions of escalating social inequality in Chicago and throughout the country.

Johnson has appointed the five incumbent DSA alderpersons to city council leadership positions, which still have to be approved by the council. He selected Carlos Ramirez Rosa to serve as the incoming mayor's floor leader and chair of the powerful zoning committee; Jeanette Taylor to lead the education committee; Rossana Rodriguez Sanchez the health committee; Byron Sigcho Lopez the housing committee; and Daniel La Spata the pedestrian and traffic safety committee.

After the April 4 runoff election, publications aligned with the DSA have sought to promote the election of Johnson as a turning point in American politics, as they did before with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other Democratic Party politicians. *Jacobin* magazine declared, "Chicago's left scored its biggest victory in recent memory," and that with the election, Johnson "and the movement behind him now have the chance to remake the city into one that serves the many rather than the few."

The election of Johnson will not "remake the city" any more than the elevation of the myriad Democratic Party politicians backed by *Jacobin* and the DSA in the past. The main change is that DSA members are being elevated to positions within the state apparatus, where they will be used as critical instruments for implementing the policy of the ruling elite.

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