

Billionaire Illinois governor Pritzker refuses extra funding for Chicago schools, setting stage for huge cuts

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Illinois' billionaire governor J.B. Pritzker will not allocate additional state funding for Chicago Public Schools, he declared in comments to the *Chicago Sun-Times* published Friday night.

The article had the character of a public intervention by Pritzker into the ongoing contract talks between CPS and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). With the district facing a more than \$500 million funding shortfall, it makes clear that massive cuts are on the way. A showdown is brewing between teachers and the Democratic Party which controls the city and state governments, along with the Democrats' allies in the union bureaucracy.

Since the expiration of the last contract on June 30, CTU officials have largely kept workers in the dark about what is coming. But in a recent members webinar on the budget, the union suggested that without additional funding, the budget presented by CPS CEO Pedro Martinez would require layoffs of 2,000 and 3,000 teachers for additional costs and spending to be added to the budget, such as teacher raises.

An internal CPS memo reported on by *Chalkbeat* suggests CPS was asked by Chicago mayor Brandon Johnson to assume a hypothetical 4 percent raise for the coming year, far below what is needed to make up for record inflation over the past four years. Even this, however, will not be possible without additional funding. Johnson's proposal for a \$300 million loan to pay for meager pay hikes has been rejected out of hand as unserious, given the district's credit rating is in junk status.

With aristocratic arrogance, Pritzker told the *Sun-Times*: "I don't think that that's the job of Springfield [the state capital], to rescue the school districts that might have been irresponsible with the one-time money they received. Poor fiscal management on the part of a local government is not necessarily the responsibility of Springfield."

CPS, like many school districts throughout the state and country, spent funds allocated for COVID relief to cover gaps in its operations budget. With CPS spending the final \$300

million of its original \$2.8 billion allocation this year, the district is now facing a deficit of \$505 million. This is up from an earlier estimate of \$391 million, and it is set to grow even larger next year.

The article, written by Rich Miller, a long-time reporter on state politics, answers claims by Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson and the CTU that the district is being shortchanged by the state. The CTU has publicly called throughout the negotiations has been to call on Pritzker and to increase state funding for the school district.

Johnson and the CTU have claimed that CPS should be receiving an additional \$1.1 billion annually in state revenue. This is based upon the "evidence-based funding" (EBF) formula for public schools the state enacted in 2017. That law established "adequacy" levels for school districts, and called for annual increases in state appropriations until districts reached funding at the level of 90 percent adequacy.

According to the *Sun-Times* article, the \$1.1 billion figure is what CPS would receive in additional state funding if it was immediately funded to 100 percent adequacy.

According to an analysis by the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability (CTBA), the state legislature has increased annual spending on public education by just the minimum specified in the EBF law. As a result, it will miss the legally specified target of 90 percent funding by fiscal year 2027. Adjusting for inflation, state funding will only reach 90 percent adequacy by fiscal year 2034.

Miller and the *Sun-Times* attempted to scare the public by pointing out that fully funding every school district in the state would require funding public education by an additional \$4.85 billion. This bill could be easily footed by the state's 23 billionaires, including Pritzker himself. His family is worth an estimated \$41.6 billion, according to Forbes.

Not only wages, but also pensions are on the chopping block. According to CPS, the Chicago Teachers Pension Fund (CTPF) is only 47.2 percent funded and will only reach a 90 percent funding level in fiscal year 2059, assuming its funding assumptions hold.

There is also growing recognition that the Tier II pensions the

state enacted in 2010 are completely inadequate, and in fact violate federal law because the pension payouts they provide are worse than Social Security, which CPS teachers do not pay into and for which they are thus ineligible.

A fight against capitalism and the Democratic Party

Pritzker's statements make clear that Chicago teachers are in a fight against the financial oligarchy which controls America. While they claim there is "no money" available for public schools and other basic social spending, no expense is spared to fund Wall Street bailouts and wars in Ukraine, Gaza and across the world.

Teachers are also in a fight against the Democratic Party. Pritzker personifies the Democrats as a party of Wall Street. He was floated briefly as a potential successor to Biden as the party's presidential candidate, before he endorsed vice president Kamala Harris on Monday.

In a statement earlier this month, the Educators Rank-and-File Committee (ERFC) explained that the impending cuts in Chicago are "part of a nationwide assault on the right to public education." It explained the city would become "a major political battleground" when it hosts the Democratic National Convention next month, where the decision on the party's nominee "will be made by the cabal of billionaire donors and high-ranking military and intelligence figures who run the Democratic Party."

The statement continued:

Teachers and the working class as a whole must emerge as vanguard fighters for the defense of democratic rights because these can only be defended through a fight against control of society by the corporate oligarchy. The working class, the vast majority of society and the source of all its wealth, must determine how society's resources are used, not a handful of super-rich individuals.

This requires a fight against the CTU bureaucracy. Having imposed sellout contracts on teachers for years, they have been working behind closed doors with Johnson even before Pritzker's statement to hash out an austerity contract. Johnson, an ex-CTU staffer, openly floated budget cuts even during his election campaign in 2023, declaring: "Who is better able to deliver bad news to a friend than a friend?"

They are cynically trying to use the position of the state government to prepare public opinion that they have "no choice" but to accept huge cuts.

When CTU President Stacy Davis Gates addressed union members at a July 18 webinar on the contract, she encouraged illusions in the Democratic Party, telling members, "We have a state government, anchored by a governor, anchored by state reps, anchored by state senators, who will have to come

correct." She knew perfectly well they would do no such thing. The very next day, Pritzker's comments were published in the *Sun-Times*.

The reality is that the Democrats at both the state and city level are working with the union bureaucracy. Their collusion was expressed in the fact that the CTU immediately joined with Johnson and Pritzker to endorse Kamala Harris for president, a figure complicit in the Biden administration's genocide in Gaza.

Teachers want to fight to defend public education, for real pay raises, and against layoffs, but teachers' interests can only be defended in a broader struggle of educators and workers.

In a Facebook group for CTU members, educators discussed the possibility of a strike, but expressed frustration at how the union bureaucracy sold out teachers in previous strikes. One educator commented, "I wish the CTU had a fund that when we strike we get like half or quarter pay. Where does our money go?"

"Agree," another teacher replied. "Living is just so freaking expensive right now."

Another teacher commented, "Everytime we've [gone on] strike we didn't get anything out of it! We lost pay! The same thing that they offered in the beginning was the same thing we got in the end. The only people that got paid was [former CTU president] Jesse Sharkey and Stacy [Davis Gates]!"

Rank-and-file educators need their own strategy to defend public education and the livelihoods of teachers, not just in Chicago but throughout the country and indeed internationally. This requires that the rank-and-file take leadership of their own struggle.

As the ERFC explained:

The first step is for teachers to organize themselves outside of the control of the CTU bureaucracy. They must take their place in the growing world movement for rank-and-file committees, democratic organs of workers' power being formed in opposition to the union bureaucracy and the pro-corporate parties. Teachers must take direct control over the contract talks—not just allowed to sit in and listen during "open bargaining" sessions controlled by the bureaucrats, while the real contract is being worked out in secret.

Teachers must draw up a list of demands and prepare for strike action if these are not met. To put them in the best possible position to fight the Democrats and the corporate oligarchy, they must link up with workers across Chicago and across the country, making their fight a focal point in a broader campaign in defense of public education.



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