

# Chicago Teachers Union uses “public bargaining” charade as cover for austerity contract

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With only two weeks left before the start of class, educators in Chicago Public Schools face the prospect of starting the school year under an expired contract. The last deal expired at the end of June.

According to a report in *Chalkbeat*, talks are expected to go on for weeks or even months, possibly going past the November elections. But this is not because the talks are highly contentious. In fact, the Chicago Teachers Union and new Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson, an ex-CTU official, speak regularly about their mutual admiration.

Rather, the “talks” are being dragged out in order to conceal from teachers the fact that massive cuts are on the agenda. The city has a \$500 million budget deficit to close, while districts across the country are imposing similar cuts since the White House allowed pandemic-era education funding to expire. The CTU has spent years imposing concessions on teachers, including the closure of dozens of schools and forcing the reopening of classes in the height of the pandemic.

Behind the union’s phrase mongering about fighting for a “a baseline of a joyful, robust education for every student” and endless discussion of its 730 contract proposals, there can be no doubt that a deal, at the least the basic framework of one, is already in place. The challenge that remains for the union bureaucracy and the Johnson administration is how to create the political conditions to ram it through.

In particular, they are aiming to avoid a situation where rank-and-file opposition upends the Democratic

Party’s election campaign, starting with the Democratic National Convention next week. Tens of thousands of antiwar protesters are expected to come to the city, with Johnson threatening mass arrests as he has done to earlier protests.

One element in their strategy is the “public bargaining” between CTU and CPS. These occasional meetings are designed to create the appearance of transparency, while concealing what is really being discussed in the closed-door sessions.

Similar methods were used by the Teamsters—with its “strike ready campaign” and “rank-and-file bargaining team members”—to pass a contract at UPS last year, which is now being used to lay off tens of thousands.

A July 30 “public bargaining session” at Mason Elementary School was a typical example. At one point, CTU president Stacy Davis Gates asked CPS if they could tentatively agree on lowering class sizes to 22 for elementary schools and 20 for high schools. CPS bargainers chided Davis Gates, reminding her this is a topic that will not be decided in public: “As you know, we have already talked about and planned for when we’re doing counter-proposals to the proposals, and we’re going to be doing that at future sessions.”

When CTU vice president Jackson Potter asked CPS to commit to filling teacher vacancies, the district reminded him: “You know we have ground rules on this. We did commit to not having tentative agreements today, so that was the commitment we made before we came here.” Potter then asks, “Can you commit to this tomorrow?” CPS answers, “We actually have a session tomorrow.” That is, a private session, the proceedings of which have not been reported on by CTU.

During another part of the session, the two parties

skirted around the question of budget cuts, careful not to address the question directly. Davis Gates asked if CPS could assure that they will ameliorate staffing disparities in the district. A CPS negotiator responded, “So I think what you’re getting at is whether, going forward, we’re not gonna move forward with impact, people being reduced [laid-off]. You’re asking for commitment that that won’t ever happen ... I think any given year we need to have the flexibility to look at the student needs and the operational needs and the budgetary—we have to live within those realities.” CPS then moved off this line of questioning by declaring, “We can continue these conversations [but] in the interest of time...”

Recent communications from the union have attempted to place the blame for the stalled negotiations on top CPS leadership itself, saying it is “wedded to the cadence of the past.”

A union blog post from August 9 stated, “Last week, we heard the same things in our public bargaining session that we did in big bargaining: excuses, misunderstandings about basic concerns that our union has raised with the district for many years, and a dearth of knowledge about our profession and the things our students need and deserve.”

In fact, the CTU and the Johnson administration are effectively in coalition with each other, with Johnson even appointing the union’s chief of staff Jen Johnson to the post of Deputy Mayor of Education, Youth, and Human Services. The CPS board and CEO are also all mayoral appointees.

The fact is that cuts were being prepared even before Johnson took office. When he was a candidate, Johnson declared:

“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?”

In a Facebook group for CTU members, one teacher wrote, “We really need a raise. I’m barely making ends meet as it is.”

Another teacher commented, “We’re two weeks away from pre-planning and we’re in the dark [about] almost everything.”

Another teacher commented, “The Board is hand-

picked by the mayor. CPS ‘CEO’ is hand-picked by the mayor. If the mayor wanted CPS to be funded, he wouldn’t insist on continuing to employ [these people].”

Another teacher commented, “I am stunned that there is any obstacle in these negotiations: we have a mayor that is friendly to CTU who appointed CTU member Jen Johnson to Deputy Mayor of Education and appointed a school board. ... So what is the obstacle to contract negotiations? CTU leadership continues to create some boogey man that mysteriously holds up contract progress.

“We were promised by CTU luminaries all kinds of significant contract changes such as better pay, smaller class sizes and fundamental changes ... if Brandon became mayor. All I read and hear is CTU leadership backpedaling on these bread and butter issues. CTU leadership and the mayor need to stop worrying about re-election four years from now and concern themselves with delivering on promises made or both will have a bleak future.”

The “public bargaining” sessions are the opposite of genuine, rank-and-file control over the talks, which requires full transparency on all discussions and side-discussions. Teachers must insist they have the right to impose their democratic will on the conduct of the CTU bargaining team, including the right to countermand anything that violates their clear instructions. If the CTU bureaucrats refuse to accept such reasonable demands, they should be replaced with a bargaining team controlled by the rank and file.

“It is urgent that educators take the initiative,” the Educators Rank-and-File Committee warned in a statement last month. “They must form rank-and-file committees, prepare for strike action if their demands are not met, and appeal to the working class across Chicago, as well as to teachers across the US, for the broadest possible support.”



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