Parents and teachers protest closure of Acero charter schools in Chicago: “2,000 of our students will be displaced”

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Are you a teacher, school worker or parent at Acero or the Chicago Public Schools? Take up the fight against school closures! Join the rank-and-file movement to defend public education and share your thoughts about the situation at your school by filling out the form below.

On Tuesday, Fuentes Elementary School parents Miriam Ortolaza and Angelica Juarez organized a demonstration in Chicago to oppose the closure of their children’s school. Fuentes is one of seven schools the Acero charter network has identified will be closed this year, affecting 2,000 students and 250 workers in predominantly working-class Hispanic communities. More than 100 of the students affected are recent immigrants.

The closures at Acero are part of a wave of threatened closures all over the US, including scores in Milwaukee, Seattle, San Francisco and almost 100 more in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), according to a list leaked last month in the midst of negotiations between CPS and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU).

The management board of Acero claimed earlier this month that the Chicago Public Schools district supports its decision to close schools that are “no longer profitable,” according to media reports.

The parents, teachers and students gathered at Fuentes on Tuesday demanded that the school remain open, chanting, “Whose schools? Our schools!” Supporters of the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Committee distributed a statement, titled “Stop Acero’s school closures in Chicago! For a unified struggle of teachers and workers against all budget cuts and school closures!”

On Wednesday, hundreds of parents, teachers and students came out to a demonstration officially called by the CTU. The CTU bureaucracy, for its part, in a webinar Tuesday night claimed that the charter school network, which is leading the attack on educators and the working class, along with the Democratic Party, could be “pressured” to change course.

The CTU bureaucracy is politically aligned with Democratic Mayor Brandon Johnson, a former CTU lobbyist, who has made it clear educators and parents will have to accept deep “sacrifices” to pay for a more than $1.2 billion public school deficit over 2024-25. Like other school districts, Chicago has been severely affected by the Biden-Harris administration’s decision to let federal COVID school funding expire.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke at length with teachers and parents at the protest Tuesday afternoon at Fuentes school.

“Everyone should have the right to equal education”

Miriam, a parent at Acero-Fuentes in Chicago, explained why she organized the demonstration.

“The main reason I organized this rally is because I have a child that has an IEP [Individualized Education Plan],” she said of her son’s special educational needs. “Often with the amount of students in Chicago Public Schools, the kids tend to fall through the cracks.”

Miriam continued, “The ratio is good with 15 students to 1 teacher. His needs are being met. He is thriving. He is being acknowledged here even though he has an IEP. My main focus is making my child thrive. I want him to be independent and successful. He’s one of the highest kids academically, and that’s important to me as a parent. The school has been very welcoming and accommodating. He’s very happy here. That’s not what he used to be.”

Miriam spoke said working class parents were being forced to pay for Acero’s financial crisis. “They’re closing seven of our schools because of debt. The CEO of Acero gets paid $260,000 a year. So there’s clearly money for payroll. The decision was made without consulting the parents. The staff didn’t know.

“I encourage everyone to support us,” she added, with a warning that further attacks are coming across the country. “This is not just happening in the city of Chicago. It’s happening in other states. Parents need to get together and have our voices heard. They’re taking our rights away. All the parents should come together and stand up for what’s right.

“High quality education should be for everyone,” Miriam concluded. “It shouldn’t matter the race, it shouldn’t matter the income at home, it shouldn’t matter the neighborhood you live in. Everyone should have the right to equal education. Everyone should have the same resources.”

“Our students, 2,000 of them, will be displaced which is disgraceful”

Carson, a music education teacher at Fuentes, echoed Miriam’s concerns. She stressed the importance of the school community and the devastating impact on students. “I believe all of our students deserve a quality education which they are getting at this school,” she said.

“I can’t imagine all of our classes separating and not being together after having been together eight, nine years. This is my third year here, and I have never been happier. I think it’s disgusting to even think of our school closing and our community being broken apart because I love them so much.”

Speaking on the impact the closures would have on teachers, she added, “Teachers are going to have to look for new jobs. Many of us live outside the city, and it’s hard to find jobs in this area. Many of us don’t have the

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option to follow where some of our students are going.

"Our students, 2,000 of them, will be displaced which is disgraceful. Not only because of the relationships which we built, but because families chose this school and to have that choice taken away is not right."

Speaking on the billions being spent by Democrats and Republicans for war and the corporate elite instead of education, Carson added, "The misallocation of funds is disgusting."

"When public education fails, the general population fails, not the top 1 percent"

Soren, an English and Language Arts teacher at Fuentes, spoke out against the planned closing of his school.

"We're out here because our school is being closed with little to no notice. It's being closed at the end of the school year. We just found out just a few weeks ago in basically a clandestine meeting. They were going to announce it without our knowing.

"We went to the [Acero Board] meeting and we were blindsided by the news that seven of our schools were going to close by the end of our school year with obviously little to no notice. That's leaving 2000 students displaced in the Chicago area—a lot of high needs students. We have a lot of recent arrivals [migrants] that we accepted to take from the city of Chicago and now they're going to be displaced as well.

"Now, we have students that are going to have to figure things out, go through CPS and figure out whatever schools they can get into. It's going to be a real travesty for families and really difficult for families to navigate this to get their students and children the education they need."

Soren spoke on the impact the closures would also have on teachers. "The teachers are obviously blindsided and disappointed. These schools have served a strong community for a lot of years. That community is obviously going to be broken up. Teachers are going to have to figure out what to do on top of families."

He commented on the gulf between the pro-corporate policies of both the Democrats and Republicans and the needs of working people. "America as a whole is reaping the results of those decisions. Education as a system has started to deteriorate. That's the reason why there's a teacher exodus. It's a real problem with our next generation if they're not receiving the education they need. That means we're not going to have skilled workers and citizens to have a functional democracy.

"The people who are really hurt by these decisions and this lack of funding and the focus on education are the normal citizens, the everyday citizens. When public education fails, the general population fails, not the top one percent. Public education is how people get opportunity. The rich and upper class are always going to get a good education. They can pay for private education. It's really the everyday citizen that's going to suffer."

Soren also contrasted the trillions being spent on war over public education. "Obviously there's a ton of money that's going into the defense budget that goes unchecked," he said. "The amount of money that's just kind of blank checked to the defense budget whereas we are penny-pinched for education is a real travesty."

"Schools are not a business and can't be run like a business"

Aaron, a special education teacher at Fuentes, condemned the closure decision as a "violation of the public trust." He pointed out that public funds were used to build these schools and rejected the subordination of education to business interests. "Schools are not a business and can't be run like a business. This isn't a failing franchise—this is a community that has depended on this school.

"So, I think when it's shut down, the reality is that you're shattering these families' abilities, we're shattering the locations that they've planned on, we've taken the trust of immigrants who've come into town and been bussed to our school with the expectation that this was going to be a stable environment where their needs were gonna be met. Now, they're being thrown back into an open system without a dependable place to go."

He also spoke about the traumatic impact of the closures on special education students, who rely on routine and stability. "It's been such a trauma for them, coming from this wide set of backgrounds and knowing they're not going to have a place to graduate now. They're worried about losing teachers. So, it's so difficult for students who are already having these struggles to be able to get their needs met properly and feel safe and comfortable in schools."

Aaron continued, "It was kind of a last-minute backdoor deal that got dropped on everyone with no warning." Denouncing the tactics of the charter network, he said, "They clearly had over six months of planning involved in it. They had a worked-out website that was posted almost the second we found out it happened. So again, it was only a surprise to the community, it was only a surprise to the teachers, it was not a surprise to the operator."

Aaron connected the fight for public education to broader democratic rights, stating, "One of the underpinning ideas of the American system is that access to a public education is access to the opportunity that we're promised in the Constitution. That's why we use federal dollars to support it, that's why we use special funds like Federal Education for Special Education to support these small community schools. It's because we all agree and believe that it's the underpinning of the social right to have an opportunity in this country.

"And that's a right that immigrants have. That's a right that students with special education have."

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