

Opposition builds among Chicago educators to school closures and signs of another CTU sellout contract

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Teachers, paras, and educational staff: Build the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Committee! Don't allow the union to isolate your fight to stop all school closures and gain the real raises you deserve! To get more information about the rank-and-file committee, fill out the form at the end of this article.

Opposition to attacks on public education is growing among educators in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), where rank-and-file members of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) have been working without a contract since June. At the same time, educators and working class families in the Acero Schools charter network are opposing threats to close seven of its 15 schools at the end of the school year.

The Acero school closures would displace around 2,000 students, including 500 students with special needs, around 1,000 English language learners, and more than 110 newcomers (that is, children of recently arrived migrant families). Additionally, around 270 Acero Schools teachers and educational staff would be laid off if the school closures are allowed to go forward.

Last Thursday, the Chicago Board of Education passed a resolution to “Maintain Acero Attendance Centers,” which calls on Acero representatives to appear before the board to “explain the basis for its October 9, 2024 notice of its intention to close ‘up to’ seven (7) Attendance Centers,” and to discuss with the board “alternatives that enable Acero to continue operating its fifteen Attendance Centers through June 30, 2026.”

In other words, the school board is seeking not to stop the Acero closures, but merely to delay them.

The board resolution then goes on to state that if Acero closes schools in 2025 instead of 2026, that Acero “shall return all unspent public funds and property as required under 105 ILCS 5/27A-10.10 and Acero’s Charter School Agreement.” It adds that “this action may be considered in whether to renew Acero’s Charter Agreement for another term in 2026.”

The state law in question requires a charter operator closing schools to return assets, property or unspent public funds to the public school district from which they siphon students. However, that provision is subject to that district’s acceptance of the property or assets. Thus, it appears the CPS board is offering to let Acero keep those assets if they allow the schools to remain open for another year.

In any case, the very next section of the board resolution, on

extending the deadline for student transfers from Acero Schools to Chicago Public Schools, demonstrates that board members accept the Acero school closures as a foregone conclusion: “To minimize the potential disruption to the Acero students, the 2025-26 GoCPS application deadline shall be extended to December 15, 2024.”

At the same time, there is a very real possibility of public school closures by CPS officials also. In September, the CTU revealed the existence of a “space analysis” conducted by the district which identified around 70 schools which could be consolidated with another 70 schools—leading to their inevitable closure. While district leaders and the CPS board disavowed any plan to close schools and passed a moratorium on school closures through the 2026-2027 school year, the board can reverse itself at any time.

CPS has a structural deficit of \$691 million for the current fiscal year. This was partially obscured by the use of the last remaining federal COVID funding. But the Biden administration has allowed the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund to expire.

With that gone, CPS will need to find a way to make up that amount, in addition to increased spending for the Chicago teachers contract. School closures have already been announced across the country, including 13 schools to be shuttered or merged in Milwaukee and 13 to be closed or merged in San Francisco.

For its part, the CTU bureaucracy is rehashing the same role it has played since 2012: while publicly posturing as opponents of school closures it is facilitating them. In the case of Acero, it is marching in lockstep with the school board, negotiating with the charter school management not to stop closures but to delay them.

In one of the slides at a recent CTU member webinar, in language that would be echoed in last week’s board resolution, the union stated that Acero “must keep the schools open at least until 2026.”

In another slide presented at the CTU webinar, the union boasted that “only 50 schools were closed” in 2013 instead of the 150+ proposed by the district due to the union’s efforts at securing a seat at the table of school closures in collaboration with the district [emphasis added].

In fact, the CTU bureaucracy has always insisted that it be included in the planning of school closures in order to dissipate popular opposition. During the 2012 teachers strike, CTU

president Karen Lewis said of the planned school closures, “We understand that whole movement of closing schools and doing it aggressively. The problem is—I guess that’s why we’re all here—we either do this together in some reasonable way or we will always be fighting, and I think the key is that the people that are making these decisions want to make them unilaterally.”

Asked by WBEZ radio if she contended that no schools should be closed, Lewis only complained about the scale of the closures and lack of a fig leaf to sell the closures to the public, saying, “You know what, that is not even a real argument. The issue that we need to talk about is this outrageous number of schools and the fact that nothing has been done to prepare people appropriately for anything of this measure.”

Former CTU president Jesse Sharkey, who at the time was CTU vice president, told WTTW, “No one in the union thinks you should keep an empty school building open. That doesn’t make any sense.”

In the recent webinar, CTU Field Rep Leah Raffanti made it clear to members that the union is not considering calling a strike to oppose the Acero school closures: “And if just before anybody asks, if a strike is actually on the table, what happens is that requires multiple discussions, meetings with members, and a vote before anybody can do anything like that. *So that’s not something we’re looking at right now.*”

Meanwhile, as it is increasingly evident that CTU is preparing a sellout of district teachers, they have denounced the union’s apparent proposals for “raises” of only 4-5 percent. This would effectively be a sizable pay cut since the cost of living has increased by 23 percent since the start of the previous CPS-CTU bargaining agreement in 2019.

For CPS teachers, who are required to live in Chicago (and not in nearby suburbs) in order to work in the city’s public schools, news of another property tax hike caused oppositional statements to boil over in a Facebook group for union members. Mayor Brandon Johnson proposed the increase to cover the city’s own \$1 billion budget deficit, which is distinct from that of CPS.

Johnson’s initial proposal for a \$300 million increase in the city’s property tax levy was soundly rejected in a largely symbolic unanimous vote by the 50 members of the city’s council. He has now proposed to increase it by \$150 million, with the balance to be covered by a variety of tax and fee increases on streaming services, cloud computing and alcohol sales. At the same time, Brandon, a former CTU lobbyist, has warned that “sacrifices will be made.”

In a Facebook group educators noted that any pay increases from the upcoming contract would largely be eaten up by increased property taxes. One said, “Soooo, whatever increase in salary CTU members may get is already spent???”

A different educator noted: “Even if you don’t [own a home], a property tax increase is going to impact your landlord and will most likely be your burden in a rent increase.” The educator continued, “If we don’t get more than a 4% raise, I’ll be mad. Know why? They raised our [union] dues! They got their money!”

The CTU’s “Digital Communications Specialist” Nathan Goldbaum sought to dampen teachers’ entirely legitimate criticisms, commenting, “Look, I don’t like property tax increases,

but I like layoffs and furloughs less. ... I’m not trying to say that MBJ [Mayor Brandon Johnson] is perfect. There’s plenty to criticize, but let’s try to keep our criticisms level headed.”

At a recent “tele-town hall” conference call for union members, CTU President Stacy Davis Gates castigated a member for not supporting regressive taxes on working-class families.

Gates told the teacher, “I’m gonna have to challenge you on this whole tax thing you got going on here, because that doesn’t sound like a public school educator. The irony is you gotta be okay with that, because that’s how schools are funded. ... I challenge you on the whole spirit of your question.” She even absurdly claimed, “Property tax is the most progressive form of taxation.”

So much for the left-sounding talk from the CTU bureaucracy about boycotting Bank of America and demanding a state investigation into the “predatory financial deals” CPS made with Wall Street banks that have left the city’s school district “broke on purpose.” All of that is for public consumption. When push comes to shove, the CTU bureaucracy, following the orders of its Democratic Party masters, imposes austerity and insists that the cost of public education be borne by those who can least afford it.

To fight school closures and for inflation-busting pay increases, rank-and-file educators must take the conduct of this struggle into their own hands. This means establishing rank-and-file committees in every public and charter school so educators can override any agreements that do not meet their needs, and fight for what educators and students need, not what the corporate and political powers-that-be claim is affordable.

Educators will find their most powerful allies not by appealing to CPS CEO Pedro Martinez, as the CTU apparatus argues, but by appealing to the broadest sections of the working class, including workers in healthcare, manufacturing, logistics, hospitality and other industries to defend the social and democratic rights of the working class, including the right to free, high-quality public education.

The need to defend public education is all the more urgent in light of the plans of the incoming Trump administration. Trump and the Republicans have vowed to slash social spending, bar immigrants from public education, privatize schools and eliminate the Department of Education, among other reactionary measures.

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