

Chicago Teachers Union faces rank-and-file rebellion, as contract talks stall and layoffs loom

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

More than 20,000 teachers have been working without a contract for eight months as the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) administration of Mayor Brandon Johnson, a former Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) lobbyist, refuses to accept even the most modest wage and staffing demands of educators.

The general context of the teachers' struggle involves attacks on immigrant families, looming school closures and consolidations at Acero charter schools and an unprecedented political crisis in the United States.

On Wednesday morning, a parent dropping off two students at an Acero school on the city's southwest side was seized by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents. Three plainclothes ICE agents were stalking their victim from an unmarked car parked near Jovita Idar Elementary School, community members who photographed them told the *Chicago Tribune*.

As attacks on social programs, which millions of people depend on, take place across the board and public education faces an existential threat, the Democratic Party and the CTU's parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), are doing nothing more than urging educators and parents to write letters to their Congress members.

The decades-long domination of Chicago by the Democratic Party has produced nothing for teachers except stagnant wages, staffing shortages, school closures and budget cuts. Under these conditions, the CTU bureaucracy and its CORE leadership faction are facing a rebellion of the

rank and file.

The efforts by the CTU and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), who hold six seats on the Chicago city council, to sell the strategy of "progressive electeds" to educators has worn itself thin. Mayor Johnson, who was elected with millions of dollars from the AFT and its local and state arms, is denying teachers badly needed wage increases and closing Acero charter schools, which serve some of the most vulnerable Spanish-speaking immigrant families.

During a recent virtual CTU meeting for Acero educators, union officers blocked and removed oppositional messages by rank-and-file educators in the Q&A pane; as with all CTU virtual meetings, the chat was disabled. Even within the House of Delegates, the CTU leadership body, the CORE leadership has resorted to increasingly aggressive censorship with the banning last year of the publication of minutes, a long established practice.

Hostile to any strike action by rank-and-file educators, CTU leaders are pleading for state funding to toss a few bones to workers to push through a contract. But billionaire Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker, another Democrat, has boasted there would be no new taxes in his state budget and that the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) would not be getting anything from the state.

Last weekend, an announcement from CTU's bargaining team indicated a willingness to accept CPS's abysmal wage offerings, essentially abandoning the demand for raises, and claiming the focus must now be on staffing.

Earlier this month, the union officially rejected an arbitrator's fact-finding report that largely agreed with CPS officials' position that the district cannot afford most of the union's demands. According to state law, 30 days after rejecting the report, the union can give the district a 10-day notice that it intends to strike.

The union bureaucracy, however, is trying to avoid a strike at all costs because a strike by Chicago teachers under present conditions could escape the control of the union and transform into a showdown between the working class, the city and state Democratic Party establishment and the Trump administration.

While the main issue for most teachers is pay, the CTU has proposed a raft of contract measures that it has repeatedly claimed will be “transformative” but which are widely understood will amount to very little.

The factfinder’s report acknowledges that the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U) increased 22 percent over the course of the previous contract, which began in 2019 and expired in June of 2024, and that teachers received raises amounting to only 17 percent.

CPS has maintained throughout the negotiations that it is unable to afford more than its initial proposal of 4 percent in the first year and 4-5 percent a year for the following three years, depending on CPI-U. This would again leave teachers facing a real decline in purchasing power and living standards.

Although the CTU initially proposed raises of 9 percent per year, it has continuously lowered this demand and worked to dampen expectations. Its latest proposal is 5 percent in the first two years and 4-5 percent for the last two years, hardly an improvement over the district’s initial offer.

The costs of essential necessities, of course, have continued to increase since the expiration of the contract in June 2024. Pegging wages to the national CPI average for US cities, moreover, fails to take into account that consumer prices in Chicago are increasing at a rate of 4.3 percent, more than any other major metro area of the US, largely driven by increased housing and transportation costs.

Even the factfinder’s report admitted it would be a “fool’s errand” to project future inflation rates due to Trump’s tariff threats that are “likely to aggravate the rate of inflation,” as well as his deportation policies which may be “adding to inflationary pressures.” But this has not led to any revision of its figures or wage increase recommendations.

From the beginning, the factfinder’s process was intended to prevent teacher strikes and provide leverage to educational institutions during negotiations.

Teachers are rightly concerned that school authorities will make them pay for meager wage increases through layoffs and furloughs. Indeed, CPS faces an enormous deficit of \$750 million in the next fiscal year due to a large structural deficit that was papered over through the use of federal pandemic funding, which the Biden administration let expire.

The ruling class has been adamant that CPS not take on

additional debt, and there have been continuous calls for “right-sizing” the district through school closures and layoffs.

In the course of his mayoral campaign in March 2023, Johnson told the media, “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’s 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?”

The CTU bureaucracy has a long history of blocking the resistance of educators to school closures and austerity. In 2013, it worked closely with the CPS to close 50 schools and merely demanded a “seat at the table” in exchange for its services.

Teachers are determined not to accept a further cuts in real wages, layoffs and school closures. The Educators Rank-and-File Committee, which is affiliated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), calls on educators to take the conduct of this struggle out of the hands of the CTU bureaucracy.

In every school, rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves, should be formed to outline the non-negotiable demands of educators, including inflation-busting wage increases, cost-of-living protections, and reduction in class sizes and the hiring of necessary staff to provide high quality public education to all children. All layoffs and school closures must be opposed.

These committees should unite with parents, students and other community members to oppose ICE operations and the detention and deportation of immigrant workers and family members. Rank-and-file workers must call for mass demonstrations and strike action to defend immigrant workers and the right to public education against the existential threat by Trump and his billionaire hatchet man, Elon Musk.

Strike action by teachers in America’s third largest school district, guided by the most militant and class-conscious educators and fighting for the defense of the democratic and social rights of the working class, would be a powerful catalyst for an industrial and political counter-offensive by the whole working class.

To join the Educators Rank-and-File Committee, fill out the form below.



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