

Chicago teachers want fight to defend public education as CTU, Democrats move to impose Trump budget cuts

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Teachers and young people across Chicago spoke out in defense of public education this week in opposition to Trump's massive federal funding cuts and the existential threat they pose to public schools. Their comments were made as the Chicago Teachers Union and the city's Democratic Party establishment try to prevent a strike by 28,000 educators in one of America's largest school districts, which would be a catalyst for broader, nationwide fight against Trump's savage cuts.

Voting is scheduled for Thursday and Friday on a four-year deal pushed by the CTU bureaucracy and Mayor Brandon Johnson, which not only fails to meet educators' demands for inflation-busting wage increases, substantial increases in staffing and smaller class sizes, but leaves them vulnerable to Trump's massive federal funding cuts.

CTU President Stacy Davis Gates has made the absurd claim that the deal will "Trump proof" the district and create a "force field" to protect educators and students from federal cuts. While peddling this fairy tale, Gates and Johnson, a former CTU lobbyist "on leave from the union," know there is only funding to cover the first year of the four-year contract, which starts retroactively in 2024, with no funding for the next three years. This means educators and students will be forced to pay for the already existing \$700 million budget deficit and the coming federal funding cuts in the form of school closures, layoffs and program cuts.

At an all-member online meeting on Wednesday ahead of the vote, CTU Vice President Jackson Potter made it clear that even if teachers reject the contract, the CTU will not call a strike. "You decide whether or not this is sufficient, adequate, and meets our needs. And if it's voted down, we go back to the table," he said.

Educators have been hit by decades of budget cutting and deteriorating conditions, overseen by the Democrats. The question of facilities alone, including a dangerous lack of heating and cooling in many buildings, is an issue teachers are

willing to strike over. Many facilities are poorly maintained, and have serious vermin and filth problems. On Tuesday, CPS officials admitted that over \$14 billion is needed for necessary upgrades but the district is only spending \$3 billion on the most "critical" ones. *Chalkbeat* reports the average age of schools in the district is more than 80 years old, with some buildings dating from the late 19th century.

"These cuts are going to hurt our students, and we are going to need to stand up and fight for our kids and their future," a teacher at Lane Tech College Prep High School on the city's north side told the WSWs Wednesday morning. "As a special education teacher, we already don't have a lot of funding as is, so to get a cut is going to be horrible. We need funding for our students so they can get the resources they need and the programs like we have here to support our students, even after they leave."

Rejecting the claims by Elon Musk, Education Secretary Linda McMahon and other billionaires in Trump's regime that there are not enough resources to fund these programs, she said, "There is money for schools; there's money for our future, for our kids. I don't believe it, those are lies."

She said she was very encouraged by the mass protests on April 5, and that it was critical for Chicago educators to take a stand against Trump now.

A Lane Tech student made a simple, powerful statement: "We should stop Trump from depriving the children of tomorrow of the educational opportunities that we have today. Don't let Trump take us back in history; fight against him to take us forward in history."

Another student added, "The Department of Education is something that is very important, considering that is the only way we can move forward, through the youth and the people. Cuts should not be happening. The first words in the Constitution are, 'We, the people' and we can't be the people if we are not educated." Referring to the April 5 protests, she said, "That was powerful and that is something that we can still do. We have power in numbers."

Another Lane student said, "I don't like the billions that are being cut and I'm really glad that you're fighting for our

rights,” he said, saying that he would “most definitely” support the Chicago teachers going on strike. He said, “It is really wrong how Trump is attacking certain people. Everybody should be accepted regardless of gender identity, sexuality, race. I’m really worried about moving backwards as a country.”

Regarding Trump’s drive to destroy public education, he said, “It’s horrible. Public education should be a right for everyone in America.” Referring to the protests, he said, “I really like that, someone has to stand up for us.” The Democrats, he said, “did not stop the Republicans when they wanted their budget passed. The Democratic Party is just backing down.”

The chief concern of Johnson and the CTU bureaucracy is preventing a strike action, which could quickly get out of their control. In the 10 months since the June 30, 2024 contract expiration, the CTU has not even held a strike authorization vote. Gates has said strikes are no longer necessary because the CTU has a “seat at the table” in city government through Mayor Johnson and other “friendly electeds.”

In fact, the CTU apparatus has proven to be nothing more than a tool of the Democratic Party and an enforcer of its austerity and other reactionary policies. Its record includes the sellout of strikes in 2012 and 2019 and forcing teachers back into Covid-infested classrooms in 2021 and 2022. As a result, the CTU bureaucracy and its leading faction, the pseudo-left Coalition of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), have been deeply discredited.

An “All-Member In-person Info Session” called by the CTU for Tuesday evening at the Hyde Park Academy High School on the city’s south side attracted virtually no teachers. After years of contracts presented by union officials as “victories,” only to be followed by school closures, teachers layoffs and program cuts, educators are deeply alienated from the union apparatus.

Supporters of the Educators Rank-and-File Committees Network have been widely distributing a statement calling on teachers to reject the CTU sellout agreement and mobilize their strength against Trump’s war on public education. Warning that the suppression of a strike would only “embolden Trump,” the statement calls on educators to form “rank-and-file committees in every Chicago school, made up of the most class-conscious, trusted and militant educators. These committees will provide teachers the means to unite with educators, and broader sections of workers throughout the region and across the US, to lay the groundwork for a political struggle to defend public education and all the democratic and social rights of the working class.”

The full funding of high-quality public education and other vital social needs will only be secured by expropriating the ill-gotten gains of the corporate and financial oligarchy and reorganizing economic life along socialist lines based on human need, not profit.

A veteran educator at the Hyde Park Academy High School said the pay offer and proposals on class sizes in the contract were “not adequate” and urged her fellow teachers to ask themselves: “Can we live with this over the next four years? Educators need to read very carefully and be aware of everything politically what this contract could bring in the future.”

Denouncing Trump’s cuts a newer Hyde Park teacher said, “This is an attack on the poor. I was always taught that education is the great equalizer; that’s what is under attack. The power is with the people, and it’s time to mobilize,” he said, referring to the mass April 5 protests, which included 30,000 demonstrators in downtown Chicago.

“The principle of free education is what this country was founded on,” another teacher said. “The attacks on it are horrible. I completely disagree with them.”

Another Hyde Park educator added, “This is against the working class. It is against teachers and our kids. Because they are going to suffer because of these cuts.”

Asked about teachers taking strike action, his colleague said, “Historically, Chicago teachers have taken a stand, we are going to have to come together in solidarity and do it again. If we don’t strike what is going to happen? What would these people think if their kids were having education taken from them? But they are the elite, and their kids don’t go to public schools.

“We have to come up with a solution, not just in Chicago but across the country. We need to ensure that education is a place is safe place for everyone, children and educators, a place where we have what we need—the funding, the programs.”

A grandmother of a special needs student at the high school said, “I’m afraid these children are going to lose not only their services but their well-being. How can they survive or thrive as human beings this way? Everybody has the right to equality.”

A young worker at a law office said, “I was born in 1997, and my generation has seen everything, 9/11, 2008 [financial crash], the pandemic, and we’re sick and tired. Trump needs to be impeached. Education is very important, and all the teachers need to go on strike and make a call to action across the country. If I have children, I don’t want them to deal with the repercussions of Trump’s actions.”

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