Chicago Democrats vie for mayoralty, pledging historic cuts

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The campaign for the February 2027 election of the mayor of Chicago has been characterized by competition among the Democratic Party candidates over who will make the deepest budget cuts and enact the policies demanded by the banks and largest corporations. The savage austerity measures being prepared are setting the course for an explosive confrontation between the working class and the Democratic Party along with the financial and corporate oligarchy it defends.

Earlier this month, Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson and 15 other candidates filed nominating petitions to appear on the mayoral ballot in the municipal elections. Some of the other candidates include:

- Illinois State Comptroller Susana Mendoza
- Illinois Secretary of State Alexi Giannoulias
- US Representative for Illinois's 5th District Mike Quigley
- George Cardenas, a commissioner on the Cook County Board of Review
- Matt Brewer, owner of The Wiener's Circle novelty hot dog restaurant and a commissioner on the Chicago Housing Authority Board
- Investment management executive Joel Holberg
- John Kelly, a lobbyist and founder of Sentinel private security
- Real estate developer Zoe Ma

Some of these candidates may be removed from the ballot through various challenges. Johnson's nominating petitions will also be scrutinized by the Election Board in coming weeks after they were challenged by other candidates.

The Democratic Party's austerity agenda

Leading Democrats Quigley and Mendoza have declared themselves ready to take radical action in making cuts to municipal pensions and city services as a means of addressing the current budget deficit and the city's substantial debt burden. Their public statements have made clear that the Democratic Party's policy in the coming years is to make deep cuts to services, raise fees, "restructure" city finances, and shift the burden onto working families already struggling under 20 to 30 percent increases in food and rent costs.

Warning of the drastic cuts and restructuring she would undertake, Susana Mendoza said, "[T]his next mayoralty is not going to be fun and pretty and flowery."

Even before he announced his intent to run, Mike Quigley was very clear about his program, speaking with the *Chicago Sun-Times* of "drastic changes" and an "austerity budget that focuses on the fundamentals." In particular, he is taking aim at the pensions of city workers and city services. Quigley proposes to draft union leaders to help with decisions on the cuts being made, setting the stage for a massive conflict between city workers and a union apparatus aligned with the demands of the banks and the Democrats that serve them.

Referring to the 2014 bankruptcy of Detroit, Quigley threatened, "We can meet in rooms and talk about this and negotiate and make it as fair and equitable as we can or, at some point, a federal judge will make these decisions. And we have to remember the federal judge in Detroit said, 'I have to treat [pension] debt like any other debt.'"

Over the last three decades, Democratic mayors failed to make the necessary contributions to Chicago's public retirement system. Instead, the city used the cash to fund operating expenses, taking tens of billions of dollars away from worker pensions that are now underfunded. Earlier this year, the *Financial Times* reported, "Chicago has also become a test case for how state and local governments may cope as cash-strapped public pension plans edge towards insolvency."

The newly re-elected Illinois Secretary of State Alexi Giannoulias, who enjoys the support and mentorship of Barack Obama in his run for mayor, has the largest campaign war chest of close to $20 million. He is attempting to strike a more moderate tone, paying lip service to reducing the cost of living and raising taxes on the wealthy, while reassuring business and financial interests that he will make the necessary decisions when it comes to city services.

Mayor Johnson, a former Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) staffer, has postured as an opponent of cuts, but has also proven his loyalties to the ruling class agenda. The CTU apparatus worked very closely with his administration last year to push through a sellout labor contract and block a teachers strike by concealing the scale of the budget crisis facing the school system. Weeks after it was ratified, Johnson announced new information about the financial crisis had come to light and cuts would be necessary. More than 1,700 Chicago Public Schools employees were laid off last summer.

Johnson unveiled a proposed 2027 city budget of $17.6 billion last week to address a deficit of around $883 million. As part of his re-election campaign, he has cynically renewed an earlier call for a $125-per-month corporate head tax on large businesses that would raise less than one-eighth of the revenue needed. The tax is highly unlikely to win the support needed in the city council to pass, and continues to be vocally opposed by Illinois's billionaire Democratic governor, JB Pritzker.

Social conditions ahead of the elections

Inequality in the Chicago metro area has grown ever wider in recent years, in parallel with the US as a whole. Since 2021, food prices have risen 22 percent and rents have increased 31 percent, with the average rental cost estimated by Zillow to be over $2,100 per month.

In the wake of Trump's deep cuts to federal food assistance, 36 percent of the city suffers from food insecurity, as reported by the *Chicago Tribune*. Of households with children, 47 percent face food insecurity,

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leaving adults to skip meals so kids can eat. Hunger is concentrated on the South and West sides of the city, where rates of food insecurity approach 50 percent, but some 20 to 27 percent of households living in the more affluent areas on the North Side are also food insecure, according to the same report.

Enormous cuts to Medicaid health care access have impacted hundreds of thousands in the state, a significant proportion of whom live in the metro area. Pritzker and the Illinois General Assembly—where the Democrats hold a supermajority in both houses—eliminated the Health Benefits for Immigrant Adults (HBIA) program, ending state-funded healthcare coverage for low-income undocumented and noncitizen adults aged 42 to 64. More than 660,000 people have been removed from state health insurance in recent years.

The Trump administration's attacks on immigrant families—including "Operation Midway Blitz" in the Chicago area, in which 4,000 were arrested and 2,700 detained or deported—have devastated households, neighborhoods and small businesses over the last year. Families have lost breadwinners, and the city courts have since become a center of the deportation machine. Recently, immigrants are summoned to court and arrested on arrival. These kidnappings and deportations continue at a rate of 80 per month.

The Great Cities Institute at the University of Illinois Chicago placed the economic cost to the region of the mass arrests and deportations over just the last year at $1.26 billion total, including $107 million in local sales tax revenue, with the most significant losses accruing to small businesses in the neighborhoods that were hit hardest by the Gestapo-style raids and kidnappings.

Brandon Johnson's record

The incumbent Brandon Johnson's record in office has been an object lesson in the Democratic Party's reliance on its pseudo-left-backed "progressive wing" to lend it enough legitimacy to carry out its class policies.

Johnson's claims to be a fighter for the working class were quickly exposed as a fraud. His tenure has been marked above all by attacks on the most vulnerable. His first hundred days were defined by a promotion of the Chicago Police Department: disavowing earlier calls to "defund" the police, pledging not to cut the CPD budget "by one penny," and appointing as police superintendent Larry Snelling, a veteran of gang and tactical units who had testified as an expert witness in trials of officers involved in the 2014 police murder of Laquan McDonald.

In 2023, Johnson initiated plans to build a "winterized" migrant camp, explaining in nakedly xenophobic terms that the immigrants bussed into Chicago by Texas Governor Greg Abbott needed to be kept away from the city population. The plan was quashed after public protest, fueled by the fact that the land requisitioned for the camp was contaminated with industrial pollutants. After warehousing immigrant families in makeshift shelters under the control of private security, he imposed a 60-day limit on shelter stays, and in June 2024 his administration began evicting them, including those with school-age children, driving many into homelessness.

In May 2024, the Johnson administration deployed Chicago police SWAT teams to the Art Institute of Chicago, where peaceful student protests in defense of Gaza were taking place, arresting and charging 68 people in total. In an attempt to send a clear message to students who might try to establish encampments in the wealthy downtown area, the administration had police move in aggressively, shoving protesters violently to the ground, zip-tying their hands behind their backs, and carrying them off. Later that year, the Inspector General issued a report revealing the Johnson administration's refusal to remove members of fascist gangs and groups within the Chicago Police Department from the force, including confirmed Proud Boys and Three Percenters.

For all the rhetoric against the oligarchy and claims to be for working people, Johnson, like Bernie Sanders, AOC and Zohran Mamdani—who has gone so far as to claim the fascist in the White House is an ally of New Yorkers—is fully committed to an anti-working class agenda.

Decisive class battles on the horizon

In a historic repudiation of Trump and the Republicans, tens of millions of workers and young people voted in the midterm elections to oppose the criminal war against Iran, declining real wages and explosive social inequality, ICE raids and the descent into fascism and dictatorship. This has set the working class on a collision course with the Democratic Party, which is committed to imposing savage budget cuts to pay the massive debts of the US government and record war spending.

The protests and general strikes sweeping France, Italy, Spain and other countries in Europe and Latin America, will soon be arriving on American shores, including in Chicago, the third largest city in America.

Next year, a large number of union contracts for city and county workers expire. Most city agreements end on June 30, 2027, while many county agreements expire on November 30, 2027.

These include:

- City of Chicago Historical Unit and Window Washers (SEIU Local 73)
- Chicago Firefighters
- Cook County departments, including CCHHS Healthcare Professionals and Hospital Technicians
- In Chicago Public Schools, the contract for Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73, whose members include custodians and special education assistants, expires on June 30, 2027. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) agreement covering more than 20,000 educators is set to expire on June 30, 2028.

Recent experiences, including the isolation of the nearly seven-month lockout of 800 BP Whiting workers by the United Steelworkers, and UNITE HERE's blocking of a unified strike by 7,000 Chicago hotel workers, demonstrate why the coming struggles must be conducted independently of and in opposition to the trade union apparatus. This means building rank-and-file committees in advance of contract expirations that will advance demands and fight for what workers need, not what the ruling class claims it can afford.

Effective opposition to the Democratic Party's agenda of slashing services and worker pensions to pay for wars and boost private profits cannot be achieved through the ballot box. A struggle for the social and democratic rights of workers requires a complete break from the Democratic Party and the building of a mass, socialist movement committed to workers power and the expropriation of the oligarchy.

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