Chicago DSA endorses Brandon Johnson for mayor: Austerity with a “progressive” face

Alexander Fangmann, Kristina Betinis
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On Friday, November 20, the Chicago chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (CDSA) announced that it is backing incumbent Brandon Johnson in the February 23, 2027, mayoral election. The statement is an indictment both of the DSA and of Johnson, whose administration has laid off teachers, evicted immigrants from city shelters and sent police against protesters opposing the genocide in Gaza.

The backing also shows the increasingly direct role of the DSA in shoring up the Democratic Party as that party advances ever more retrograde policies and open attacks on the working class.

In July, Chicago Public Schools announced 1,723 layoffs, including 760 teachers and 801 aides, the outcome of the contract the Chicago Teachers Union and Johnson pushed through in April 2025. In June 2024, his administration evicted migrant families from city shelters. The month before, it sent police SWAT units against the anti-genocide encampment at the Art Institute. A poll taken before Johnson announced his reelection bid on September 13 found that only 13.6 percent of Chicagoans wanted him to run again.

CDSA’s attempt to distance itself from its endorsement by calling it a mere “recommendation” is a fraud. As the organization’s statement says:

> After rigorous deliberation, our members adopted a resolution to recommend a vote to re-elect Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson in the upcoming municipal election. There are many candidates for Chicago Mayor, but incumbent Mayor Brandon Johnson is the only viable candidate who stands firmly on the side of the working class against the combined forces of billionaires, greedy corporations, and reactionaries that want to see Chicago move backwards.

A call to vote for a candidate is what a political endorsement means. But CDSA attempts to distance itself from its own position by saying, “This recommendation is a guidance to members and supporters on how to vote, rather than an endorsement or a commitment of material support in the form of donations or volunteering.”

The statement explains, “Mayor Johnson is not a DSA member nor does he identify as a Democratic Socialist. Additionally, our membership is not without criticism of Mayor Johnson and his administration. For these reasons, our membership voted to recommend Johnson instead of endorsing him.”

Whatever criticisms the CDSA membership has are left unstated. The “recommendation” may mean that CDSA will give Johnson neither money nor volunteers. Its resources will go to what it calls its “Socialist Slate” of aldermanic candidates.

The leading candidates for mayor, all Democrats, are competing over who will impose austerity most effectively. Illinois Representative Mike Quigley has called for an “austerity budget that focuses on the fundamentals.” He has said the next mayor must tell “our union partners, ‘We’re not gonna take away your pension, but it will fail,’” and he would confront the deficit with layoffs of city workers. Illinois Comptroller Susana Mendoza made the relationship the city has with corporations and wealthy residents the center of her speech to business leaders last month.

The city faces a projected $884 million budget gap for 2027. Johnson’s revived corporate head tax would raise about $101 million a year, barely a ninth of the

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gap, and it has no prospect of passing. Twenty-nine alderpersons have ruled it out, the City Council majority has told Johnson his budget lacks the votes, and Governor JB Pritzker, the billionaire who leads the state's Democratic Party, has again denounced it as "the most direct signal to employers: don't hire more people."

The reality behind Johnson's posturing and empty pledges is the Democrats are opposed to any moves to tax the rich. The DSA's endorsement of Johnson is thus an endorsement of austerity with a "progressive" face.

Indeed, the most revealing passage of the CDSA endorsement points to the aggressive austerity plans Johnson's party has laid out as the agenda for the next mayor's term:

> The truth is this: the City of Chicago will either need to tax the rich, or it will need to defund working-class communities by carrying out major cuts to essential city services and programs and increasing regressive revenue. The only viable candidate for Mayor who publicly recognizes this reality facing our city, and that the only humane solution is to tax the rich, is incumbent Mayor Brandon Johnson.

The role of the DSA, in Chicago and nationally, has been to absorb the radicalization of workers and youth, the growing hatred of class exploitation and war, and redirect it back into the Democratic Party. The DSA excuses its endorsement by noting that Johnson is not a "democratic socialist," but what would it matter if he were? DSA member and New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani hosted Trump at Gracie Mansion in September. At the *New York Times* DealBook Summit on November 18, he called Trump "still a fascist" while explaining that "we both love the same city," and assured the assembled executives, "I do not begrudge [billionaire] Mr. Griffin."

The coming battles in Chicago cannot be fought through the ballot box, the Democratic Party, its auxiliaries in the DSA or the union leaderships. Most city union contracts expire on June 30, 2027, and many county contracts on November 30, 2027, as the candidates prepare attacks on pensions, service cuts and fee hikes. Workers and young people will come into direct conflict with the DSA-backed Johnson, or whoever is elected, as their needs collide with the austerity demanded by the banks and big business.

The fight against the policy of the ruling class requires a complete break with the Democratic Party and its supporters in the union apparatus and the pseudo-left, and the building of a mass socialist movement of the working class, committed to workers' power and the expropriation of the oligarchy. The DSA's backing of Johnson is an effort to keep workers tied to the party that is preparing the cuts.

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