

The ISO, the middle-class “left” and the Chicago Teachers Union

By Kristina Betinis and Jerry White
12 January 2011

Chicago teachers have gone through an experience that holds essential political lessons not only for teachers, but for workers throughout the country and around the world. More than six months after a supposed militant faction of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) won control of the union, it has completely capitulated to school and state authorities and refused to mount any struggle against the destruction of teachers' jobs and conditions.

Last June, the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) won the leadership of the 30,000-member union, beating an incumbent faction that had controlled the CTU for 37 of the last 40 years. CORE includes in its leadership members of so-called left-wing organizations such as the International Socialist Organization.

CORE campaigned on promises that it would reform the CTU and lead a fight against school closings, job cuts and the victimization of teachers in the nation's third largest school district.

The vote for CORE reflected the anger of rank-and-file teachers against the betrayals of the CTU, which has collaborated in the attacks on teachers and public education spearheaded by the city's Democratic mayor, Richard Daley, and former Chicago Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan, now US education secretary. Many of the reactionary school “reform” measures being carried out by the Obama administration nationally—merit pay, test-based “accountability” schemes, the closing of public schools and their replacement with charter schools—were first tested in Chicago with the support of the CTU.

Over the past decade, more than 70 schools were closed and 6,000 teachers lost their jobs. The CTU—which has not called a strike since 1987—only asked that it be given a seat at the table in implementing these attacks on its own members. Meanwhile, top union officials, including CTU President Marilyn Stewart, increased their pay to \$200,000 and beyond.

In her victory speech last June, newly elected CTU President Karen Lewis said the election of the CORE faction marked the “beginning of the end of scapegoating educators for social ills that all of our children, families and schools struggle against every day.” The election result, she continued, “shows the unity of 30,000 educators standing strong to put business in its place—out of the schools.”

In a comment on *Socialistworker.org*, the International Socialist Organization's web site, Lee Sustar hailed the CORE victory, claiming it had shaken the Chicago media and political establishment and “given a case of heartburn” to Arne Duncan. Moreover, Sustar said, it “turned heads in the Washington headquarters of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)” —the CTU's parent union—where “AFT President Randi Weingarten has collaborated with Race to the Top and other White House education initiatives, even at the cost of

retreating from the union's opposition to merit pay and defense of tenure as the basis for teacher job security.”

What has been the record of the CORE group in the more than six months since taking office?

Its first test was the decision by Chicago schools CEO Ron Huberman to layoff 1,289 teachers, including 749 higher-paid tenured instructors. CORE's only response was to file a federal court injunction charging that the firing of the tenured teachers—without providing recall and rehiring procedures—had been a violation of state law. Union attorneys explicitly accepted the “right” of the district to layoff teachers for budgetary reasons and only asked that the laid off tenured instructors be put on a recall list and be given preference over lower seniority teachers for future openings.

CORE Vice President Jesse Sharkey—a leading member of the ISO—could muster no more than a complaint that school officials had violated procedures. At the same time, the new CTU leadership accepted without question the firing of more than 500 probationary teachers who had not yet attained tenure.

When a US district judge ruled in October that the layoffs were illegal—and ordered the district and union to establish a process to give tenured teachers “a foot in the door” to pursue current job openings—CTU President Karen Lewis hailed this as a “stunning court victory.” Shortly afterwards, another judge, acting on an appeal from the school district, suspended the order. As of this writing, hundreds of tenured instructors remain without jobs. If not hired by June 2011, they could be reduced to entry-level pay and stripped of their pensions if they were ever to work for the district again.

With over half of the CPS schools slated for “turnaround”—a process that allows for the firing of the entire staff of a supposedly failing school—thousands of teachers face an ever-present threat of being fired. Art teacher Sunny Neater-DuBow told the *Chicago Reader*, “We're on edge and living in fear. You never know if you'll be next to go.” In November, a new CPS chief Area 11 officer, Janie Ortega, instructed principals to fire two teachers in each school in the area.

This summer, special education teacher Lorna Wilson wrote to CORE, “Why did we pay union dues this year? We got no protection.”

What about the promises of CORE to fight the use of testing and other arbitrary performance standards to set pay rates, fire teachers and close so-called underperforming schools?

The Democratic-controlled Illinois House of Representatives is currently considering sweeping legislation—called the Performance Counts Act of 2010—that would eviscerate tenure, peg pay and job security to testing, reduce costs associated with firing teachers, and strip the state's 200,000 unionized teachers of the right to strike.

Rather than opposing this attack, the CTU has joined with the Illinois Federation of Teachers and the Illinois Education Association to propose a union-backed plan that is virtually indistinguishable from the right-wing proposal now being considered.

Comparing the union-backed “Accountability for All” plan to the bill being backed by Bill Gates and other corporate proponents of school “reform,” the education web site *Catalyst Chicago* wrote, “Although they differ in the details, the proposals have similar elements. Both would link a teacher’s classroom performance to the granting of tenure, recertification and decisions on dismissal for incompetence, filling job vacancies or reductions in force.”

It continued, “Performance would be measured in part by student achievement. Both proposals would streamline dismissal, but the union version would require better support for teachers in such areas as professional development and remediation...and propose[s] similar ‘accountability’ processes for principals and district administrators...”

As far as the right to strike is concerned, the unions argued that no formal ban was necessary because the CTU has not called a strike in 23 years!

Like its predecessors, the new CTU leadership is thoroughly wedded to the Democratic Party and opposes any independent political mobilization of the working class against Obama—even as the administration embraces attacks on public education long championed by the most reactionary Republicans. The main difference between the two parties on education policy is that the Democrats have relied on the services of the unions to gut education, while the Republicans have generally favored doing away with the unions altogether.

CORE officials have close ties to Jesse Jackson and other state and local Democrats. The new CTU leaders are also preparing to endorse one of the Democrats in February’s mayoral elections—even though each one, including leading candidate Rahm Emanuel, is committed to escalating the attacks on teacher and public education.

On every score—the acceptance of job cuts and the victimization of teachers, the subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party and the demands of big business—the CORE leadership has proven to be no different from the caucus it replaced.

This experience has exposed the ISO and its perspective of reforming the unions. The ISO claims “teachers’ union could be the leading force in a social movement for public education” when in fact they have played the key role in facilitating Obama’s attack on the public schools.

It is doubtful that the ISO leaders believe their own claims about reviving these rotten organizations. However, perpetuating this myth goes hand in hand with denying the necessity for the development of a socialist political movement of the working class, and continues to foster illusions in the Democratic Party and reformism—even as the capitalist system is mired in the worst economic breakdown since the Great Depression.

Despite its name, the ISO is not fighting for socialism. Such a struggle would require the most determined effort to break the working class from the Democratic Party and encourage its own initiative, fighting capacity and political independence.

Like the rest of the middle class “left” the ISO fears nothing more than the emergence of a movement that undermines the authority of the trade unions and the Democratic Party. That is why the more the unions have been discredited, the more they insist on their viability.

The political line of the ISO has the added benefit of opening up lucrative positions in the trade union bureaucracy. After CORE took office, more than 200 people applied for full-time paid union

positions, some of which paid \$200,000 or more under the old leadership. Several of these positions, including “membership communications” and “organizing coordinator” went to members of the ISO and other middle class groups. While a spokesman for the CTU told the WSWs salaries had been reduced, the union has not provided any figures.

What are the lessons of this experience?

The struggle to defend public education requires the formation of new organizations of struggle—independent of and in opposition to the official trade unions. This means rejecting the prescriptions of the ISO and the other supporters of the trade unions and the building of rank-and-file committees of teachers, students and parents to organize mass resistance to school closings, budget cuts and privatization.

To defend their interests, teachers and all sections of the working class must break decisively with the Democratic Party and its supporters. The social right to high quality public education can only be secured through breaking the grip of the banks and carrying out a radical redistribution of wealth to raise the material and cultural level of all the people. For this task only the building of a powerful political movement of the working class, fighting for socialism, will do.

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