

Teachers have the right to know: What's in the contract?

By Joseph Kishore
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Today's rally is being organized under a veil of secrecy. A conspiracy is being carried out against the teachers of Chicago, involving the Emanuel administration and the Chicago Teachers Union. The CTU is trying desperately to get teachers back to work by Monday.

Speaker after speaker today will declare "victory," insisting that teachers have won "respect," but nothing will be said about what the CTU has agreed to—just as the union has said nothing about negotiations throughout the entire strike.

But workers have the right to know: What is in the contract? This demand must be raised from every corner of the rally today. Not empty platitudes, but concrete details!

Both the CTU and the Chicago Public Schools have said that they had reached a "framework" of an agreement, which they hoped to finalize over the weekend. Yet nothing is being openly said about what this "framework" actually is. Why is the CTU silent? The answer is simple—the contract is a sellout.

The CTU House of Delegates met on Friday. Initially, the union indicated that it wanted to get a vote at this meeting to end the strike, even before a final deal was worked out. In the end, with many teachers outraged at the idea of ending the strike with no contract, the vote was delayed until Sunday. President Karen Lewis said at a press conference after the meeting, "Delegates were not interested in blindly signing off on something they have not seen"—precisely what the CTU had originally planned to do!

Lewis repeatedly refused to provide any information on what concessions the union had made. "Creative thinking" was involved, was all she would say. "They thought about some stuff, and we thought about some stuff." What "stuff" this was... who knows? Least of all

the teachers whose jobs and livelihoods are at stake.

Lewis said that the union was not going to provide any information to members before the Sunday meeting of the delegates. The assembled representatives will be presented with the agreement and asked to approve the decision to end the strike. As little time will be given for critical thought as possible.

It was left to Jesse Sharkey, a member of the International Socialist Organization and vice president of the CTU, to provide the most contorted justification for the union's refusal to release any details to teachers. There are "pretty high stakes attached" to a vote, he said. "If our membership looks at a detailed summary of an entire contract document and rejects it, then we are still on strike."

Sharkey worried that "if people can't look at the settlement as a whole, that undercuts that process." This, he explained, is "why we are being circumspect" by not saying anything about what the CTU had agreed to.

Sharkey's words require translation. The CTU has agreed to massive concessions, but it does not want to reveal these without carefully packaging these concessions together with supposed "victories." If the contract agreement is not presented correctly, the delegates (not the full membership, which has no say in the matter until well after the strike is called off) might vote to continue the strike—that is, they will vote incorrectly.

As for the membership as a whole, the CTU is calculating that if it can get a vote to end the strike through the delegates meeting, this will help put an end to the momentum and enthusiasm that the strike has generated. Two weeks from now, the union leaders hope, teachers will be more willing to vote for the contract, even if they don't like it. And if the contract is

voted down, the CTU has said that this will only result in a resumption of negotiations not a strike—and the union will not return anything better the second time around.

For his part, Mayor Emanuel showed less circumspection. He praised the deal, saying that the “tentative framework is an honest and principled compromise” that “preserves more time for learning in the classroom, provides more support for teachers to excel at their craft, and gives principals the latitude and responsibility to build an environment in which our children can succeed.”

Providing “more time for learning in the classroom” is reference to the expansion of the school day without compensation to the teachers; “excel at their craft” refers to test-based evaluation systems; and more “latitude” for principals means the elimination of job security for teachers.

The little information that has come out in the press makes clear that the CTU has agreed to the virtual elimination of job security for teachers. A new system will have “student growth”—primarily standardized testing—make up 35 and possibly up to 40 percent of a teacher’s total evaluation. Non-tenured teachers will be subject to immediate dismissal if they are deemed “unsatisfactory” on this basis, and tenured teachers can be dismissed after one year.

Lewis’ only substantive comment at the press conference was to say, when asked about the union’s attitude to the evaluation process, that this is “based on state law.” An 2011 Illinois law, passed with the support of the CTU and in response to Obama’s Race to the Top program, provides for an expansion of test-based evaluation systems.

During the five days of the strike, Emanuel made clear his ruthless determination to force through measures that drastically undermine job security for teachers. This is part of an overall strategy of dismantling the public education system.

The Emanuel administration has plans to shut down up to 120 public schools over the next five years, laying off thousands of teachers in the process. It is withholding details on these plans until after the strike is ended, with the understanding that there is mass opposition among teachers. Emanuel is also planning to vastly expand the network of for-profit charter schools.

Emanuel’s demands won the support of the mass

media in Chicago and both Democrats and Republicans at the national level—with Republican vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan declaring that education “reform” was a “bipartisan issue.” Emanuel is carrying out in Chicago what the Obama administration is implementing at a national level.

The CTU has already signed on to these plans, with Lewis saying that it is only a matter of carrying out this attack in a “reasonable way.”

The union is worried that any prolonged strike will escape its control and develop into a broader struggle against the Obama administration, which fully backs the attack on teachers being carried out by Emanuel. The union is absolutely committed to its political alliance with the Democratic Party. Teachers must not accept this framework! The workers have the right to know! Reject the sellout contract!

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