

ISO whitewashes role of Chicago Teachers Union in school closures

By Kristina Betinis
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Amid growing opposition to planned school closures and consolidations in Chicago, Illinois, a March 4 *Socialistworker.org* article entitled “Rahm's scorched-earth assault on our schools” crudely attempts to re-write the history of events surrounding the assault on public education in the city. *Socialist Worker*, the publication of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), seeks to whitewash the role of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), in which it has a leadership position. ISO member Jesse Sharkey is the current vice president of the CTU. Far from opposing the closure of schools, the CTU and the ISO have collaborated in implementing the Obama administration's school “reforms” with Democratic mayor Rahm Emanuel.

At the very beginning of the article, the ISO presents the impending school shutdowns as an effort “to undermine and cripple the Chicago Teachers Union—payback for the CTU daring to stand up to Emanuel with its nine-day strike last September.”

This statement is doubly false. First, school closures were planned from the very start of Emanuel's administration, part of a policy of dismantling public education and opening charters schools going back many years. When Emanuel left the White House, he made education “reform” a centerpiece of his mayoral election campaign.

Second, far from “standing up” to Emanuel, the unions, including the CTU, have collaborated in the attack on teachers and on public education. Since Emanuel has taken office, teachers unions in Illinois—the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers locals—have proven themselves indispensable in implementing right-wing education “reforms”.

Working in 2011 with Illinois Democratic and Republican leaders to craft the anti-teacher Senate Bill

7—a process in which CTU leaders were deeply involved—teachers unions expanded punitive teacher evaluation measures, gave school boards the right to lengthen the school day and year, raised the bar for a strike vote for Chicago teachers, and made it illegal for teachers to strike over issues they could not collectively bargain on, including layoffs, class sizes and the length of the school day.

In September, 26,000 Chicago teachers went on strike. The CTU worked deliberately to shut this struggle down as quickly as possible, and prevent it from developing into a political fight against the Emanuel administration and the Democratic Party. This then provided the green light for Emanuel to proceed with the closure of at least 100 schools in 2013. Despite opposition from teachers to threatened closures, CTU leaders insisted that teachers could not legally strike over the issue.

The ISO now writes, “Last September, Chicago teachers held the line in their strike against the city, pushing back the reformers' most drastic demands.”

In fact, while teachers showed great determination, the contract pushed through by the CTU accepted all of Emanuel's demands. CTU President Karen Lewis herself admitted that the final agreement was an austerity contract. The three-year contract included the right of principals to hire and fire teachers, the right to fire non-tenured teachers immediately and dismiss tenured teachers after a year, the lengthening of the school day and year without additional compensation, and the expanded use of standardized test scores in teacher evaluations.

The essential purpose of many of these measures was to make it easier for the school district to fire teachers as they implemented planned school closings.

The ISO closes its article with the claim, “As the

CTU rightly argues, we should oppose *all* closings and stand up against Rahm's scorched-earth war on public education..."

This too is a lie. Lewis made it clear on the second day of the strike that CTU accepted the mayor's plan to shut down schools. The main concern of the CTU leadership was to ensure that school shutdowns be carried out with the collaboration of the union and not unilaterally by CPS.

Lewis told the *Chicago Tribune* September 12, "We understand the whole movement of closing schools and doing it aggressively... we either do this together in some reasonable way or we will always be fighting, and I think the key is that the people that are making these decisions want to make them unilaterally."

In the aftermath of the strike, during a November episode of *Chicago Tonight*, CTU Vice President Sharkey said nothing to oppose what he termed the "unpopular policy" of school shutdowns, and instead advised that it need be carried out in an orderly fashion. "There's no point in closing schools until there is a plan in place."

Speaking at a union organized rally earlier that month, Sharkey said, "What the school board should do is take a year off. Have a moratorium on school closings and have a real process where there is a study of plans and the people who are part of the coalition here, the parents, the community and the teachers of Chicago have real input into what happens to our schools."

This "real input" has been a series of sham hearings on the school closures and consolidations, where thousands of parents, teachers and students have voiced their opposition to the closures.

On February 11, CTU president Karen Lewis released a video announcing CTU would be sending organizers to assist those displaced by school closures. She admonished teachers—many who will be losing their jobs, and many more whose teaching conditions will become much more difficult after the closures—to support the CTU's efforts to do so.

As always, the ISO talks out of both sides of its mouth. When it writes, "[O]n this issue, there's not even the proverbial dime's worth of difference between Republicans and Democrats," it seeks to present itself as an opponent of the Democrats. In fact, the organization operates entirely within the framework of

this big business party. school

The attacks on public education place the mass of the population in direct conflict with the political establishment in the city of Chicago and in Washington. The ISO is part of this establishment. The organization speaks on behalf of a relatively privileged section of the middle class—including trade union executives—who seek to "earn" their position by proving their usefulness to the ruling class.

Emanuel's ability to proceed with the shut down of schools is a product of the collaboration of the unions and the ISO. Throughout the teachers strike last year, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned of precisely this outcome. A struggle to oppose these closures must be based on a fight against them, through the independent political mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist program.

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