

Mass layoffs begin in Chicago Public Schools

By Alexander Fangmann
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On June 14, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) announced the first wave of layoffs—a total of 663 teachers, teaching assistants, and aides—as part of the impending closure of 50 schools. This is only the beginning, however, with more layoffs of teachers and other CPS employees in the works as Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the Democratic Party spearhead an attack on public education in America’s third largest city.

The layoffs could not have occurred without the crucial assistance of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and their supporters in the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization (ISO). The path was cleared for Emanuel to announce the largest mass school closings in US history by the CTU, which shut down last year’s strike by 26,000 teachers in order to prevent it from developing into a political fight against Emanuel and Obama’s school “reform” agenda of replacing public schools with for-profit charters.

Of the 663 layoffs already announced, 420 are teachers. Teachers targeted in the first wave include both untenured and tenured teachers. The new teacher evaluation system—one of the central gains won by Emanuel and a centerpiece of Obama’s “Race to the Top” program—eliminates tenure protection for veteran teachers and opens the door for their replacement with lower-paid inexperienced instructors.

During the teachers’ strike the Socialist Equality Party warned that the CTU was collaborating with the city to carry out school closings and mass layoffs, and that its only concern was guaranteeing that the CTU be part of the school restructuring process. It has since been rewarded with the opportunity to collect dues from teachers employed by the one of the city’s largest charter operators.

CTU President Karen Lewis and vice-president Jesse Sharkey, a leading ISO member, were well aware that the “recall provision” in the new contract would do nothing to prevent the layoffs. The provision mandates

that half of the teachers employed by the district be formerly laid-off CPS teachers. It also only allows teachers laid off due to school closings to follow students to their new schools if there are “available positions.”

According to the teacher evaluation system negotiated with CPS last year, 75 percent of teacher ratings for the first year are comprised of principals’ observations and 25 percent are derived from standardized tests. Through this mechanism, CPS principals are free to target for elimination higher-paid veteran teachers in order to save money. These administrators have also been given the green light to victimize teachers who oppose anti-education policies by maligning their professional competence and destroying future employment prospects in CPS.

Another wave of layoffs will be announced after CPS principals finalize budgets for individual schools, which will fix the number of positions available to the approximately 600 tenured teachers with higher teacher ratings who are eligible to follow their students to new schools. It is likely a majority of these teachers will lose their jobs as a result of this cost cutting and the result will be even larger class sizes.

CPS is implementing a new budgeting system that gives schools a set amount of money per student, rather than the old system, which funded a fixed number of positions per school and paid for most supplies, while allocating a portion for principals to spend at their discretion. The result will be enormous budget cuts at individual schools, and the elimination of teachers and other education and health workers. According to the CTU, some schools are on track to receive cuts of 10 to 25 percent; some are on track for even deeper reductions.

It is expected that a large number of teacher’s aides, bus aides, custodians, clerical workers, administrators and other school staff from the closed schools will also

be laid off due to the budget cuts. A post on the CTU website noted that school librarian positions are being targeted for elimination at many of these schools. Additionally, 100 CPS administrative staff will be laid off.

In addition to the layoffs stemming from school closures and budget cuts, 192 CPS workers will lose their jobs due to school “turnarounds.” This includes 125 teachers, 91 of them tenured, as well as 20 teacher assistants, 27 clerical, custodial and security staff, and 20 bus aides. In a “turnaround” an entire school’s staff is fired, and control of the school is handed over to a charter school operator, the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL), the exclusive school management company for “turned around” schools

Nor will these layoffs, totaling around 2,000, be the end of the attacks on public education. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett announced on June 10 a five-year plan with five strategic pillars—the last one being “sound fiscal, operational, and accountability systems” which indicates more cuts are being prepared. Emanuel is also working with legislators on a plan to cut public employee pension and retirement health care benefits.

The CTU and ISO are now attempting to channel the widespread public hostility toward Emanuel and the Democratic Party back into the safe channel of big-business electoral politics. The political establishment—which is dominated in Chicago and Illinois by the Democratic Party—has been discredited by its repeated attacks on public education, as well as on the jobs, pay, pensions and benefits of public sector workers. Emanuel, Obama’s former White House chief of staff, has a 40 percent disapproval rating—up 11 points over the last year.

In order to contain this anger, the CTU and ISO are floating the idea of backing an “independent” candidate for the February 2015 mayoral elections, with the ISO’s Lee Sustar writing in *Socialist Worker*, that “a teacher—or another unionist or community activist—would be an ideal figure.”

Outlining the motivation for this at a meeting the CTU held to train deputy voter registrars, union president Karen Lewis said, “We need to figure out a way to change the hearts and minds of the voters, the people to whom the mayor is accountable.” She later stated, “we have to let people know your vote means

something.”

Concerned that workers are drawing the conclusion that they can get nothing from the Democrats, the CTU, which has long been aligned with such Democratic Party figures as Jesse Jackson, is seeking to promote the illusions that the “right” Democrat will be answerable to workers instead of the wealthy. This is a fraud designed to block the development of an independent political movement of the working class against the Democrats.

The CTU and the ISO do not speak for teachers or any other section of the working class. Instead, they represent an upper middle class social layer, which looks to the Democratic Party to defend the interests of the union bureaucracy, whose ranks pseudo-left outfits like the ISO have increasingly joined.

The prerequisite for any genuine fight by teachers and all defenders of public education is a break from the CTU and other unions, and the development of struggle against the two-corporate backed parties and the profit system they defend.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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