

The political issues in the Chicago mayoral election

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A runoff election for mayor is being held today in Chicago, the third-largest city in the United States. The contest is between two Democratic Party candidates: incumbent Rahm Emanuel, a close political associate of President Obama, and Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, a long-time Democratic Party operative who is being promoted as a supposed “left” candidate.

The election has national and international significance. The basic issues facing working people in Chicago—the government-corporate assault on jobs and living standards, the closure of schools and decimation of public education, the rising tide of police violence and repression—confront workers and young people across the country. The bipartisan nature of these attacks is underscored by the political monopoly long exercised by the Democratic Party in Chicago.

Today’s election presents in sharp relief the bankruptcy of all political programs and perspectives that are oriented to the Democratic Party. The crisis in Chicago poses the need for the working class to break with the two parties of big business and mount an independent political struggle directed against the financial oligarchy and its profit system.

There is growing disaffection from the entire corporate-controlled political system and mounting signs of renewed class struggle. That is why elements within the political establishment and sections of the trade union bureaucracy, backed by the various fake-left organizations that orbit the Democratic Party, launched the phony “populist” campaign of Garcia. Its purpose is to head off an independent movement of the working class.

Mayor Emanuel embodies the foulest characteristics of American politics in general and the Democratic Party in particular. An operative in the Clinton administration, Emanuel made millions as an investment banker before returning to the White House

as Obama’s chief of staff.

As mayor, Emanuel has pursued the same policies in Chicago as Obama on the national level. He has presided over the closure of 50 schools, attacks on the jobs and pensions of teachers and public employees, and a wave of police violence against youth and working people. The money siphoned from essential services has funded tax cuts and other subsidies for corporations and wealthy investors.

Emanuel’s failure to win 50 percent of the vote in the first round of the election, held in February, revealed the deep hostility in the working class to his right-wing policies. It was also a rebuff to Obama, who campaigned for his former aide in southside Chicago.

The Chicago Teachers Union and the Service Employees International Union have spearheaded the campaign of Garcia. It is a measure of the right-wing character of the Democratic Party that the best they could come up as the supposedly “progressive” face of the party was a longtime functionary of the Democratic machine in the city. In the final days of the campaign, Garcia has sought to capitalize on a report of rising homicides in Chicago by stepping up his denunciations of Emanuel for refusing to hire 1,000 more cops. This has been accompanied by attacks on the incumbent mayor for being fiscally irresponsible.

This has not prevented the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and other pseudo-left organizations from either directly promoting Garcia or promoting the unions that back his campaign. Like their counterparts in the Syriza government in Greece, the ISO and other middle class groups that base themselves on racial and gender politics smell the opportunity to get positions of power and influence and improve their financial situation. Their task is to spout occasional “left” phrases while helping maintain the political stranglehold of the Democratic Party on the working

class.

It is impossible to halt the attack on working class living standards and rights outside of a struggle to build a political movement of the working class that is independent of the capitalist politicians and directed against the capitalist system. The Democratic and Republican politicians endlessly proclaim that there is no money to meet pressing social needs. But the ranks of multi-millionaires and billionaires continue to grow, along with the obscene levels of wealth they control. These are the paymasters of both corporate-controlled parties.

The fortunes of the Wall Street parasites and corporate CEOs must be seized and put to good use providing decent-paying jobs and building schools and affordable housing. The corporations and banks must be nationalized and turned into publicly owned and democratically controlled entities, so that the economy can be run for the benefit of the many rather than the profit of a few.

There is a massive working class in Chicago, with rich traditions of industrial and political struggle dating back to the fight for the eight-hour day in the 1880s, the Haymarket Martyrs and the first international May Day demonstrations. The mass struggles of the 1930s led to the formation of industrial unions in auto, steel, trucking, meatpacking and other industries.

These organizations, however, were subordinated by the union leadership to the Democratic Party, undercutting any possibility of a radical restructuring of social relations. Over the last four decades, the pro-capitalist unions have suppressed working class resistance to the explosive growth of social inequality.

The 2012 strike by 29,000 Chicago teachers was betrayed by the leadership of the teachers union, which includes a prominent member of the ISO. The strike was nonetheless a sign of the reemergence of open class conflict in the city. This was part of a broader trend, reflected more recently in widespread protests against police brutality and the strike by oil refinery workers.

The Socialist Equality Party is fighting to build a political movement to unite every section of the working class—black, white and immigrant, employed and unemployed, young and old—in a common struggle to take political power and carry out the socialist reorganization of economic and political life. The

central lesson of the Chicago mayoral election is the need to build the SEP and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.

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