

As union heads scramble to settle

Chicago teachers set strike date

By Kristina Betinis
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On September 28, the Chicago Teachers Union delegates set an October 11 walkout date if no agreement is reached with Chicago Public Schools before then. Chicago teachers have been without a contract now for 15 months, despite the union leaders' reassurances that negotiations are going well behind closed doors.

For more than a year, teachers have been threatened almost monthly with layoffs, pay cuts, and school budget cuts, amid state and municipal budget crises that are being used to drive down spending and condition public sector workers to accept further cuts. One thousand teachers were laid off in August.

A second strike authorization vote in 10 months was taken last week in the schools, with a reported 95.6 percent approval and 90 percent turnout of Chicago's 30,000 teachers and staff.

An earlier decision to strike was made in December 2015, with about the same level of support as the recent vote. The following month, the CTU bargaining committee was handed a tentative agreement endorsed by CTU negotiators and President Karen Lewis. But details of the contract were leaked, and in response to an outpouring of teacher opposition to the concessions—including a de facto 7 percent pay cut to cover pension costs, and hikes in health care costs—the committee was forced to vote it down. According to CPS, no substantial changes in the offer have been made in the nearly 10 months since.

CTU President Lewis and Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization, have pledged to conclude an agreement on the terms demanded by the Rahm Emanuel administration in order to avoid a strike. The "sweetener" CTU leaders say they are trying get from the city is a promise of additional funds to the district

from the city's tax increment financing (TIF) districts.

After the walkout date was set Wednesday evening, Sharkey spoke to the media from a position of abject prostration: "We're asking for some simple assurances that the public schools themselves will be defended against further cuts."

That same day, Lewis attended a school board meeting, where she reportedly appealed to board members on the basis of a shared set of problems and the need for a quick settlement before asking for a commitment of TIF funds to stave off further cuts.

What the experiences of teachers have shown is that guarantees to fund schools from the administration of Mayor Emanuel, who has publicly committed himself to the corporate "reform" of public education, are worthless. What teachers must also recognize is their class enemy in the CTU, which is collaborating with Emanuel.

At every turn the CTU has blocked teachers from mounting a fight, while engaging in secret negotiations with the Emanuel administration behind the backs of the teachers and the working class. Amid threats of thousands of teacher layoffs through the spring, the union pulled a stunt one-day walkout on April Fools' Day, widely criticized by teachers for being an unserious and ineffective response to the city's demands for cuts.

The union's efforts to block a fight by teachers to defend public education are of a piece with the CTU leadership's entire record, going back to the betrayal of the teachers strike 2012 and its support in 2011 for legislation eroding tenure and other workplace rights.

While negotiations have been ongoing, teachers complain they are not kept informed and have not seen any contract language.

Eighth grade teacher Jim Macchione expressed his

anger with the blackout in the negotiations to local public television station WTTW: “My complaint all along has been to treat the teachers like the professionals you claim that we are. Even if they say no—like with the contract the BBT [Big Bargaining Team] voted ‘no’ on—the members should be able to read the contract. Most of us have master’s degrees, most of us know how to read a document. So even if the Big Bargaining Team voted unanimously for it to be ‘no’, why isn’t there more transparency?”

The central aim of the CTU is to contain this anger and prevent it from developing into a political conflict with the Democratic Party, which has spearheaded the attacks on public education in Chicago and at the national level for the last eight years. The CTU and its parent American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has endorsed the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

One of the most grotesque features of Democratic Party politics in the CTU is its constant use of racist demagoguery to cover the anti-working class policies of privatization of public resources, above all public education with its 3 million teachers nationwide.

The CTU and its pseudo-left backers paint the attack on public education as an issue of racism against “black and brown” teachers and students, in Chicago and elsewhere, even as the corporate “reform” of education has been led at the national level by the first black president, who began his political career in Chicago, and whose Race to the Top program has undermined public education in major cities all over the country.

In recent weeks concessions contracts have been rammed through for teachers in Detroit and Cleveland. A contract was reached after nearly a day of secret negotiations in Cleveland at the end of August, just ahead of a planned visit by Hillary Clinton. In Detroit, where teachers had defied their union in a series of sickouts, AFT President Randi Weingarten was herself intimately involved in the negotiation of the contract with the school district’s emergency manager Steven Rhodes. In both Detroit and Cleveland, what little has been pledged to teachers in the agreements is dependent on tax hikes that affect the majority of the population, rather than targeting the profits of the super-rich.

Teachers who are looking for a way out of the traps

set by the Emanuel administration and the Chicago Teachers Union must build their own organizations of struggle, separate from and opposed to the CTU, the Democratic Party and the capitalist system they defend.

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