

Chicago public school teachers vote to approve merger with charter teachers union

By Kristina Betinis
12 February 2018

On January 25, Chicago Public Schools teachers voted to merge their union, the Chicago Teachers Union (American Federation of Teachers Local 1), with the charter school teachers union, Chicago Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff (AFT Local 4343), which has less than 1,000 members.

The merger will bring about a quarter of Chicago charter school teachers into the CTU, according to the head of the charter union, Chris Baehrend. The CTU reports that it has a membership of 20,000 teachers and staff, a precipitous drop from 28,000 in 2010.

The CTU reported that 70.65 percent voted in favor and 29.35 percent voted against the merger. After the decision was announced, some teachers protested on social media about a lack of transparency in the voting process, while others questioned the legitimacy of the vote.

Because of the CTU's complicity with Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel's school "reform" and privatization efforts, nearly one-third of district teachers and staff rejected the merger. Many Chicago teachers fear that the merger will not bring charter teachers to parity with their public school district counterparts and will instead be used to lower the pay of district teachers. They also see the merger as facilitating the decades-long expansion of lucrative, privately-run charter schools at the expense of public education.

Charter teachers earn significantly less—as much as \$20,000 per year—than district teachers and have even less control over their working conditions. In Chicago, charter teachers and staff have made a determined effort to secure better wages and conditions, taking strike votes and seeking to establish pay and benefits that approach parity with district teachers.

The Chicago Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff

(ChiACTS) was established by the AFT in 2007 in order to bring the growing number of charter teachers under its control and ensure that their fight for better teaching and learning conditions did not get out of the control of the Democratic Party, which has led the school privatization effort in Chicago and nationwide over the past decade.

With the complicity of the CTU, charter schools have proliferated, placing additional pressures on the dues base of the two AFT locals in Chicago and creating enrollment problems for existing charter schools themselves. This is in part what is behind the merger.

When the union merger was first proposed in early 2017, CTU President Karen Lewis declared, "Charter schools are here; they're not going anywhere." This signaled the complete capitulation of the CTU, following the lead of its parent union, the AFT, to the charter and privatization movement, which has been carried out by both political parties in an effort to undermine public education and create profit opportunities for private investors.

The merger plan met with resistance from teachers last year. A scheduled CTU House of Delegates vote set for November did not have a sufficient number of delegates present to proceed.

Last year's Closed by Choice report noted that 108 new charter schools opened just between 2000 and 2015, and 62 percent of them were located in areas that experienced high population loss of school-aged children, placing increased pressure on both district and existing charter schools that were already experiencing lower enrollments.

Lower school enrollments in recent years are primarily due to an exodus of working class and middle class households—African-American families, in particular—out of the south and west sides of the city.

This process has been driven by the social cleansing policies of the Emanuel administration, which has encouraged rising rents and led a frontal assault on schools, social services and public transit provision, all of which contributed to a sharp spike in gang violence.

School closures are on the Emanuel administration's agenda again this year, when a partial moratorium on shutdowns will come to an end. As many as 100 new school closures loom amid the further expansion of privately-run charters. In this year alone, the impoverished neighborhood of Englewood could see five schools close. WBEZ reporter Sara Karp stated in January that the new Chicago Schools CEO Janice Jackson "*will* close schools." She noted that there is a list of more than 100 Chicago public schools identified as only half full and targeted for closing.

Both AFT locals are attempting to limit their respective losses, regardless of which schools—district or charter—are ultimately selected for closure. The unions' calculations are entirely self-interested and have nothing to do with defending public education or teachers.

Far from offering teachers a way to defend public education, decent conditions or pay, the CTU is collaborating with the Emanuel administration and charter expansion. This is why many teachers felt they could not support the merger.

Teachers are determined to find a means to defend public education, establish decent teaching and learning conditions, and win improved wages and benefits, but no such fight can be mounted within the framework of the AFT, which functions as an adjunct of the school authorities, the city government and the bankers and corporate heads they serve (See: "Growing numbers of US teachers abandon unions").

Teachers need to form their own organizations, rank-and-file committees, opposed to the AFT and its partner, the Democratic Party, whose program of school privatization is little different from that of the Trump administration and its billionaire Education Secretary Betsy DeVos.

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