

Chicago charter school teachers vote overwhelmingly to authorize strike

By Kristina Betinis
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Last week, teachers at four charter school operators in Chicago voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike. Teachers at Acero (formerly UNO Schools), which operates 15 schools, and Chicago International Charter Schools, which operates four schools, approved a strike with 98 percent and 96 percent support of voting teachers, respectively. Civitas Education Partners and Quest Management approved a walkout later in the week.

The teachers seek better pay, smaller class sizes, special education resources, increased wages for the paraprofessionals and longer parental leave. Chicago Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff (ChiACTS), which merged this year with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), covers teachers in 34 Chicago charters, but each school is under a separate contract.

Nineteen charter schools in all may hold votes to authorize a strike. No strike date has been announced.

The strike authorizations come amid a growing wave of struggles in the US and internationally. In a year where teachers in the US have struck against the decades of bipartisan attacks on public education, which have been aided and abetted by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA) and their state and local affiliates, the conflict between educators, the two corporate controlled political parties, and the unions that falsely claim to represent teachers has reached a new stage.

Rank-and-file teachers walked out earlier this year in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states to oppose low pay, decades of funding cuts and unacceptable teaching and learning conditions. The statewide walkouts initially erupted outside of the control of the unions and generated popular support. In the end, however, the NEA and AFT, with the critical backing of a host of ostensibly “socialist” organizations whose members have gained prominent positions inside the teacher unions, were able to corral the strikes and smother

them. None of the issues teachers courageously fought for have been resolved.

In the past, the CTU had postured as an opponent of the expansion of charter schools. This changed after the CTU betrayed the 2012 walkout of nearly 30,000 educators and agreed to a deal with Mayor Rahm Emanuel, which accelerated the closing of 49 public schools and the layoff of thousands of educators, and led to a lengthened school day and eroded teacher tenure. This sellout of the strike also paved the way for another wave of expansion of charter schools.

In return, an AFT affiliate—ChiACTS—was allowed to organize at the city’s largest charter school operation, and the CTU colluded with the mayor in the “orderly” closing of the 49 elementary schools. Once the AFT got the franchise to take dues from miserably paid charter school teachers, the CTU dropped any pretense of struggle against the expansion of charters.

Former president Karen Lewis and then-vice president Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the International Socialist Organization, played the leading role in the sellout of the nine-day strike in 2012, blocking the emerging movement of educators not only against Emanuel but the Obama administration, which spearheaded the attack on teachers and public education.

In September, Sharkey quietly took over the CTU presidency from Lewis, who has brain cancer. This will mean a substantial increase in income for Sharkey. As union president, he will make around \$155,000 in salary (what Lewis made) in addition to the \$20,000 he receives as a trustee of the CTU Foundation, a non-profit used to funnel money to “community organizations.” Sharkey will also get a check as vice president of the Illinois Federation of Teachers, which paid Lewis \$67,622 for the position, according to the union’s 2017 filing with the US Labor Department. In other words, Sharkey will have an income in the top 2 percent of the American population,

nearly five times the salary of a public-school teacher.

Charter school teachers are significantly lower paid on average than other public school teachers, with pay often \$10,000-15,000 per year less and sometimes as much as \$20,000 less than a district teacher. While collaborating with both parties to dismantle public education, the unions are eyeing millions in potential dues from charter school teachers.

As of 2017, more than 65,000 students attend charters in Chicago, up from around 35,000 in 2010. The number of unionized charters in Illinois, which are heavily concentrated in the city of Chicago, has also increased from nine to 32 over the same seven years.

“We deserve the same pay and benefits for doing the equal work that’s done across the rest of the school system in the city of Chicago,” Sharkey said after the Acero schools vote was announced. These words should be taken as a warning by public school teachers who could very well see starting wages and conditions “equalized” downward with the help of the CTU.

As Wall Street’s own education model, charter schools allow investor corporations to buy up distressed public property for cheap and operate their own schools within the public school districts, using public funds to educate students along their own plan, drawing students and funding away from the public district schools.

Charter schools have been central to the bipartisan attack on the starved national public education system, cynically termed “school reform” under Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama. Despite an official cap on the number of charter schools allowed by law in Chicago, the number of charters in the city exploded under the leadership of Arne Duncan (later to become President Obama’s Secretary of Education), and Mayor Richard Daley.

After Emanuel’s re-election in 2015, CTU moved its alliance with the Democratic mayor out into the open, while working out plans behind the scenes for even deeper cuts. Immediately after Emanuel’s reelection, Sharkey told the *New York Times*, “Rahm in 2011 is not Rahm in 2015. He really had to get off his high horse to win.”

That year, anger over the mayor’s austerity measures came together with popular outrage over Emanuel’s cover-up of the police murder of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald, and CTU tried to chloroform teachers with the slogan of “One Chicago” and promotion of the Democratic Party, as teachers were being threatened with 5,000 layoffs and a major pay cut.

Then, in early 2016, CTU leaders were caught red-handed trying to push through a contract offer that would have slashed teacher pay and pensions, reduced staffing levels and increased for-profit charter schools in the nation’s third largest school district. That effort failed only because rank-and-file teachers—who had been working without a contract since June 2015—learned the details of the secret agreement, and the CTU’s 40-member bargaining committee, fearing a rebellion and defeat of the sellout, unanimously voted to reject the deal on February 1, 2016. Making clear that the CTU was still preparing to push through an agreement, Jesse Sharkey said about cuts to teacher pensions, “Everything is on the table.”

The CTU called a bogus one-day strike on April 1, 2016 to let teachers blow off steam and then proceeded to push through another concessions deal, which increased out-of-pocket health care and pension costs, particularly for new teachers.

To fight the district, the city government and the powerful corporate and financial forces behind them, charter school teachers certainly need to be organized, but they cannot take a step forward through the CTU and its affiliated unions. Instead, both charter and public school teachers should elect rank-and-file committees in every school and community, independent of the unions, to organize a real fight to defend teachers and the right to high quality public education.

The egalitarian and democratic principles of public education are incompatible with the enormous levels of social inequality in capitalist America. A powerful political movement of the working class must be built to break the grip of the plutocracy and carry out the socialist transformation of economic life, including the redistribution of wealth to address social needs.

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