

Chicago charter teacher strike continues, as unions announce backing for Democratic machine politician

By Kristina Betinis
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Teachers at fifteen Acero Charter Schools, one of more than 34 charter school operators in the city of Chicago, completed their third day on strike Thursday. Pickets are scheduled to resume early Friday morning.

About 500 suburban Geneva, Illinois teachers have also completed their third day on strike. A large rally of teachers, parents and students was held on Wednesday.

The Acero Charter School teachers in Chicago are demanding a reduction in class sizes, increased classroom resources and pay increases to bring their compensation and conditions closer to teachers and paraprofessionals in Chicago Public Schools (CPS)—who are themselves underpaid and overworked. Clerks and support staff at Acero do not have scheduled pay increases and are demanding them. Teachers are also asking for assurance that Acero students and families will not be turned over to ICE without a court order.

Other charter school teachers have authorized strikes in recent weeks, including those at Chicago International Charter Schools, Civitas Education Partners, and Quest Management.

The United Educators for Justice union, which merged this year with the CTU, is keeping teachers in the dark about negotiations, is limiting demands to paltry changes, and is isolating the Acero teachers from other teachers throughout the city. On Wednesday, the CTU announced its endorsement of Toni Preckwinkle, the longtime president of the Cook County Board of Commissioners and fixture of the Democratic Party establishment in the city, which has overseen the attack on public education.

WSWS reporters spoke with teachers picketing in front of their schools in the early morning Thursday.

Caroline teaches 7th and 8th grade science at Acero Clemente in Galewood. “I have four science classes, two seventh grade and two eighth grade classes. I try to do as

many hands-on labs as I can, but with 32 students it really limits us.

“I usually bring papers home to grade. That can be 2-3 hours a night. They don't pay me to be here early, but I have to in order to have everything ready that I need. I need to be here 45 minutes early and stay 45 minutes late and take additional work home, and they don't compensate me for that.

“The number one thing that I'm out here for is smaller class sizes,” Caroline added. “We are not even demanding a number. We want Acero to discuss lowering class size, and they won't even discuss it. Most of these people making these decisions, they were never teachers, so it's frustrating that they are telling us class size doesn't matter. The other issue is fair compensation. We had nine teachers leave last year because they could make more somewhere else. We want equal pay so that teachers stay here.”

Caroline gave a detailed explanation of the overcrowding problem in her classroom. “The National Science Teachers Association recommends 24 [student in a class] for science labs for safety. Some of the 8th grade kids tower over me, so having 32 bodies in the room when we are doing labs is a safety concern for moving around the room. Getting down to 30, 28 at this point would be great.”

Caroline also explained that teachers were not aware of the status of negotiations: “All I know is what's being put out; Acero is dragging their feet on the big issues. There's some movement on the little things, but the big issues that we are out here for, I don't think there's much movement.”

Judith coordinates the office at Acero Las Casas in Pilsen. She spoke with the WSWS about the dangerous and exploitative conditions at Acero, the product of

decades of bipartisan “school reform.”

“For the four and a half years I’ve been here, I’ve been alone for two and a half years in the office. When I talk to other schools in the neighborhood or CPS schools, there’s more than one person in the office. My job is very difficult. I basically run the entire office, plus finance, plus field trips, plus food, special events, attendance, files, records, transfers, everything that has to do with the office. I’m the nurse as well.

“I am basically five to ten positions rolled into one person. Try to compact that into an eight-hour day; it’s impossible. My days do not end at 4:15. I leave almost every day at 6, 6:30, 7, and I have a part-time job. I work an additional twenty hours at a retail store to help with my finances, and I’m still barely making ends meet.”

United Educators for Justice has deliberately kept its proposals as vague and minimal as possible, asking only for some reduction in class sizes and some reduction in work hours or rise in pay.

The main aim of the unions is to contain the anger of teachers throughout the city and prevent a movement that would bring teachers and other workers into conflict with the Democratic Party, which runs the city and has presided over the attack on public education. The Democrats, with the backing of the CTU, have led “school reform” that has closed district schools, laid off teachers, and expanded charters.

In 2012, the CTU shut down a nine-day strike of CPS teachers, paving the way for Mayor Rahm Emanuel to escalate the attack on public education.

On Wednesday, the CTU house of delegates voted to endorse Preckwinkle for mayor, which was followed by endorsements from other unions. After hugging CTU President and International Socialist Organization (ISO) member Jesse Sharkey in front of the news cameras Thursday, Preckwinkle stated, “Today’s endorsements reflect a coalition built from a shared commitment to working families.”

Preckwinkle has proposed various education measures, including a return to an elected school board, a freeze on new charter schools and public-school closings for four years or her first term, and “real progressive revenue” for neighborhood schools.

The proposal for a temporary halt to school closings clearly leaves open the possibility that more will be shut down. Preckwinkle has a record of advocating budget cuts, pension “reform” and other regressive measures.

Preckwinkle has been courting the support of the unions and the pseudo-left, including the Democratic Socialists

of America faction of the Democratic Party and the ISO. She has stated in recent weeks that she will support a change to Illinois laws, including an end to the current ban on rent control (which involves changing the Illinois state constitution), and changes to income tax structure.

This is not the first time CTU has attempted to back Preckwinkle for mayor. In 2015, Preckwinkle was asked to run against Emanuel and declined. Karen Lewis—then the CTU president—announced her plan to run but pulled out after a cancer diagnosis. The CTU then backed Preckwinkle’s floor speaker, Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, for mayor and provided generous financial support.

Asked if Preckwinkle would get the millions CTU gave to the Garcia campaign in 2015, Sharkey demurred: “I would say there’s no way we’re going to match dollars with the corporate-funded candidates, that have big law offices and work for big business.”

Far from representing the interests of working-class people in the city of Chicago, the unions represent major institutional interests within the Democratic Party and the upper middle class and are seeking to secure their interests in a Preckwinkle mayoralty. These are the same unions that suppressed a struggle against Emanuel’s attack on education.

Given Preckwinkle’s decades-long record as a Democratic Party politician, including serving as the official head of a party that has overseen the dismantling of public education and social services, her posturing as a supporter of education is so much empty bluster. The CTU, in backing her, only demonstrates its own hostility to the working class and the teachers it claims to represent.

A WSWS reporting team contributed to this report.

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