

Chicago charter teachers strike enters second week

By Kristina Betinis
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The strike by 175 teachers at four Civitas campuses, part of Chicago International Charter School (CICS), has entered its second week with teachers and staff seeking raises, smaller class sizes, a reduction in healthcare costs and more support staff.

The strike began February 5 after talks broke down over teachers' demand for an eight percent raise in the first year. CICS says it would accept the proposal only by eliminating crucial support staff, like social workers and counselors. According to the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), negotiations continued throughout the week last week. The schools have been kept open by administrators with students doing online activities.

In ongoing negotiations, the CTU is calling on CICS to use "some portion" of its \$36 million set aside to support instruction to meet teacher demands, but no figure nor any number of counselors or support staff has been publicly advertised. A spokesperson for CICS told the *Chicago Tribune* last Friday that the length of the teachers' workday and year, and whether the maximum class size of 28 or 29 students, are also at issue.

Earlier this week, CTU reported a "subject matter" hearing on charter management where CTU officers and staff gathered to testify to city officials about allegations that CICS is siphoning off millions of dollars a year from school communities.

The four schools—ChicagoQuest, Northtown, Wrightwood and Ralph Ellison schools—are managed by Civitas Education Partners and have an enrollment of about 2,200 students. This walkout is the third strike of charter teachers in the US; the first took place at Acero Charter Schools, also in Chicago, last December. The second was largely a stunt by the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) union as it was preparing to sell out last month's strike by 33,000 public school

teachers. Charter schools are publicly-funded by taxpayers but privately managed.

Striking CICS teachers said police had been called to the picket at CICS Wrightwood twice Thursday and Friday by Civitas management, though there was no reason for any police presence. Teachers are also charging that they are being intimidated on the picket lines by Chicago police.

Teachers have also spoken out on social media to demand CTU not accept any class size "loopholes." Last December, the CTU shut down the four-day strike at 15 Acero Charter Schools, presenting as a "victory" an agreement that included paltry raises and a reduction on class size limits by just one student or 31 students per room. Teachers have complained that these sizes are still unmanageable and sometimes dangerous.

The CTU, its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and its rival, the National Education Association (NEA), have abandoned anything but rhetorical opposition to the expansion of charter schools, which drain students, space and resources from traditional public schools. Having colluded with the Democratic Party and Republicans in the shutdown of public schools and mass layoffs of hundreds of thousands of teachers over the last decades, the unions see miserably paid charter school teachers as a new source of dues income.

After the 2008 financial crash, the AFT and NEA colluded with the Obama administration, which used the Race to the Top federal funding scheme to give cash strapped school districts a financial incentive to lift caps on charter schools. The number of students enrolled in charters nearly doubled under Obama.

In 2012, 24,000 Chicago teachers struck against the corporate-driven "school reform" agenda and the demand of Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Obama's former

chief of staff, for the shutdown of scores of public schools. The CTU shut down and betrayed the strike, paving the way for the closure of 50 schools. In return, the teacher unions were given a green light to unionize the UNO Charter School Network, the state's largest charter business, with the blessing UNO CEO Juan Rangel, a key political and financial backer of Emanuel. After Rangel was forced to resign over a corruption scandal over the misuse of state grant money, the UNO schools were rebranded as Acero.

The CTU president is Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), which has increasingly been integrated into the leadership of teacher unions in Los Angeles, Seattle and other cities. The ISO has played a chief role in trying to prop up the discredited teacher unions, providing union bureaucrats with left-sounding rhetoric about "social justice" and the "schools students deserve," while they collaborate with the very same Democrats that are spearheading the attack on public education.

The CTU openly used the Acero strike as a backdrop for their endorsement of Cook County Democratic Party Chair and Cook County Board Chair Toni Preckwinkle, who is running for mayor. The union is carrying out the same cynical ploy in the CICS strike, using picketing teachers as extras in their campaign for Preckwinkle. Speaking from a CICS picket line last week, CTU vice president Stacy Davis Gates praised a recent Preckwinkle campaign ad, telling the *Chicago Tribune*, "You saw the commercial. She basically said she's our tribe."

If teachers are to fight the escalating attack on public education, including fighting for a 40 percent raise, a sharp reduction in class sizes and the conversion of all charters back to public schools, they will have to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. This means organizing rank-and-file committees across Chicago and suburban districts, which are independent of the unions and the Democratic Party, to unite with teachers in Denver, California and around the country, and other sections of workers, including autoworkers, UPS workers and Amazon workers. The vast improvement of public education and the eradication of poverty is inextricably linked with the development of a political movement of the working class to seize the fortunes of the super-rich, radically redistribute wealth,

and carry out a socialist reorganization of economic and political life.

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