

Chicago Teachers Union shuts down strike at CICS charter schools

By Alexander Fangmann
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Early Monday morning, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) announced that it reached a tentative agreement with Chicago International Charter Schools (CICS) and was suspending the strike of 175 teachers after nine days, with workers scheduled to return to the classroom on Tuesday.

Displaying the union's contempt for teachers, the CTU informed them by an email sent out at 3 a.m. Monday that the strike had been "suspended" without teachers seeing any contract, let alone voting on one.

Despite hailing the tentative agreement as a "victory," even the terms that have been released show that conditions at the four charter schools, as well as the compensation of teachers and other educators, will remain well below the level at Chicago Public Schools (CPS). This will preserve the profitability of the charter schools.

According to reports, teachers at the four CICS schools managed by Civitas Education Partners (CEP) will see an immediate 8 percent increase in salaries for the first year and pay raises over the course of the contract are said to average 31 percent by its end, though it is likely that the higher percentage raises will only be seen by the lowest paid workers, such as paraprofessionals. It is also unclear whether the agreement by CICS to cover a portion of teachers' pension contributions factors into the reported pay raise.

Although the union and CICS have asserted that teachers will be brought up to the pay level of teachers at CPS by the end of the contract, this is largely because the CTU has collaborated in the lowering of the real wages of CPS teachers.

Starting pay at CICS is just \$44,000 per year, \$8,000 per year less than at CPS district schools. While the union also claims to have won "more affordable health care coverage for families," there will no doubt be substandard benefits.

A new purported lower limit on class sizes is likewise a

complete farce. While the new agreement includes a maximum class size of 28, on par with CPS, the union has said this is a goal, and classes are capped at 30 students. The current maximum class size is 29 but this is routinely ignored and unenforced, just as it is at CPS.

Similar obfuscation is used in relation to supposed wins over the length of the work day for teachers and over the length of the school year. The new agreement reduces the work day by 15 minutes, down from 8 hours, and it reduces the school year from 202 days to 190. However, this is still around two weeks longer than the school day at CPS, underscoring the level of exploitation involved in the charter school industry. Additionally, because teaching time will be unaffected, it is likely that teachers will be forced to do more grading and other teaching tasks at home.

Other provisions of the agreement include a mere week of paid parental leave as well as a so-called "sanctuary school" provision to protect immigrant students, which in reality will do nothing to stop the targeted assault on immigrants being carried out by the Trump administration.

According to the agreement, CICS will now also apparently comply with special education regulations. As a matter of business practice, charter school operators like CICS routinely seek to avoid providing special education services, which involve much higher costs, offloading them to the regular public school system.

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 in Los Angeles as the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) union 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. CICS owns 14 schools, but subcontracts to five different school management companies, including CEP, to actually run them.

Talks broke down after nine months of negotiations over teachers' demands for 8 percent raises in the first year, with CICS insisting that it would be forced to make cuts if it agreed to the pay raise. Indeed, after announcing the agreement, CICS said it would be cutting some staff and administrators, and released a statement, "With the limited funding that is an unfortunate reality in public education, in order to pay for such a significant salary increase, we will be forced to make certain cuts and compromises."

CTU had repeatedly demanded for CICS to use some portion of its \$36 million in reserves to meet teacher demands. In its statement, the union said that CICS was forced to return \$4 million to the classroom, leaving the rest of the \$32 million untouched.

Jen Conant, CTU bargaining team leader and CICS math teacher, said in a video announcement on Monday morning, "We are proud to say CICS had to contribute money to settle this contract. That means we changed the way CICS does business, and they will serve our schools better in the future."

During the strike, it was revealed that after the state's school funding model changed in 2017, CICS increased revenue from \$82 million to \$93 million in just one year, with the largesse spent largely on management. This prompted rebukes from Democratic state legislators, who urged CICS and CEP to come to an agreement with teachers due to concerns that the generosity shown toward charter operators might become a political liability.

During the course of the strike, however, CTU left the CICS teachers isolated and facing CICS and their financial backers alone, deliberately blocking them from linking up with other striking teachers in Chicago or elsewhere, including Los Angeles or Denver, let alone the December strike of teachers at the Acero Charter Schools network.

The CTU shut down that strike after just four days, 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. For the CTU, this is a well-trodden path. In 2012, the CTU shut down a strike of 24,000 CPS teachers, presented the resulting concessions as wins, and paved the way for the unprecedented closure of 50 public schools.

Above all, the CTU is concerned to prove that it is a

reliable partner for the Democratic Party, ensuring that it is not sidelined by the next mayoral administration, no matter the draconian cuts that are on the table. 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.

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.

CICS teachers and staff should demand to see the full contract and sufficient time to study and discuss it before any ratification vote. To fight, charter school teachers need a real organization of their own, not an instrument of the Democratic Party, which has overseen decades of attacks on teachers and public education across the US.

They should begin forming rank-and-file committees to link up their struggle with other teachers, including striking teachers in West Virginia, in Oakland where educators are scheduled to strike Thursday, as well as other workers around the world, including workers in Matamoros, Mexico, Berlin, Germany and elsewhere.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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