

Form rank-and-file strike committees to expand the struggle!

Chicago teachers' strike in danger as CTU maneuvers to shut it down

By Kristina Betinis
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The strike by 32,000 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) educators entered its third school day today. The tens of thousands of striking teachers and staff are fighting for smaller class sizes, increased numbers of critical support staff like librarians, nurses and social workers, and additional funding for the US's third largest school system.

CPS, a centerpiece of the Democratic Party's corporate education "reform" policy, has slashed spending not only on teachers and staff but at every level, resulting in crumbling school buildings and practically nonexistent instructional supplies and resources in a city where social inequality has skyrocketed.

The defense of public education and teachers has enormous support in the working class. However, this struggle's success depends on a clear understanding of what teachers are up against—who are their friends and who are their enemies.

First, the fight to secure the right to public education for everyone, along with a livable income and reliable benefits for themselves, places teachers in direct conflict with the entire political establishment, and in particular the Democratic Party, which dominates Chicago politics.

Chicago's newly elected mayor, Lori Lightfoot, has made clear where her administration stands in relation to the demands of the teachers. "The fact is there is no more money. Period," she has proclaimed. This is absurd in a city and state dominated by the Pritzker family, which has a net worth of \$29 billion.

Additionally, Lightfoot has canceled classes each day of the strike, stating that there would be no make-up days for students. This opens the way for strike days to

be effectively furloughs, days teachers would not be paid. CTU offers no strike pay.

Lightfoot, a corporate attorney and former Mayor Rahm Emanuel's point person for managing the fallout from the police murder of Laquan McDonald and its official cover-up, is continuing the policy of the Emanuel administration. Emanuel, Obama's former chief of staff, was responsible for the destruction of dozens of schools following the shutdown of the 2012 teachers strike.

Emanuel himself was implementing the policy of the Obama administration, with its "Race to the Top" attack on public education, now followed by Trump's reactionary attack on all the social rights of the working class.

Second, teachers confront in the Chicago Teachers Union, and the teachers' unions more broadly, organizations that are determined to smother their fight, channel it behind the Democratic Party and shut it down as quickly as possible. To win the strike, teachers must take it into their own hands, through the formation of rank-and-file strike committees.

The CTU and its president, Jesse Sharkey, are trying to conduct the strike in a manner that will ensure its defeat. Sharkey began the strike with assurances that it would be "short-term." Over the weekend, he responded to the decision of CPS to cancel classes on Monday with a complaint that this announcement was "premature," as a deal could be struck on Sunday.

Any agreement "negotiated" by the CTU on this basis will be one that accepts all the demands of CPS.

Whatever the occasional demagogic rhetoric, the CTU is working closely with Lightfoot and the administration. When Lightfoot was inaugurated in

May, the CTU promoted illusions in her campaign promises for education. Within just a few weeks, the claims that teachers had a “friend” in Lightfoot had been exposed as lies.

The CTU is following a well-worn pattern. In the powerful Chicago teachers’ strike of 2012, it was right at the point when the strike challenged the Democratic Party’s pro-business “school reform” policy and threatened Obama’s reelection campaign that the CTU ended the walkout (under the leadership of Karen Lewis, with Sharkey as vice president).

A concessions contract was imposed that prepared the way for mass school closures, layoffs, funding cuts and the expansion of charters. In return for its services, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the CTU’s parent organization, was allowed to unionize the lower-paid charter schoolteachers.

The AFT, along with the National Education Association (NEA), has played the lead role in isolating and shutting down the series of teacher strikes over the past two years and imposing the austerity demands of both big-business parties. In West Virginia, where the teachers walked out in 2018 against the union and the local and state governments, charter schools were recently made legal by the Democratic governor.

Rank-and-file strike committees, democratically controlled by the teachers themselves, must take control of the strike and develop it into a broader struggle to defend public education and oppose the dictates of the ruling elite.

This would mean an immediate appeal to all sections of the working class to support their fight, including uniting the 48,000 GM autoworkers who have been on strike for more than a month. The autoworkers currently confront the efforts of the United Auto Workers to shut down their struggle on the basis of a contract that paves the way for a massive restructuring of the auto industry.

Third, teachers are engaged in a fight against the capitalist system. Why is it that the most basic social rights, including the right to public education, are sacrificed while ever greater sums of money are funneled into the pockets of the corporate and financial elite? This is capitalism.

The conditions in Chicago Public Schools are the product of a decades-long social counterrevolution, during which both Democrats and Republicans have

facilitated the destruction of jobs, wages and social programs. Following the 2008 economic crisis, the Obama administration oversaw the largest transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich in US history. This is now being intensified by the Trump administration.

The working class has begun to fight back. The walkout in Chicago is part of a global wave of teachers’ struggles over the last two years. This is itself part of the growth of the class struggle more broadly, including autoworkers in the US and mass demonstrations and strikes in Ecuador, Lebanon, Chile, France, the UK and many other countries.

The success of this struggle requires a new strategy. Chicago teachers should not sit back and wait for the inevitable betrayal being prepared by the CTU. Form rank-and-file committees at every school to discuss a strategy to win this strike! Turn the strike by teachers into a broader counteroffensive of the entire working class against social inequality and the corporate oligarchy!

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