

The attack on public education in Chicago

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The announcement of plans in Chicago, Illinois to shut down 61 elementary and middle schools marks a new stage in the assault on public education and the social counterrevolution in America.

It is the largest single school closure announcement in US history. In the latest phase of school shutdowns, some 13 percent of primary schools in the nation's third-largest district will be closed, affecting 30,000 students and laying off some 1,000 teachers. These cuts will produce higher class sizes and greater strains on the schools that stay open, and four percent of all teachers in the city will immediately lose their jobs.

The ultimate aim is the privatization of the entire public education system. Six of the schools targeted in this round of closures face "turnaround"—with all teachers and staff fired, and control handed over to the Academy for Urban School Leadership, a politically connected private charter school operator with close ties to banks and investment funds.

There is mass popular opposition to school closures. In Chicago, thousands of people attended hearings scheduled on the closures over the past two months, giving one indication of the seething anger among broad layers of working people.

A confrontation is brewing between the working class and the policies carried out in Chicago by Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel, President Obama's former chief of staff. His arguments echo those of politicians nationwide: with a \$1 billion budget deficit, there is supposedly no money to keep existing schools open. Moreover, public schools are "underutilized"—a self-fulfilling prophecy, as students and funding are diverted to charter schools.

The argument that there is no money for schools is a contemptible lie. While the ruling class insists that there is no money for basic social rights such as public education, it hands out hundreds of billions of dollars every year to the financial criminals on Wall Street.

In opposing school closures, working people are also entering into struggle against the national policy of the Obama administration and the Democratic Party, which have overseen an all-out attack on public education as part of Obama's Race to the Top program. Mass school closures have been announced in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., New York and Detroit—all overseen by Democrats. Today, an emergency manager is taking over Detroit, serving as a financial dictator tasked with making massive cuts to jobs, wages and living conditions.

At a national level, the Democrats and Republicans are involved in a bipartisan conspiracy to attack Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security. This follows the implementation of the "sequester" budget cuts, which will involve a 20 percent pay cut for one million federal workers, a sharp cut in federal unemployment benefits and other devastating cuts.

The critical question is mobilizing the mass opposition that exists in the working class against social attacks waged by the corrupt, money-mad ruling elite. The defense of public education must be carried forward, but this depends on the establishment of new organizations of struggle in the working class, independent of and in opposition to the unions and the Democratic Party.

While the Chicago Teacher's Union (CTU) has postured as an opponent of school closures, it has played a critical role in helping the Democratic Party establishment carry this attack through.

Opposition to the shutdown of all schools is not a "real argument," CTU President Karen Lewis said in an interview to Chicago Public Radio on Friday. The CTU, which includes in its leadership a top member of the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization, wants Emanuel to accept their assistance to ensure that school closures occur smoothly.

The CTU effectively gave a green light to the school

closures by shutting down last year's strike of 26,000 teachers, who were striking to oppose "reforms" making it easier to fire teachers and to defend public education. The contract eventually pushed through by the CTU contained everything that Emanuel demanded, including several measures making it easier to victimize and fire teachers.

The Chicago teachers' strike was a major experience for the working class. It won the support of workers in Chicago and across the country who correctly saw the attack on teachers as part of a broader attack on every basic social and democratic right.

In its intervention in this struggle, the Socialist Equality Party insisted that the defense of public education required a break with the CTU and a political struggle against the Democrats and Republicans. Public education, we argued, is not compatible with the subordination of society to the profit dictates of the financial aristocracy. The CTU's moves to rapidly shut down the strike, we wrote, would be seized on by Emanuel to accelerate the closure of public schools throughout the city.

This has now come to pass.

A new political leadership must be built, rooted in the understanding that the rights of the working class are not compatible with the capitalist system. Nothing can be accomplished without bringing down the economic and political dictatorship of the banks and big business.

The SEP calls on all workers and young people—in Chicago, throughout the US and around the world—who agree with this program to contact us today. Join the SEP and take up the fight for socialism.



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