

Protest against school closures in Chicago

Teachers union seeks to channel opposition behind Democratic Party

Jeff Lusanne, Shane Feratu
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The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) organized a late-afternoon protest Wednesday against the city of Chicago's plans to close 61 public schools.

A few thousand parents, teachers and community members participated in the march, only a partial expression of the mass sentiment against the administration of Mayor Rahm Emanuel's assault on public education. Over the past several months, thousands of parents and teachers have attended public hearings organized by the Chicago Public Schools to let off steam.

The aim of the CTU in calling the march was to channel opposition behind the Democratic Party political establishment in the city. The demonstration was far smaller than the mass protests during the time of the teachers strike in September, reflecting a widespread disillusionment of teachers with the CTU.

The school closure plan—one of the largest in US history—is the direct outcome of the betrayal of the teachers strike. The CTU shut down the strike as quickly as possible, pushing through a contract that accepted all of Emanuel's demands and paved the way for the school shut downs.

Before marching, the CTU organized a rally addressed by Democratic Party politicians, including Jesse Jackson, along with CTU President Karen Lewis. Jackson, always present when the Democratic Party and unions are seeking to smother public opposition, offered up his usual pabulum of empty chants. (A video of the remarks by Lewis, Jackson and other can be found [here](#).)

At the rally, Lewis sought to present the attack on public education in racial, rather than class, terms, noting that the schools affected primarily African

American students. "Let's not pretend that when you close schools on the South and West sides, the children affected aren't black," she said. "Let's not pretend that's not racist."

She failed to mention, however, that these neighborhoods are also the poorest in Chicago. The focus on race is aimed at dividing the working class, while also solidifying the CTU's relationship with local Democratic Party officials. The Democratic Party and the Obama administration, which is leading a nationwide attack on public education, went unmentioned by Lewis.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed a statement, "No to all school closures! Unite the working class to defend public education!," which calls for the formation of independent committees to mobilize the working class against school closures, in opposition to the Democratic Party and the trade unions.

The WSWs spoke to many of those attending.

Expressing the sentiments of many Chicagoans, Kiarra, a mother of three and a sociology student told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I think these closings are a question of class and inequality. We have stratification. We have overcrowding in public schools. We have too much testing. Testing does not determine abilities of students. And if there is no money for public schools like they're saying, then why is there so much money for charter schools? They're closing schools where children have special needs.

"These are working class issues and we're going to fight for our children's education. We need real social change today."

Lee, a parent, said, "Things have got to change. It's

not just about fighting to keep your school open. We have to fight for all our schools. We have got to stop this as a whole, as working people, and not just as individuals. We just can't go on like this. When Wall Street needs money, they give it to them. But they don't have money for us?"

In commentary to the press, Lewis has made clear that the CTU is not opposed to school closings, but merely wants to ensure that the union is part of the process. (See, "CTU president denies opposing school closures")

Since taking office, the Obama administration has carried out a nationwide assault on public education, pushing school closures and "turnarounds," merit pay, and charter schools. The national teachers unions have expressed their support for these measures.

The main concern of the CTU is to maintain its dues income. CTU's sister union, the Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff (ACTS), recently reached an agreement with UNO, the largest charter school company in Chicago, to collect dues from underpaid charter school teachers.

In part of its effort to prevent any discussion of the political issues in the fight to defend public education, the CTU focused its action in the demonstration on an act of "civil disobedience," in which 131 marchers were arrested for blocking traffic. Among these was CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey, a member of the International Socialist Organization.



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