

As contract expiration nears, Chicago teachers need a strategy to defeat another sellout

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Educators: Take up the fight for rank-and-file control! Fill out the form below for assistance forming a rank-and-file committee in your school district.

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) began negotiating with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) April 29 over the contract which covers roughly 25,000 teachers and other educators, which expires at the end of June.

The CTU leadership has released more than 700 proposals for what they call a “transformative contract.” But these are nothing but hot air, intended to mask the reality that the union and Mayor Brandon Johnson, a former CTU staffer, will work closely together to suppress wages and cut school budgets.

Chicago teachers face, as they have in all contract fights in years past, the need to wage a two-front war against both the Democratic Party administration and the corrupt union bureaucracy. They must form rank-and-file committees to enforce their democratic control of their own struggle and override decisions that violate their will.

The formation of new structures that they control will form the basis for linking their struggle up with the growing movement by students and academics against war, as well as with other educators around the country facing massive cuts to school budgets.

The contract talks unfold amid a massive attack on public education around the country, with layoffs and school closures taking place in one district after another. Cities affected include Ann Arbor and Flint, Michigan, Los Angeles, San Diego, Houston, Denver and others.

The immediate cause is the cut-off of \$190 billion in federal pandemic funding creating a massive nationwide “fiscal cliff” for school districts. This in itself exposes the indifference of the ruling class to mass death from the coronavirus pandemic, which is continuing despite official proclamations that it is “over.”

The money drained out of school districts is finding its way into the massive US war machine. Earlier this year, Congress passed an \$825 billion military budget, not including nearly \$100 billion more in funding for Israel, Ukraine and other US proxy wars. US imperialism is imposing discipline on the “home front” in order to unleash military violence on a world scale.

A history of sellouts in Chicago

This applies as well in Chicago, where CPS has estimated the district has a \$691 million structural deficit, and a \$391 million deficit looming for the upcoming fiscal year.

Even during his election campaign, Johnson threatened massive cuts to schools. “There will be some tough decisions to be made when I am mayor of the city of Chicago,” he said. “And there might be a point within negotiations that the Chicago Teachers Union quest and fight for more resources—we might not be able to do it. Who is better able to deliver bad news to a friend than a friend?”

Meanwhile, the CTU has signaled its willingness to accept any cuts. CTU President Stacy Davis Gates noted in March that she expects this round of negotiations to be “less of a soap opera” with Johnson as mayor.

This says more than she intended. She essentially is admitting that previous contract talks were scripted theatrics designed to ultimately pave the way for concessions.

The 2012 contract that followed a citywide strike was described at the time by the late CTU president Karen Lewis as “an austerity contract.” It led to 49 school closures and the layoff of thousands of teachers and educators. In 2016, Lewis and Mayor Rahm Emanuel reached an agreement without a strike, which held salaries flat, allowed healthcare costs to rise and created a two-tier pension system.

In 2019, following another strike, CTU touted a deal that included “wins” on the “bargaining for the common good” model. But these allowed CPS to get away with doing little to nothing. Raises in that contract amounted to roughly 2.5 percent raises per year after accounting for increased health insurance and lost wages from the strike. Due to high inflation over the past few years, teachers are making less in real terms than in 2019 when the contract was signed.

But the most treacherous sellout by CTU was its role in reopening schools in 2021 and 2022 in the midst of the deadliest phases of the pandemic. The union bureaucrats overrode massive opposition from teachers, parents and students, defying massive votes against it. This led directly to mass infections and deaths.

This was part of a nationwide campaign by the American

Federation of Teachers to reopen schools as part of the reopening of in-person work, doing the bidding of Wall Street, whose mantra was that the “cure can’t be worse than the disease.” AFT President Randi Weingarten, who is also a member of the Democratic National Committee, was reported by the *New York Times* as working 15 hours a day to get schools opened.

This history makes clear CTU’s “transformative contract” proposal is not worth the paper it is written on, made only for public consumption. It recalls pledges last year by the United Auto Workers, which “demanded” a 32-hour workweek and the hiring in of thousands of temporary workers. But after a toothless “standup strike” which did not stop production, the union imposed a deal with unlimited overtime, and has already led to thousands of job cuts, especially among temps.

But even CTU’s public “demands” would do nothing to change the situation of teachers in one of the most expensive cities in America. On the question of pay raises, CTU president Stacy Davis Gates told the *Chicago Sun-Times* in April the union’s opening pay demand would be the lesser of 9 percent or the consumer price index (CPI), setting a low ceiling for subsequent talks. The union later claimed the written proposal was for the greater of 9 percent or CPI.

Earlier this month, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73 reached a four-year agreement with CPS with raises of only 4 percent per year for the first two years and 4 or 5 percent in the last two years, depending on inflation. This gives teachers an indication of what they can expect.

Attacks on anti-war protests

The contract talks also are taking place amid the eruption of student protests against the US-backed genocide in Gaza, and the ruthless crackdown on these protests. This is being directed and coordinated by the White House, but the Johnson administration occupies the front rank of local governments unleashing cops against demonstrations.

Johnson has also played a foul role in deploying police to suppress protests against the Gaza genocide and arrest protesters at campuses throughout the city, including the University of Chicago and the School of the Art Institute. Police even arrested anti-genocide protesters gathered outside of April’s Labor Notes conference as Johnson himself spoke to the gathering.

This directly concerns teachers, not least because the targets of the crackdown are their students. But teachers themselves are also being targeted for opposition to genocide.

Enormous anger among educators is what forced the UAW to call a strike of academic workers at the University of California system. Although the union is trying to limit the strike, as it did in the auto industry last year, this points to the growing convergence of the class struggle with the fight against war.

The Chicago schools contract expires only weeks before the start of the Democratic National Convention in the city this August. There are obvious historical parallels to the DNC held in Chicago

in 1968, when Mayor Richard Daley’s riot cops brutally attacked anti-war and Civil Rights protesters. Similar scenes are almost certain to play out again. The Johnson administration has already denied permits to protesters.

A major difference will be that, unlike 1968, when President Lyndon Johnson was forced to decline the nomination due to mass anger over the Vietnam War, the Democrats today are preparing to nominate, without any serious opposition, a president guilty of genocide. This shows how far to the right the entire political system has gone, and how impervious it is to public opinion.

Another major difference is that the riot-cop-in-chief Johnson enjoys crucial support from pseudo-left groups like the Democratic Socialists of America, which endorsed him. Johnson, a former CTU staffer, is also a direct product of the pseudo-left’s role in propping up the union bureaucracy.

The Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), backed first by the International Socialist Organization before its demise, and now by the DSA, has ruled the union for more than a decade. It has long been held up as a model of other “reform” caucuses which occasionally use populist demagoguery to cover for the same betrayals. But among rank-and-file teachers, CORE is widely hated. This was partially reflected in a significant protest vote in the latest union leadership elections.

The outcome, not just of CORE but of the entire pro-Democratic Party, pro-bureaucracy platform it is based on, is the elevation of Johnson, an ex-union staffer, to mayor. The darling of both the union bureaucracy and the DSA, Johnson wasted no time in showing himself to be a ruthless attack dog for American capitalism.

Chicago teachers have long been among the most militant in the United States. They want to fight, but their struggle cannot be viable as long as it is controlled by the CTU bureaucracy, and through it, the Democratic Party. They must take matters into their own hands, in a fight not just against CPS and CORE but the entire political system.

Teachers must make contact with the emerging mass movement against this system, connecting the defense of the right to public education with the fight against war and in defense of democratic rights.



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