

Chicago teachers: Organize rank-and-file committees to fight another sellout contract!

Educators Rank-and-File Committee
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Teachers: Take up the fight for rank-and-file control! Contact us below for help setting up a rank-and-file committee at your district. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Behind closed doors, a conspiracy is being hatched against 25,000 Chicago school teachers. The Chicago Teachers Union is working with the city administration of Brandon Johnson to impose cuts in a new contract and block a strike during a politically explosive election year.

Following an “open bargaining” session meant for public consumption, the CTU hailed various fig leaves like “green” facilities. But what they are not telling teachers is that the city is aiming to close a massive \$400 million budget deficit on the backs of educators and students.

It is urgent that educators take the initiative. They must form rank-and-file committees, prepare for strike action if their demands are not met, and appeal to the working class across Chicago, as well as to teachers across the US, for the broadest possible support.

Teachers cannot allow these cuts to take place because conditions in schools are already intolerable. CPS educators and students endure huge class sizes, understaffing, a years-long effective wage freeze for teachers, conditions for special education that routinely violate federal standards, building closures and the replacement of professional teachers with Teach for America “volunteers.”

A conspiracy against teachers and students

What is happening in Chicago is part of a nationwide assault on the right to public education. From Los Angeles to New York, in major cities like Detroit as well as in smaller districts like Flint and Ann Arbor, school districts are slashing tens and hundreds of millions in spending for this year alone.

The immediate trigger is the Biden administration’s decision to allow emergency COVID-19 funding for schools to expire. But the aim of the bipartisan cuts is to free up resources for war and for Wall Street through austerity. While funding for the Department of Education declined by half a billion dollars in the latest federal budget, military spending ballooned to \$850 billion, not including aid packages to Ukraine, Israel and other proxies of US imperialism.

The AFT bureaucracy is working hand in glove with Democrats at the local and federal levels to impose the cuts. This finds its sharpest expression in the person of Mayor Johnson, a former CTU staffer. Even during his election campaign, he spoke of the prospect of school

cuts. “There will be some tough decisions to be made when I am mayor of the city of Chicago,” he threatened, adding, “Who is better able to deliver bad news to a friend than a friend?”

CTU President Stacy Davis Gates is not even attempting to make a show of opposition to Johnson. In an interview with WTTW, she said: “The voice that you don’t hear from the CTU is one that is confrontational because we don’t have a mayor being confrontational with us. In fact, we have the opposite. We have a mayor who’s encouraged both sides to work together to foment this transformation.”

Last month, hundreds of CPS teachers and staff were laid off in what has since 2013 become a regular firing event. CTU Vice President Jackson Potter said, “This has now become an annual bloodletting ritual that we hope will end or at least become more humane and thoughtful.” In other words, the bureaucracy’s aim is a “humane” bloodletting, which means they should be centrally involved in helping carry it out.

These statements make clear that what is taking place are not “negotiations” between two adversarial parties. Whatever tentative agreement is produced will be the product of a conspiracy between the pro-corporate Democrats and the union bureaucracy.

Against CORE and the pseudo-left apologists of bureaucracy!

It is high time for teachers to draw a balance sheet of the experience with the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), the so-called “reform” slate which has controlled CTU for more than a decade. It has been hailed across the country by pseudo-lefts in the Democratic Socialists of America, *Labor Notes* and other outfits with close ties to the CTU leadership as the model for bureaucratic self-reform.

The reality is that CORE has collaborated with successive city governments to close dozens of schools and sell out strikes. Its first major “accomplishment” after taking over CTU was its sellout of the strike in 2012, allowing mayor Rahm Emanuel, Barack Obama’s former chief of staff, to carry out the largest mass school closure in history. Similar betrayals followed in the 2016 and 2019 contracts.

But the most profound exposure of CORE/CTU as a class enemy was its criminal betrayal of the fight against the reopening of schools during the height of the pandemic, defying overwhelming opposition among teachers, students and parents. This mirrored the role of the national American Federation of Teachers, CTU’s parent union, whose president Randi Weingarten boasted she spent 15 hours a day

on the phone fighting to reopen schools.

These experiences prove that the task facing teachers is not the “reform” of the CTU bureaucracy. Instead, the apparatus must be smashed through a movement from below, and be replaced with democratic organs of power that teachers actually control.

Teachers and the US political crisis

In the past, under pressure from a restive and militant rank-and-file, CORE has attempted to cover for their betrayals through militant-sounding phrases and has even been forced to call strikes. But now there is virtual silence surrounding contract talks. In the explosive social and political environment, the silence around the contract reflects the immense fear that even CTU phrase-mongering could raise teachers’ expectations in a way that could quickly escape the bureaucracy’s control.

The fight to defend public education is a political struggle. The contract talks themselves take place during the biggest political crisis in American history. On the one hand, Donald Trump, four years after his failed January 6 coup, is running to become an American führer, openly threatening violence and mass arrests of his political opponents. On the other, Biden, whose clear mental decline has called his viability as a candidate into question, is hated for his role in supporting the Gaza genocide and in coordinating mass arrests of protesters across the country.

Chicago will become a major political battleground next month when the Democratic National Convention meets. The Biden campaign is in such deep crisis that it is not even clear he will be the party’s nominee. That decision will be made by the cabal of billionaire donors and high-ranking military and intelligence figures who run the Democratic Party.

Mayor Johnson, meanwhile, has pledged a massive crackdown against the inevitable protests, just as he has cracked down against pro-Palestinian demonstrators and immigrant youth. No doubt a particular reason for the silence over the contract talks is aimed at preventing teachers from disrupting the DNC or Johnson’s police mobilization.

The breakdown of democratic forms of rule has two fundamental causes: relentless and escalating war and the growth of extreme levels of social inequality. Chicago is a microcosm of the whole society, with 24 billionaires (not including Illinois governor J.B. Pritzker) and 120,500 millionaires, while the vast majority struggle to get by.

Teachers and the working class as a whole must emerge as vanguard fighters for the defense of democratic rights because these can only be defended through a fight against control of society by the corporate oligarchy. The working class, the vast majority of society and the source of all its wealth, must determine how society’s resources are used, not a handful of super-rich individuals.

For a rank-and-file rebellion!

Teachers should not underestimate the ruthlessness with which the ruling class will respond to any challenge from below. But the crisis that has erupted shows the ruling class is not all-powerful. The

working class, armed with proper organization and strategy, can take the initiative.

The first step is for teachers to organize themselves outside of the control of the CTU bureaucracy. They must take their place in the growing world movement for rank-and-file committees, democratic organs of workers’ power being formed in opposition to the union bureaucracy and the pro-corporate parties. Teachers must take direct control over the contract talks—not just allowed to sit in and listen during “open bargaining” sessions controlled by the bureaucrats, while the real contract is being worked out in secret.

Teachers must draw up a list of demands and prepare for strike action if these are not met. To put them in the best possible position to fight the Democrats and the corporate oligarchy, they must link up with workers across Chicago and across the country, making their fight a focal point in a broader campaign in defense of public education.

The demands should include the following:

- Hundreds of billions for public education, not for war! There is no lack of money, the problem is who controls it. Public funding must go to social needs, not the Pentagon.

- A minimum 25 percent pay increase and cost-of-living adjustments, to attract and retain experienced educators.

- Effective staffing levels for all grades! Nurses, counselors, libraries and librarians in every school! Special education students’ needs must be met!

- Elimination of the two-tier pension system. For the full funding of teacher and staff retirements!

- A permanent halt to school closures and renewal of old infrastructure.

- For clean and healthy school buildings! This includes clean indoor air, measures to filter out COVID-19 and other diseases, universal masking as well as the right of teachers to close schools whenever they become unsafe.

- Students have the right to protest! The Johnson administration must end its arrests of young people demonstrating against war. Free speech must be defended!

If you agree with this, then contact the Educators Rank-and-File Committee today to begin building the rank-and-file opposition.



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