

As teachers start the school year with no contract

Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson demands “sacrifices” to pay for \$1.2 billion school budget gap

Kristina Betinis
1 September 2024

Chicago’s Democratic Mayor Brandon Johnson announced last week that the city’s public school system faces a \$982 million budget deficit in 2025, on top of a shortfall of \$222.9 million for 2024. The mayor, a former lobbyist for the Chicago Teachers Union promoted by the CTU and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) as “one of us,” made it clear that educators, parents and students would have to accept savage austerity measures to pay for the budget gap.

“The size of the budget gap is significant,” Brandon told reporters. “It’s going to require decisions that will speak to our overall collective desire to build an economy that works for working people. There are sacrifices that will be made.”

The mayor who was promoted as a “progressive” by the union bureaucracy and the Democratic Socialists of America did not bother to square his rhetoric about “building an economy that works for working people” with budget cuts that would inevitably involve mass layoffs, school closures and other attacks on the right to public education.

The mayor’s office did not provide specifics to the *Chicago Tribune* detailing the nearly \$1 billion deficit, but officials said state revenues declined, a “one-time budget surplus” expired, and pension and personnel costs rose.

The financial crisis in America’s third largest school district is part of nationwide trend. School districts across the US are facing a “fiscal cliff” because the Biden-Harris administration has allowed its \$121 billion federal pandemic emergency program to expire, though COVID-19 is still spreading in the schools. Chicago Public Schools have already spent 88 percent of the \$1.8 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding it received, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

The drying up of these funds, which public school districts needed to plug gaps caused by decades of underfunding, along with rising costs, could lead to the elimination of the jobs of 384,000 teachers and other school staff over the next two years.

The governor of Illinois, billionaire Democrat J.B. Pritzker, made it clear that the district would not be bailed out by the state. “I don’t think that that’s the job of Springfield to rescue the school districts that might have been irresponsible with the one-

time money they received,” Pritzker told the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

At the end of the last school year, 600 paraprofessionals were laid off, with fewer than half reportedly hired back for the new year.

The labor agreement covering 30,000 Chicago Teacher Union members expired on June 30, and school workers have returned to the classrooms without a new contract. As usual, the CTU bureaucracy is using various “social justice” demands to cover up its plans to accept draconian attacks on educators and schools.

In statements to a school board meeting on August 29, CTU President Stacy Davis Gates professed “confusion” about the state of district’s finances. She said the CTU and the school authorities were engaged in a “group project” and presented the board members as devoted advocates of students because most board members are African American and Hispanic. This was a deliberate effort to use identity politics to cover up the fact that the board members, along with the mayor and the governor, are doing the bidding of the most powerful corporate and financial interests.

“You’ve got a diverse board of education. You’ve got a badass union who wants to be a partner, and an environment in this country that finally wants to resource schools. ... Why don’t we have agreement? I’m confused, and I need you to help me understand.”

Gates let the cat out of the bag, however, making it clear that massive cuts were coming. “You don’t have money for school next year. ... What’s the plan? Close schools that are under-enrolled? Fire teachers and staff, like 2,000 of them? What’s the plan?”

Gates presented Democrats like Minnesota’s Governor and Kamala Harris’s running mate Tim Walz and Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer as champions of public education, even though they have overseen the continual undermining of public schools. The CTU is now requesting federal mediation in the talks.

The union leaders’ strategy has been to attack Chicago Public Schools CEO Pedro Martinez as an ineffective leader who saw the funding problem for CPS and did not simply resolve it, either through renegotiating debts or convincing state leaders to provide additional funding. This only distracts from the fact budget cuts

have long been prepared, indicated in Johnson's own statements that he would lead the charge to cut school budgets made when he was on the campaign trail.

In a March 2023 election forum he responded to his view on CPS: "There will be some tough decisions to be made when I am mayor of the city of Chicago. 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?"

During the public participation period of the school board meeting last week, Jerry White, Socialist Equality Party Vice Presidential candidate in the 2024 US elections, denounced the cuts and called on rank-and-file educators to resist them.

White said he stood with educators, parents and students "against savage budget cuts being planned by Mayor Johnson, Gov. Pritzker and school authorities." He continued:

Chicago and districts across the US are facing a fiscal cliff and threatening up to 400,000 educators' jobs. This is chiefly because the Biden administration ended federal Covid relief, though 1.4 million Americans continue to be infected every day. The mayor says the district has a \$1 billion shortfall, and "sacrifices must be made." But earlier this month, the Democrats and Republicans found 20 times that for Israel's genocide against the Palestinians—and every year they spend \$1 trillion for world war against Russia and China.

Far from opposing further job cuts and erosion of living standards, CTU bureaucracy is preparing another monumental betrayal. For years, CTU officials have promoted the lie that the Democrats speak for working people and have collaborated with this corporate-controlled party to close schools, open Covid infected classrooms. Now one of their own is the chief budget cutter in the Mayor's Office.

Educators must stop this. Teachers, paras and staff must form rank-and-file committees, prepare for strike action to defend the right to high quality education and good wages, and appeal to the working class across Chicago, including the hundreds of striking autoworkers at Dackota on the south side, and educators nationwide and internationally for the broadest support.

There is no lack of money, the problem is who controls it. Public funding must go to social needs, not the Pentagon and enrichment of the corporate-financial oligarchy.

Sweltering classrooms, COVID-19 spreading with no support

The school year started with teachers languishing in

overcrowded, underfunded and poorly ventilated classrooms. As one teacher reported in a Facebook group for Chicago Teachers Union members, "I felt physically sick by the end of the work day," and they included a photo of a thermometer in their classroom marking over 80 degrees Fahrenheit (27 degrees Celsius).

Another teacher commented, "Our temp was 89 in our rooms. It was brutal."

Amid a massive summer wave of COVID-19 infections that is expected to accelerate with schools reopening, CPS issued guidance establishing that the virus is no longer a reportable disease within CPS. Staff and students are encouraged to stay home while they have symptoms, but public health emergency sick days "are no longer be available for staff members who test positive for COVID as of August 1st, 2024." No PPE is available through CPS.

Another teacher commented in the CTU members Facebook group to advocate for masking, to insist that air quality in schools be improved, and to raise the dangers of these rules that will increase the spread of the virus and the possibility of extended illness and disability:

FYI folks, CPS and the CDC decisions about Covid aside, if you're testing positive at home, you are still contagious. None of the things we know to be true about Covid/ long covid have changed—not the rates of infection, not the rates of long covid, not the increased chances of strokes, diabetes, and other life-altering secondary illnesses that are "long covid." Covid isn't even a "seasonal illness", as we are seeing in this very moment with the surge happening as school starts. The current variants are more evasive on at-home tests, and there is an increase in false negatives until up to day 5 of symptoms / the start of symptoms. Please mask! Insist that your rooms keep their air purifiers, and the filters get changed! And more than anything, please stay home until you test negative!

To defend the social right to high quality public education and to safe schools, teachers, parents and students must form rank-and-file committees to take the conduct of the fight out of the hands of the CTU bureaucracy.

Educators can take the first step by joining and expanding the network of Educators Rank-and-File Committees (ERFC) across the US, uniting educators with one another and with the broader struggles of the international working class in a common program against austerity and war.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact