

“An act of social arson”

Chicago charter operator Acero to close seven schools heralding future attacks on CPS

Joe Raymond, Alexander Fangmann
11 October 2024

Are you a teacher/school worker at Acero or Chicago Public Schools? Take up the fight against school closures! Join the rank-and-file movement to defend public education and share your thoughts about the situation at your school by filling out the form below.

On Wednesday night, the board for the Acero charter schools operator voted to close seven of its 15 schools in Chicago, Illinois, after the end of the current school year. The planned closure of these charter schools, due to enrollment declines and staff and facilities maintenance costs—which mirror the budgetary pressures in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) itself—makes clear that school closures and cuts continue to be a real threat, despite disavowals by CPS CEO Pedro Martinez and the CPS board.

According to the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), the closure of the seven Acero schools will impact over 2,000 students, around one-third of the charter network’s enrollment of 6,318. Over 270 educators will be laid off, and while some may be able to move to one of Acero’s remaining schools, it will likely be at the expense of educators with lower seniority who will be laid off themselves.

It has been reported that 300 of the 2,000 displaced students will be given the opportunity to enroll at one of the remaining Acero schools.

Acero schools historically have enrolled large numbers of Latino students, a growing number of whom are recently arrived migrants. One Acero educator reported to the WSWS that when these students asked the bilingual specialist at their school if she was going to work with them next year, she burst into tears.

The educator noted, “These kids are deeply personally attached to this teacher in particular, since she works with them every day, in small groups, teaching them English, helping them with socialization, and being a de facto social worker. These school closures are an act of social arson.”

The educator reported that there had been rumors of possible closings. They said their CTU rep alerted educators at their campus on Wednesday that, “she knew how many schools were slated for closure but wouldn’t tell us because she wants us at the board meeting so we can find out then.”

According to a teacher who spoke to the WSWS, Acero Schools CEO Richard Rodriguez in his report to the board meeting cited the 2018 strike by Acero educators as a major factor in the decision to close schools, implying that the school closures are a kind of punishment for the teachers’ strike.

Teachers and parents were taken aback by the scale of the closures. Speaking to the WSWS, another Acero educator reported that when

the slide was revealed, “The moment was a huge gut punch. We had heard rumblings of a few schools, but nobody was prepared for seven schools being closed, practically half of the network’s 15 schools. That was a huge blow, a huge shock to teachers who cried out, ‘Oh my god!’ ‘No!’ ‘What?!’ Teachers burst into tears, hugged each other, consoled each other, and that was the end of decorum being followed, with teachers rightfully shouting down the brutes of the board.”

Teachers shouted, “Cowards!” at the board and other statements of opposition. But despite the educators’ denunciations of the board for its decision, union officials “told us all to go to work the next day.”

Caroline Rutherford, CTU council chair for Acero appeared most concerned that the union bureaucrats did not get a “seat at the table” in implementing cuts. She complained of Acero, “They have had zero conversations with any of the members, any of the union leaders. They did not inform us, meet to negotiate with us about any of this. They’re just making this decision unilaterally.”

Indeed, having a seat at the table in the implementation of cuts, school closures and other attacks on education has been a central goal of CTU’s Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) leadership since it was elected to leadership. It has sought to prove itself to the ruling class on numerous occasions, most notoriously in the closure of 50 schools under former mayor Rahm Emanuel and the reopening of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Now, with long-time CORE CTU staffer Brandon Johnson as mayor, the union is trying to position itself to keep a lid on the growing rebellion among teachers to the continued deterioration of public education and the looming fiscal cliff that threatens mass school closures and layoffs.

On Monday, Johnson announced his appointment of six new CPS board members. In the wake of explosive revelations that CPS had drafted a proposal to close or consolidate as many as 100 schools, news broke Friday that all seven members of the city’s Board of Education would be resigning at the end of the month.

While none of the outgoing CPS board have made public the reason for their resignation, differences had emerged between the board and Johnson over the latter’s plan to fire CEO Martinez and over the mayor’s request that the school district take out a \$300 million, short-term loan to fund CPS employee pensions and reportedly nominal teacher raises of 4-5 percent.

The exiting school board members—career-minded individuals in the philanthropy, nonprofit, and business sectors—no doubt want no association with raising debt or with forcing out Martinez, who has

substantial backing among the financial elite.

All but one of the seven outgoing board members had been previously appointed by Johnson. Most of the new board members will be effectively lame ducks, as early voting is already underway as part of the transition to a hybrid elected and appointed board in January. Members of the just-appointed board will not be eligible to continue unless they live in one of the 10 newly-created school board districts.

One week before submitting their resignations, the prior school board passed a moratorium on school closures, ostensibly delaying the closing of public schools until after the 2026-27 academic year, but the board can overturn this temporary face-saving measure at any time.

The school board resignations also take place amid stalled negotiations between CPS and the CTU. Teachers in Chicago have been working without a contract since the previous agreement expired in July, an increasingly common situation for American educators and a sign of the escalating attack on public education.

While local media reports have made much of Mayor Johnson's request that Martinez resign, the fact is that savage cuts are being prepared regardless of who occupies the top position at CPS. The closures of the Acero schools are only a taste of what is coming in the city and across the country.

In fact, neighboring suburban Evanston/Skokie District 65 already voted to close one school in June, and has hired a consultant to investigate further possible closures to avoid insolvency and potential takeover by the state. After initially announcing the closure of 21 campuses, the board at Seattle Public Schools voted to move ahead with the closure of five schools.

On Wednesday, Martinez proposed using funds from Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts to solve the district's budget shortfall and provide a funding source for the minimal teacher raises that have been proposed. TIF districts have long diverted funds away from the school district and other public budgets, with Martinez even noting they have been "depriving CPS of over \$600 million in annual revenue." Without increased revenue from the TIFs, any teacher pay increases would have to be offset by furloughs, layoffs, and even school closures.

In a statement Martinez noted, "government and labor partners are coalescing around this revenue source," and that expenses could be handled "without cuts, without taking on expensive short-term debt, and without waiting for additional funding to materialize from the State."

Mayoral spokesman Ronnie Reese claimed Martinez had "flatly refused" to include TIF funds in the CPS budget. In a statement, Reese said, "Had the CPS CEO worked collaboratively with the City and the Board of Education to pass a budget with the source of revenue being TIF and additional financing, as we and our [budget] team worked diligently to do, we would not be in the predicament we find ourselves in today."

Meanwhile, the CTU has been doing damage control for Mayor Johnson, with union officials parroting or uncritically sharing Johnson's statement on the school board resignations, which in its statement the CTU called "a mutual decision" by the board and Johnson, in whom the CTU encouraged further illusions: "We finally have a mayor that is moving the district away from cuts and furloughs."

But in reality, the 4-5 percent teacher raises reportedly floated by Johnson in an internal CPS memo would amount to a pay cut in real

wages when accounting for the cumulative increases in consumer prices of more than 23 percent since the start of the previous CPS-CTU contract in November of 2019.

With no signs of any progress on teachers' most critical contract demands for real pay raises and improved working conditions, opposition has been growing among Chicago teachers who are growing tired of the union's member email updates that, as one educator said, "really tell us next to nothing." In a Facebook group for Chicago Teachers Union members, rank-and-file educators have started raising demands for transparency and concrete, comprehensive bargaining updates from the union.

One educator proposed that the union share with members a "spreadsheet of the items being bargained, and update each one individually for members. Then highlight the changes between each bargaining session. Sure it's a lot of work, but we pay dues for a reason. We should be getting comprehensive updates that are easy to read and follow, and that can paint a clear picture of what is going on."

In response to this legitimate and entirely reasonable proposal, CTU President Stacy Davis Gates responded: "Bargaining does not happen in the format you describe above." Davis Gates then went on to tell the teachers that they need to "come to the table ... so you can understand the updates."

Significantly, the teacher raising the demand for comprehensive updates from the union received nearly 10 times the number of "likes" and "hearts" on her comment than Davis Gates's dismissive response.

Other teachers agreed with the demand for real transparency from the union, with one educator writing, "CTU's emails about the contract are worthless in regards to any important information."

Educators must draw far-reaching conclusions from the actions of Johnson and the CTU in the face of the closures at Acero and the looming attacks on teachers throughout the district. The WSWS calls for the widest possible mobilization of CPS and charter school educators and workers to stop the closings at Acero.

Teachers and educators and school staff must take the initiative by building rank-and-file committees to defend public education if they are to stop the school closures at Acero, but also the attacks that are coming in CPS. They cannot put any trust in the CTU, which has been conspiring with the Johnson administration and the Democratic Party to strangle the opposition of Chicago educators.

Are you a teacher/school worker at Acero or Chicago Public Schools? Take up the fight against school closures! Join the rank-and-file movement to defend public education and share your thoughts about the situation at your school by filling out the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact