

Explosive anger mounts against Acero school closures in Chicago: “We are not items to be counted as dollar signs!”

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On Wednesday, educators, families and students packed the gym at Idar Elementary School during the Acero Schools Board meeting to denounce the decision by the charter operator to close seven schools in Chicago serving predominantly working class and immigrant Latino families.

The closures at Acero are part of a wave of threatened closures all over the US, including scores in Milwaukee, Seattle, San Francisco and almost 100 more in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), according to a list leaked last month in the midst of negotiations between CPS and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU).

In spite of this, the CTU, which is allied with Democratic Mayor Brandon Johnson’s administration, has refused to organize a joint struggle of Acero and CPS teachers. Instead, they are keeping CPS teachers on the job without a contract, while they work behind the scenes to hash out a deal which meets none of their demands.

The meeting was Acero’s first public board meeting since the announcement in October that it would be closing seven of its 15 schools at the end of the school year.

Yielding their time to move immediately to public comment, the wealthy, well-connected Acero executives and board members had nothing to say to the teachers and families whose schools they are closing.

During public comments, educators, parents, and elementary, middle and high school students gave voice to the deep-seated recognition within the working class of the need to defend public education as a social right.

In opposition to the social arson represented by the attacks on schools, Luis Delgado, a CPS high school student, spoke powerfully against the threatened closures of the seven Acero schools, including Acero-Santiago, where he graduated and where he was elected student council president.

Delgado said:

Rather than expressing my sadness over the potential closure, I feel an overwhelming sense of anger. I’m furious

about the system that has let us down, of the Acero Board that has made this decision, and everyone who contributed to this reckless outcome. You made promises of love, trust and support, yet you exchange those ideals for hate and fear. ...

We need answers. Why did you choose to take this extreme step? What led you to break the trust of so many faithful students, educators and parents? Why did you see us merely as profit rather than individuals with dreams and aspirations? We are not items to be counted as dollar signs! That is an unacceptable way to treat the 2,000 students who call their schools home, the 270 educators who are committed to shaping our futures, and the 4,000 parents who every day work hard to support us.

Shame on all of you, each and every one of you who made this reckless decision! We will continue to fight for our schools!

Parents of students gave moving testimonies of the vital role that public education plays in the lives of the working class and the social hatred of the parasitic layer typified by the Acero executives and board members.

Reyna Rodriguez, the mother of a student at Santiago Elementary School, spoke about the moment she heard the news that Acero had decided to close her child’s school:

All I could do in the moment was to cry and to think of my baby ... my babies! My 224 babies—the students—and the 44 staff members, including teachers, administrators, office services, our janitors, our lunch crew, and the list goes on.

And now that I’m saying this out loud, my stomach is hurting, and I really wanna puke. ... Dear CEO, dear board members: Shame on you for making this decision without asking your families and your community. Shame on you for hurting over 2,000 students, 4,000 parents and 300 staff members. [CEO] Rodriguez, remember? You said we shine together, but you lied. You failed us.

Alejandra Morales, the mother of students at Cisneros Elementary School, addressed Acero Schools CEO Richard Rodriguez directly, asking, “How can you go home and look your kids in the eyes, knowing there are 2,000 students with their hearts broken because their school is about to close down?” She then quoted Benito Juarez (Mexico’s president from 1858 to 1872): “Education is fundamental to social happiness; it is the principle on which the freedom and greatness of peoples rest.”

Christine Binder, a veteran teacher at Cisneros, also pointed to the need to prioritize education over the financial interests that are demanding school closures:

In my career as an educator, I’ve faced many challenges: navigating the chaos of a global pandemic, safeguarding students in emergencies, protecting them from harm both inside and outside of the school, and weathering much ineffective leadership. ... Losing these schools would devastate [our students’] sense of security and shatter the trust that we have worked so hard to build. ... Acero’s decision to close these schools threatens everything we’ve built. ... These schools are more than walls and classrooms and dollar signs.

For its part, the Chicago Teachers Union bureaucracy attempted to cover up its complacency toward the school closures with bluster directed at the assembled Acero leaders. In private though, the CTU seeks to cut a deal with the Acero leadership to “bargain the impact” of the school closures, which the union accepts as a foregone conclusion, just as it did in 2013 when it worked together with CPS to close 49 schools.

In her comments at the Acero Board meeting, Caroline Rutherford, chair of the council of CTU members at Acero, again appealed to Acero to attend the next day’s Chicago Public Schools Board meeting, telling Acero leaders that the CPS Board of Education “would also love to hear from you all on how you can work together. ... Agree to keep all of our schools open through the 2025-26 school year as Acero schools.”

This is in line with last month’s CPS Board resolution, which called on Acero to “explore” delaying the school closures by one year.

Toward the end of the meeting, Acero Schools Chief Operating Officer Richard Valerga snatched the microphone away from Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) Alderman Byron Sigcho Lopez as he had begun to speak. This provoked immediate outrage in the audience.

Acero CEO Richard Rodriguez, whose total compensation is over \$298,000 according to the most recent data, noticed a *Chicago Tribune* photographer capturing the events up close and signaled to Valerga to return the microphone to the alderman.

Alderman Lopez echoed the CTU’s appeals to the Acero leadership that they should attend the next day’s CPS Board meeting. Lopez also told Acero’s leaders that, in the face of mounting threats of deportations, that Acero had a responsibility to the immigrant population affected by the school closures.

When Lopez concluded his remarks and handed the microphone to an Acero schools mother, Valerga again attempted to snatch away the microphone. This provocation was met with mounting anger among the assembled educators, families and students who then rose to their feet and shouted denunciations of Acero’s leaders. At that moment, the Acero Board voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting early due to “disruptions.”

At a meeting of the CPS Board of Education on Thursday, the very next day, the CPS board outlined four options, one of which included a proposal to preserve five of the seven Acero schools threatened with closure, throwing Paz Elementary and Cruz K-12 into the fire.

The Acero educators and families, who are determined to fight against school closures, must not allow this struggle to be sold out by the CTU bureaucracy that collaborated with CPS to close 49 schools in 2013. Now the union is seeking again to “work together” with the social arsonists and cut a deal to close “just a couple” or “just a few” schools.

What are the class interests behind such miserable complacency?

Also empty are the racist sentiments promoted by the CTU and the pseudo-left. Attempts to appeal to the “better angels” on the shoulders of figures like CEO Rodriguez on the basis of his Latino “identity” or his attainment of the “American Dream” are worse than worthless.

The class chasm that separates these schools’ working class and immigrant families from figures like CEO Rodriguez, whose “American Dream” is based on exploitation and the immiseration of these families, is unbridgeable. Truly defending public education requires nothing short of a frontal assault on the ill-gotten wealth of these social parasites.

What is required is a mass movement of educators and workers in defense not just of public education but of all the social rights of the working class which are under assault.

To break free of the stranglehold of the union bureaucracy that aims to “work together” with the social arsonists, educators and workers need their own organizations of struggle, independent of the union bureaucracy which is tied to the capitalist state.

If there is to be a fight to stop the school closures, mass deportations and world war, that fight must be waged by workers themselves, by building their own rank-and-file committees, in coordination with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), in a fight for socialism.



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