

CTU and Mayor Brandon Johnson prepare austerity contract for Chicago teachers

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Contract negotiations between the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) appear to have stalled recently over the central issue of pay raises. With the corporate and political establishment demanding austerity in the schools, Democrat Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson and CPS administrators are working furiously to figure out how to impose a contract on teachers and other educators that is acceptable to big business.

Teachers and other school workers, who are determined to fight against years of austerity and lost purchasing power, must reject the illusions peddled by CTU leaders about the supposed “transformative” contract. The only way to win needed pay raises and defend students and public education from the onslaught of the Trump administration and the banks is to organize independently of the CTU apparatus and build the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Committee to coordinate and lead the fight and link up with educators in the same struggle across the country.

The critical issue in the negotiations is teacher pay. Throughout the negotiations, CPS CEO Pedro Martinez and CPS leadership, backed by the banks and financial circles, have refused to budge on their initial offer of 4 percent in the first year and 4-5 percent for the final three years—which they clearly expect to amount to only 16 percent in total. At the same time, CTU leaders have steadily lowered teachers’ expectations through diminishing counteroffers.

CTU’s initial proposal of 9 percent raises would have left teachers only trading water since 2019. Since then, CTU’s “Big Bargaining Team,” which includes former union president and pseudo-left leader Jesse Sharkey, has backed down on the union’s initial demands and completely capitulated to the ruling class’s insistence on austerity. The CTU’s last counteroffer includes a paltry 5 percent raise in the first two years and 4-5 percent in the final two years of a four-year contract, depending on the consumer price index.

This would amount to a real loss in purchasing power for teachers, who have suffered from a 23 percent cost-of-living increase since their 2019 contract. That five-year deal included total raises of only 16 percent, which were

effectively even lower due to lost pay from the sold-out strike and increases in health care costs.

While CTU leaders are entirely willing to push through a contract resulting in a loss in real wages for teachers, they have asked for supposed assurances that the contract will not be funded through layoffs or furloughs. This and other toothless proposals will serve as a fig leaf for the abandonment of higher pay.

The CPS budget approved in July did not include any funding for the CTU contract and only narrowly closed a \$391 million deficit. Like other school districts around the country, CPS has been facing a fiscal cliff due to the expiration of \$190 billion in federal pandemic funding, including \$1.8 billion for Chicago schools. The district already faces a large structural deficit of just under \$700 million for the upcoming fiscal year.

Johnson and CTU President Stacy Davis Gates have advocated for the district to take out a short-term loan to fund the contract for the present year, leaving the question of subsequent years for another day. Martinez’s refusal to go along with the plan led to him being fired by Johnson’s hand-picked board on December 20. However, due to provisions in his contract, he will continue to be CEO for six months from the date he was fired.

The banks and their political representatives have come out in force in demanding that teachers and students bear the brunt of the deficit. Ratings agency S&P threatened the district with a credit downgrade, according to the *Chicago Tribune*, saying “neither drawing on its reserves nor taking on new debt to fund the contract is an option.”

The Chicago Civic Federation, whose board is largely made up of corporate and financial executives, released an analysis of the CPS budget on Monday urging the newly seated Board of Education to “right-size” the district and claimed the district’s finances were “so serious that a state financial takeover ... is not and should not be out of the question.”

The Civic Federation rails against “underutilized” buildings, demanding that schools be closed and students

packed into buildings like sardines. Indeed, although Martinez has recently disavowed any plans to close schools, in September the CTU revealed that CPS had conducted a “space analysis” which identified around 70 schools that could be consolidated into another 70 schools, leading to their closure. This could lead to an even larger number of school closures than the historic shutdown of 50 schools in 2013, the year after the CTU sold out the 2012 strike.

The Civic Federation also points out that state legislation remains on the books for the activation of a Chicago School Finance Authority, a legacy of the 1979 financial crisis in the district. The School Finance Authority (SFA) could potentially take over much of the district’s financial powers and authority, effectively sidelining the mayor and his appointees on the board to carry out a gutting of the schools. The *Chicago Tribune* editorial board and the financial press have been accusing Johnson and the CTU of “engineering a fiscal collapse” in order to prompt the state to take over.

Civic Federation President Joe Ferguson, a political appointee in both the Richard Daley and Rahm Emanuel administrations, noted, “It doesn’t need to be a complete takeover. It could be a partial takeover. It could be a check on the operation of the board. But what we do all know is the challenge for 2026 and beyond is way beyond everyone’s capacity, and we need to start talking in those terms about that challenge.”

CTU leaders have complained that enough revenue sources have already been found to pay for the contract at least for the present year. Johnson was able to allocate around \$300 million from tax increment financing (TIF) districts to CPS for the current year. This would largely have covered the CTU contract’s minimum cost of around \$125 million and \$175 million in pension payments Johnson pushed from the city budget onto CPS, in line with his predecessor, Lori Lightfoot.

Johnson has also said many TIF districts will not be renewed, which will free up their tax revenue to go back to the taxing bodies from which they were originally siphoned, including CPS. The union claims that in the past, financial workarounds such as the freeing up of TIF funds would have been enough to land a contract agreement, even without all future funds accounted for. Davis Gates asked in this vein, “The TIF was good for Rahm, it was good for Lori, how come it ain’t good for Brandon?”

Similarly, CTU Deputy General Counsel Thaddeus Goodchild said recently that it was “astounding” that Martinez’s “prerogatives supersede those of the mayor and the members of the Board of Education.”

The reality is that despite all the pie-in-the-sky claims about the “transformative” contract that would result from “alignment” between the union, the mayor’s office and the

CPS board, the present situation is a complete indictment of the CTU’s political strategy under the leadership of the pseudo-left Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE).

CORE’s strategy of working within the Democratic Party, funding candidates and ultimately winning control of the mayor’s office have entirely exposed the bankruptcy of its reformist perspective. Johnson, who even as a candidate indicated he was best positioned to deliver “bad news” to teachers during contract negotiations, is poised to do just that, after a year in which he deployed police against peaceful anti-genocide protesters, cleared out homeless encampments and forced immigrants out of city shelters.

Far from fighting against the imposition of an austerity contract, the union actually paused the fact-finding process begun in October that would legally lead to a strike and has been pushing furiously for a quick agreement, claiming that the contract is required to erect a “force field” around schools prior to the Trump administration taking office. Union leaders claim the contract would be able to protect the school curriculum and even immigrant students or their parents who may be targeted by ICE raids, which the Trump administration has made clear would begin in Chicago right after the inauguration.

Teachers should be under no illusions that any agreement with CPS will stop attacks by the Trump administration against educators and students, including those who are immigrants. The CORE leadership is concerned above all with maintaining its legal status and, like the rest of the Democratic Party, will stand aside as agents seize parents and even students.

The only way to fight back against the attacks on teachers, students and public education in general is through the construction of a mass movement outside of the control of the union leadership and dedicated to ending the rule of the financial oligarchy.

Join the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Committee today! Fill out the form below.



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