

The Chicago Teachers Strike and Win!

Statement by the Revolutionary Organization of Labor, USA - Sept. 20, 2012

Congratulations to the students, parents and teachers of Chicago! Congratulations to the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) local of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO (AFT)! And thanks for exposing to the peoples of the world the Wall Street ruling class interests that Democrats Rahm Emanuel, Arne Duncan and Barack Obama really represent.

On September 18th, the 800 members of the CTU's House of Delegates, voted by an overwhelming 98% to suspend the eight day old strike by the more than 26,000 CTU members, mostly teachers but with three thousand support staff, pending the full membership vote on ratification. The 98% Delegates vote is a reflection of the fact that the CTU has succeeded in forcing the powerful Chicago Democratic Party machine, now led by Mayor Rahm Emanuel, to grant substantial concessions to the teachers who are fighting not only in defense of their wages and working conditions but in defense of the 350,000 public school students in Chicago and for quality public education in the USA.

On September 10, 2012, the 26,000 CTU members struck the third largest public school system in the USA. This was the first such strike in Chicago in 25 years and was undertaken with a similarly incredible 98% of the membership vote authorizing the action. The basis for such **powerful trade union unity** is the principled nature of the teachers' demands and the principled character of their leadership.

Some Key Demands: 1. More art, music, world language and physical education teachers, especially in underfunded schools; 2. Improved conditions of buildings, air conditioning, playgrounds, science labs; 3. More

special ed teachers, social workers, and counselors in schools to help address the socio-economic problems that plague so many students in certain schools; 4. Minimum rather than maximum use of teacher



evaluations based on student test scores; 5. Job security where seniority plays large role -- including laid-off teachers being recalled anywhere they are qualified for openings; 6. Books available on the first day of class; 7. Smaller class sizes.

The principled nature of the teachers' demands earned them impressively strong support among the students and even among the parents who in so many cases are dependent upon the schools for child care. Many parents joined picket lines. With such trade union unity and community unity, including substantial Chicago labor solidarity, a number of these demands have been won.

The Leadership: In 2010, the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), led by President Karen Lewis, an Afro-American chemistry teacher, was elected as the union leadership with 60% of the vote, *union democracy in action*. CORE took a strong stance *against school privatization* and charged the incumbent United Progressive Caucus (UPC) of capitulating to corporate interests. *The new leadership cut pay for union officers and used the savings to expand outreach to the parents and community.*

In preparation for this strike showdown, President Lewis and the new union leadership had to tackle a number of major obstacles politically. At the AFT Convention at the end of July 2012, when Vice President Biden arrived on the stage, CTU President Lewis was the only member of the AFT Executive Council who did not go on stage and shake Biden's hand when called on to do so by AFT President Randi Weingarten. While every seat had an Obama-Biden 2012 sign on it, only the Chicago delegation protested, wearing Chicago Teachers red shirts and holding up "Stop Race to the Top" signs instead. This decisive break with the Democratic Party has allowed the CTU leadership to be clear-eyed in the strike crisis of the past several days.

First of all, the CTU went on strike against Mayor Emanuel, President Obama's former chief of staff and the very first person selected by Obama to join and help head up his 2008 Executive Branch team when he

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was elected president. Once they were out, AFT's Weingarten had to support her Chicago membership. And AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, who had rhetorically talked about union dissatisfaction with and "independence" from the Democrats, had to give lip service to this well organized and strongly supported strike as well. Some of the reason that Emanuel et al. thought they could crush the CTU is because AFT President Weingarten had supported teacher contracts in Cleveland and elsewhere that weakened tenure rules and linked teacher evaluation to student test scores along the lines of what Mayor Emanuel was trying to impose in Chicago. Indeed, this is the crux of the Obama/Arne Duncan Democratic Party education policies: close "underperforming schools" and open publicly unaccountable charter schools. This is what Duncan had done as CEO of the Chicago public schools before Obama tapped him to be Secretary of Education in Washington, D.C. Once he became Mayor, Emanuel appointed the current Chicago public schools CEO, Jean-Claude Brizard, a graduate of billionaire Eli Broad's leadership training institute which trains business leaders to run school districts *with a privatization agenda*. (No wonder Obama and the Democratic National Committee didn't support the recall effort on Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin!)



Despite all the obstacles facing the CTU, on Friday, September 14th, a tentative agreement was reached. Emanuel and Corporate America had "negotiated," and they expected the CTU leadership to "order" the CTU membership back to work and cause some cracks in their unity in the process. Instead, once again showing their confidence in **union democracy**, Lewis and the CTU leadership responded by holding a huge rally on Saturday and by meeting with the 800 member House of Delegates on Sunday. The Delegates decided to extend the strike at least through Tuesday, September

18th, so as to have proper time to study the tentative agreement and *to discuss it with the members* at their various workplaces.

Emanuel, the Democrat, but clearly *not* a *democrat*, sought an injunction on the basis that the strike was illegal (all of a sudden) *to force the teachers back to work*. The judge refused to give an immediate ruling, setting up a hearing for Wednesday. On Tuesday (Sept 18th) the vote of the House of Delegates was to suspend the strike, with 98% in favor, pending the full membership vote. Delegates left the hall singing "Solidarity Forever." Certainly the CTU strike has ignited the labor movement in Illinois. Already since the Chicago strike began, union teachers have gone on strike in Lake Forest, IL, Wal-Mart chain workers went out on strike near Joliet, IL and Sensata workers in Freeport, IL are camping out protesting the outsourcing of 170 jobs and planned November closing of the auto parts plant.

Confirming joint "Republicrat" rule with regard to this significant battle, Republican Vice Presidential candidate Paul Ryan stated: "We know that Rahm is not going to support our campaign, but on this issue and this day we stand with Mayor Rahm Emanuel."

Thus, in the CTU's principled and politically courageous defense of public school education, a cornerstone of democracy, the following points about **democracy** have been made much clearer: 1.) The 2012 U.S. Presidential Election is devoid of democracy, as the candidates of *both* the Democratic and Republican wings of the "Republicrat" Party represent the interests of Wall Street and finance capitalism in opposition to the interests of the working class and the oppressed masses who make up the majority of the people of the USA. 2.) Union Democracy is a wonderful thing, capable of uplifting the members of a union and its whole community, and pointing a path forward for the entire working class and the 99%. 3.) The Chicago Teachers Strike has offered us a glimpse of workers power, beautiful U.S.-style Soviet democracy that is needed to oppose, defeat and suppress the "democracy" for the Wall Street rich that is privatizing and destroying the world in which we live.

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