

# **Chicago Teachers Lead the Fight as Corporate Attacks Against Education Escalate!**

**STOP RACE to the TOP**

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Taking a major stand against school closings, privatization, large class-sizes, and high-stakes testing, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike. In doing so, Chicago public school teachers are pitting their collective will against that of Mayor Rahm Emanuel and his political allies in Chicago, Washington, DC, and throughout the country. While negotiations continue, the union's House of Delegates authorized President Karen Lewis to give the Chicago Board of Education the required 10-day strike notice at her discretion. At a time when attacks on education and public workers are escalating across the country, particularly in urban areas, the Chicago teachers' stand against these attacks is of national importance. Much is at stake.

In Chicago, the closing and privatization of public schools and health clinics, a drastic reduction in funds for education and public libraries, and major cuts in other social services, including severe cutbacks in Medicaid affecting 2.7 million people in the state, have set the stage for a confrontation between Chicago's political establishment and its teachers. The city's continued allocation of public money to private charter schools and luxury establishments while refusing to finance basic needs for public school children reflects its real priorities. The recent allocation of \$29.5 million in TIF money to the River Point Plaza in downtown Chicago is just one example. TIF (tax increment financing) money uses millions of taxpayer dollars to finance projects to benefit private developers rather than using resources to support public schools, parks, and health clinics. The mayor's proposed \$5.6 billion school budget allocates \$76 million to private charter operators while simultaneously draining Chicago Public Schools' (CPS) reserves down to zero, which downgraded the CPS bond rating. The money Chicago allocates to charters has escalated in recent years from \$30 million in 2002 to their current plan of \$500 million (half a billion) in 2012. Emanuel's recent revelation that he has set aside \$25 million for strike preparations makes clear that he can get his hands on significant funds when he wants to but chooses not to put it into the school system.

Declining investment in public education and basic social services exacerbates the class, race, and sex/gender oppression of the social system under we live. While inner-city schools are starved of resources, most elite and upper middle-class families maintain access to private or well-funded public schools. Poor and working class neighborhoods, particularly communities of color, face rising unemployment, homelessness, government repression, and incarceration. The disparity of resources allocated in urban areas can be demonstrated in many ways. A CTU analysis of class size revealed that CPS classrooms for younger children were larger than 95% of other Illinois school districts. This disparity in class size is repeated in urban areas throughout the country and is representative of a resource impoverishment comparable to many underdeveloped countries (noted by Darling-Hammond). Not only do these attacks on education severely impact learning, but the major dislocation caused by rampant school closings and arbitrary student reassignments leads to a significant increase in urban violence and gang activity. In fact, violence is escalating in the very neighborhoods hardest hit by budget cuts and school closings. When Emanuel announced the planned closing and "turnaround" of 17 Chicago schools in February, he was met with outrage and protests by community residents, including the take-over of an elementary school by parents. Ignoring these protests and the needs of the community, Mayor Emanuel continues to move ahead with his plan to reorganize and relocate 7,500 students, thus undermining entire communities. CTU President Karen Lewis called the decision to close these schools "education apartheid", an accurate assessment not only of Emanuel's actions but also of his words. In a private meeting, Emanuel made a comment to Lewis that she later reported. Ac-

According to Lewis, Emanuel said, “25% of the students in this city are never going to be anything, never going to amount to anything and he was never going to throw money at them.” (Video on CTU website) Consistent with this policy, capitalist party politicians in the Illinois legislature attempted to guarantee that Chicago did not spend money on poor kids by passing legislation restricting the rights of public workers.

## **Laws Target Workers**

In June, 2011, Democratic and Republican politicians, supported by Rahm Emanuel and backed by billionaire-financed Stand for Children, passed Illinois Senate Bill 7 (SB7) which, when combined with the 1995 Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act (CSRAA), severely limits the legal rights of public workers. One provision requires 75% of CTU members to vote for a strike for a strike to be legal, a seeming guarantee against strike action because of the difficulty of obtaining such an overwhelming vote. However in June, 90% of the entire CTU membership (24,000 teachers) voted for a strike, and 98% of those voting voted for it, reflecting a deep frustration with the closing of neighborhood schools, firing of teachers, imposition of a longer school day without compensation, and refusal to pay a previously negotiated 4% pay raise. Through this vote, the CTU temporarily outmaneuvered Mayor Emanuel, setting the stage for what may be one of the most crucial labor struggles in recent history.

Another provision of SB7 limits what the parties can negotiate and specifies that only wages can be negotiated. Everything else is thrown into a “permissive” category, so that major issues in education – class size, length of school day and year, curriculum, testing, staffing, resources, instructional periods, professional development, evaluations, job security – are off limits, unless both parties agree to negotiate over them. This gives the Chicago Board of Education and the city’s leaders effective veto power over negotiations. SB7 also requires an independent fact-finder, a plan that was intended to undermine union proposals. However, this backfired when Fact-Finder Edwin Benn recommended a 20% wage increase to match the 19.4% lengthened school day that had been instituted. The CTU’s rejected Benn’s report because it ignored the teachers’ main concerns: 1) reduced class size; 2) a rich curriculum that includes art, music, foreign languages, and physical education; and 3) a procedure for CPS to retain the qualified and experienced teachers, paraprofessionals, and clinicians who have been laid off from “turnaround” or closed schools.

## **Chicago Teachers Take a Stand**

What is significant about this struggle is that the CTU is standing up to the devastating attacks on public education orchestrated by the Democratic Party and the Obama administration and supported by its own parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, at least for now. At the recent AFT convention held in Detroit in July, the CTU delegation took a stand against Obama’s Race to the Top (RttT), the privatization of public schools, high-stakes testing, and merit pay, while highlighting the need for small classes and support services that help children succeed. The delegates publicized their position by leafleting both before and after Democratic Vice President Joseph Biden’s speech, holding up placards, wearing red CTU shirts to distinguish themselves from the other delegates who wore Democratic Party blue to welcome

Biden. Most important, CTU President Karen Lewis's refused to stand on the stage with other chapter presidents and special guests to welcome Biden. In addition to this public display of opposition, the CTU submitted multiple resolutions in support of their demands. Most of these were defeated by the manipulations of Randi Weingarten, president of the AFT, whose notorious deals and compromises on charter schools and highstakes testing have sold out teachers across the country.

The CTU's opposition to Obama's Race to the Top is crucial. RttT increases the attacks on teachers across the country, accelerating the destruction of public education set in motion by George Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB), enacted in 2002. NCLB mandated greater accountability based on testing, requiring all public schools to test children in reading and math in grades 3–8 and to report the results based on racial and ethnic groups and various classifications (income, English skills, special needs). The NCLB requirement that absolutely all students be proficient by 2014 established a series of ever-escalating sanctions that greatly expanded the federal government's role in education. Obama's RttT mandates that teacher evaluations be tied to student test scores, using so-called "valueadded" calculations that place all responsibility for the problems of US public education solely on teachers, while leaving administrators, bureaucrats, and politicians entirely off the hook. NCLB ramps up sanctions against poorly performing schools by mandating their closure and reorganization, while setting the stage to turning them over to private outfits.

## **Schools in Crisis**

The crisis in the United States public school system is one part of the decay of the entire infrastructure of the country. Whether it's roads, bridges, airports, public transportation, housing, food, water, energy, education, or health care — long-standing problems have risen to the fore in this period of economic crisis and stagnation. Despite the fact that the economy is suffering from severe shortages of skilled labor as the economy continues to move away from industrial production, the educational system is incapable of conveying even minimal literacy skills to working class and lower middle-class students. This is the crux of the current crisis in education, and it is this that the ruling elite is trying so desperately to solve. But instead of a sophisticated analysis of the state of the educational system and thoughtful measures designed to improve it, the elite, through both Democratic and Republican parties, places the entire blame on the teachers and can come up with nothing better to do than to weaken or smash the teachers' unions and farm out pieces of the school system to private enterprise.

The crisis in American education has deep economic and historical roots. Performance of American students on international tests has been and remains mediocre because of the poverty of so many of its residents. When poverty is eliminated as a factor from the educational performance calculations, US students compare well with other high-scoring countries. But the percentage of children living in poverty in the United States is higher than in more than 50% of reporting countries.

Moreover, poverty and racism are inextricably linked. The long-standing achievement gap between Black and white students has its roots in slavery and segregation. Only in the 1970's and early 80's, when US schools were at least somewhat integrated when there was significant investment in urban education, did the achievement gap narrow. In addition, states that invested in early childhood education and teacher training while increasing allocations of resources to

their public schools saw greater improvement and a more substantial narrowing of the gap. But since that time, and especially in the past few years, conditions in US schools have continued to erode.

To turn this situation around will require a greater investment in the public schools, not the elimination of funds, the firing of teachers, and privatization. Priorities to improve public education are:

1. Adequate resources (books, libraries, technology, furniture, physical education facilities, and arts and music programs) for all schools;
2. Small class sizes that foster learning and enable teachers to identify and help children who are struggling;
3. An end to dictatorial interference and harassment from ignorant and incompetent administrators, educational bureaucrats, and capitalist politicians;
4. The establishment of collaborative structures through which teachers, parents, students, and administrators, can share their ideas and come up with workable solutions to the problems facing the schools. Education requires constant feedback at every level, but it is currently squashed in most schools and school districts by self-important administrators, bureaucrats, and politicians who believe that teachers are the problem and not the solution.
5. Not least, a substantial investment in high-quality teachers who are specialists in their fields (especially in science and math). This will require a substantial increase in salaries across the board (instead of the cuts we are now seeing), far beyond anything envisaged in the paltry and divisive plans for “merit pay” now being proposed.

In today’s public schools, low pay, crippling workloads, bad working conditions, and uneducated, interfering bureaucrats force some of the best teachers to leave the profession.

Student achievement correlates highly with having highly qualified, experienced teachers in the classroom, teachers who are experts in curriculum and understand how children learn. Despite significant research demonstrating this, Obama’s Race to the Top escalates the exodus of qualified teachers and their replacement with inexperienced, unlicensed, temporary workers. RttT demands that states evaluate educational achievement by means of scores on state tests and ties teacher evaluations to their students’ scores, using “value-added” calculations. But this approach is flawed. John Corcoran, an economist, found that the margin of error in value-added calculations ranges from 13 to 79 percent. Gary Rubinstein, a math teacher at Stuyvesant High School in NYC and Teach for American (TFA) alum, found similar results, noting that the same teachers can get wildly different percent rankings in “value-added” calculations from one year to the next as well as in the same year with different classes. These and other analyses demonstrate that there is no strong correlation between student test scores and teacher performance. Because of the flawed assessment measures demanded by RttT, many excellent teachers have been and will continue to be poorly rated and removed, leaving schools with ever fewer experienced teachers.

This does not mean that tests are not useful – they might be, under much different circumstances. But test scores do not reveal the whole picture. Annual student tests capture a child’s

work in one subject for a few hours on one day under intense pressure. If students are sick or exhausted, they will not perform at their best. Standardized tests that attempt to measure overall competence in a subject often undervalue a student's specific strengths. A true assessment of student growth requires multiple sources and is most helpful when it is targeted, specific, and timely. When standardized tests are overvalued and teachers are encouraged to "teach to the test," deeper learning characterized by knowledge application and critical thinking is often neglected. In the current test-driven frenzy that dominates education, the movement against testing is positive.

The escalating crisis in education, propelled by the common goals of NCLB and RttR, can be seen in rampant cheating and the mounting attempts to "game" the system on the part of school administrators — including the manipulation of data, forcing low-performing kids to drop out or be absent from school on test days, pressuring staff to help students cheat, and actually changing students' test answers — that have been exposed in the major cheating scandals in Atlanta, Baltimore, Pennsylvania, and Washington, DC.

## **Democrats Scapegoat Unions**

If quality teachers are essential to good education, why do Obama and Democratic Party politicians force an evaluation system on students and teachers that mis-evaluates quality? If "teaching to the test" (which is what occurs when evaluations are tied entirely to high stakes tests), works against quality education, why does RttT increase the importance of these tests rather than improving teacher education and funding resources? The fact is that Democratic and Republican politicians have no solution to the crisis in public education.

Flowing from their mistaken and self-serving assumption that the problem with the schools is the teachers, Obama's RttT weakens teacher unions and to opens the door for privatization of the public schools. Among other things, RttT lifts the caps on charter school openings, ushering in a massive increase in private charter schools. Privatization removes virtually all public control over the schools by putting taxpayer money into the hands of private school corporations and foundations. Accountability goes to the owners who expect to make profits. Over time, charter schools will become an increasing financial drain on public resources, costing taxpayers more than public schools but making no improvement in the education of children.

In fact, charter schools perform no better than public schools, and like the public schools, their quality varies tremendously. A 2009 Stanford study found that charter schools were no better than public schools with 17% of charters scoring better, 37% doing worse, and 46% showing no difference. It is also important to note that most charter schools regularly force kids with greater challenges — those who are English language learners and those with special needs — out of the schools. The majority of charter schools are also unable to keep an experienced staff as teachers are forced to work extremely long days and are given limited time to plan. In sum, charter schools provide no solution for the crisis in education; instead, the privatization takes the schools out of public control and turns the children into the pawns of profiteers.

What is most revealing about Obama's RttT is that it has joined the Democrats and Republicans together in a united attack against teachers and public workers. More specifically, these attacks reveal a fundamental contradiction within the Democratic Party. This is a contradiction between the fact that it represents and is controlled by corporate interests, yet simultaneously claims to represent the working and middle classes and relies on the unions and other popular

organizations to mobilize its voting base. From today's vantage point, it looks as if the Democratic Party establishment is preparing to sell out the unions that have long been a major base of its support. Because of this, significant number of teachers, who would otherwise have voted for the Democratic Party, are now having serious reservations about this because of the role the Obama administration has played in attacking teachers and undermining education.

Prior to RttT, much of the attacks on teachers had been mounted from the right, but the coordinated attacks against teachers and the teachers' union today make the Democrats' shift increasingly clear. Thus, Obama's applauding of the firing of the entire faculty of Central High School in Providence, Rhode Island, in February of this year was no accident. Nor was his silence when public workers' unions were under vicious attack in Wisconsin.

Central to the capitalists' coordination of anti-teacher educational policy have been wealthy foundations. Influence from and connections among well-financed political allies of the capitalist class have grown geometrically over the last decade. Some of the most well known include the Education Action Group (with ties to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Stand for Children, which has played a major role in organizing against teachers in Chicago), Education Reform Now, Walton Family Foundation, Eli & Edythe Broad Foundation, Democrats for Educational Reform, Carnegie Corporation, Annenberg Foundation, and the Koch Brothers. Providing legislative support for these organizations, ALEC, the American Legislative Exchange Council, is a coalition of conservative lawmakers and corporations organized to influence political bodies. They write "model" policy legislation to increase privatization and have been instrumental in the flooding of right-wing legislation throughout the country, including legislation restricting voting rights and advocating stand your ground gun laws. In addition, Pearson, a provider of a vast array of educational materials (including the Common Core, NCLB mandated reading programs, SAT and GED testing, etc.) is connected with ALEC, as well as many of the foundations listed above, placing it in the center of profiteering off the destruction of public schools.

## **Chicago's Struggle Is Our Struggle**

In many ways, the confrontation in Chicago illustrates what is happening throughout the country – growing privatization, increasing class sizes, cutbacks in school allocations, layoffs, school closings, and teacher firings. In Detroit, Philadelphia and Muskegon Heights, the situation may be even worse – the privatization of schools is farther along while poverty is more widespread and deeper. Detroit is under the jurisdiction of an emergency manager who imposed a 3-year contract on teachers that allows up to 41 students in classes in grades K-3, 46 in grades 4-5, and an impossible 61 students in grades 6-12. The city of Muskegon Heights, Michigan, was one of the first to turn over the education of ALL its students to a private charter company, Mosaica, despite its poor ratings (the cost has been kept secret). With a shortfall over \$200 million, Philadelphia announced plans to close 64 schools over the next five years, increase charter school enrollment to 40%, and divide up the remaining schools into networks so it can cut the wages and benefits of public workers. While projected charter school expansion in Philadelphia was expected to cost \$39 million, an updated assessment recently placed the cost at \$139 million, a \$100 million cost overrun! In California, schools face severe cutbacks, layoffs, salary reductions, unpaid furloughs, and huge class size increases. Many districts operate on negative budgets. In Oakland, when students were transferred to other schools because of privatization and closures,



they had to transport themselves because no funds were available for transportation. Yet charter enrollment more than quadrupled in the city. After Hurricane Katrina destroyed much of the infrastructure of New Orleans, city officials reopened all public schools as a charter operation, leaving students and teachers without recourse. The number of school closings, cutbacks, and layoffs, as well as financial emergencies and educational catastrophes throughout the country is too long to list. It is for this reason that all eyes are on Chicago!

## **Build National Solidarity!**

Chicago teachers have linked their struggle with the needs of all students by speaking out against large class sizes and a narrow test-driven curriculum, and advocating for art, music, foreign languages, and gym in Chicago Public Schools. The CTU is raising some of the most important issues facing public schools today – inequality in funding and the quality of education for students. Can Chicago teachers force Emanuel and the Chicago ruling class to provide needed resources to working class children and their teachers in Chicago? If the CTU strikes, collective solidarity and direct action will be essential!

To win this fight, the CTU must organize a massive, broad-based strike support campaign that involves parents, neighbors, and community organizations, and links up with other public and private workers and their unions throughout Chicago, surrounding neighborhoods, the state and the country. In preparation for the overwhelming strike vote, the CTU organized a rally in May that drew over 10,000 teachers and helped to build significant community support among teachers and supporters. This kind of mobilization, which reflects the deep community roots of the CTU leadership and membership, will be crucial in this struggle.

In order to build widespread support, parent-teacher-student committees at each school are needed to organize picket lines, community rallies, and demonstrations. Making connections to other public workers is essential. Public workers, particularly the police and firemen in Chicago, are looking to the teachers to defend public workers' rights and set a standard to help them in the future. Special efforts must be made to reach those workers as well as teachers and other staff in charter schools who can become allies. Outreach efforts to small businesses and neighborhood organizations in each community will help to build support and make important connections within communities. Teachers throughout the country need to put Randi Weingarten on notice for her complicity in the attacks on teachers by demanding national support for the CTU strike in local chapters – direct actions, rallies, and job actions as well as financial and organizational support.

Chicago teachers and supporters need to reach out to other workers around the state and country to build toward a series of national one-day strikes that can build momentum. Outreach to different struggles, such as the anti-foreclosure movement, antiracist campaigns, and Occupy Wall Street, will help to make the kinds of connections that can build broad support and momentum for the strike.

Only by understanding how we are all connected can we mount the militant mass struggle needed to win.

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