

Chicago teachers in forefront of fight against bipartisan assault on education

By [Joseph Kishore](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Global Research, September 12, 2012

[World Socialist Web Site](#)

The strike by 26,000 Chicago teachers completed its second day on Tuesday. Tens of thousands of teachers and their supporters gathered at a mass rally in downtown Chicago, filling several city blocks.

Striking teachers march to rally in downtown Chicago

The large turnout reflected widespread opposition to the dictates of Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) authorities and broad support for the teachers among Chicago workers.

CPS is insisting that teachers accept an evaluation procedure that will undermine their job security, combined with a merit pay scheme that will more closely tie pay to test scores. The assault on the teachers is part of a broader attack on public education that is backed by the entire corporate and political establishment.

To underscore his contempt for the teachers and his determination to break their strike, Emanuel for the second day in a row released a statement from one of the city schools being kept open with non-union personnel. "This was a strike of choice, a bad choice for our children and not necessary," he declared.

He reiterated his demand that principals be given a freer hand to hire and fire teachers based on "accountability," i.e., standardized test scores, without regard to experience. "It is about who is best for the kids. It is about raising the standards, raising the qualities in the schools," he declared.

Emanuel was flanked by "pro-reform" principals, including Ethan Netterstron, who insisted, "It's for us to hire whoever we feel is the best fit for our school. We want people that would add to the culture and climate we're already building."

This assault on teachers' job security will allow the city to push out better-paid, more experienced teachers and replace them with ones who are younger, less experienced and lower-paid. Similar motives are behind the administration's drive to more closely tie teacher evaluations—which are the basis for pay and tenure decisions—to test scores.

The claim that these measures are motivated by a desire to do "what is best for the kids" and to hold teachers "responsible" turns reality on its head. It is the teachers who are seeking to defend the rights of the students and opposing the attack on the public schools

being carried out by the so-called “reformers.”

Many teachers on the picket lines have pointed to the devastating impact of budget cuts and poverty on the ability of students to learn. Schools have been allowed to fall apart, with many lacking air conditioning and other requirements of a decent learning environment.

Conditions of poverty and mass unemployment dominate large parts of cities such as Chicago. Over a third of Chicago’s children live in poverty and more than 80 percent qualify for free or subsidized lunches because their families are low-income.

It is the political representatives of the corporate and financial elite and the capitalist profit system who are responsible for these conditions, not the teachers. Over the past three decades, the public education system has been increasingly subordinated to the demands of big business.

CPS is deliberately starving the most troubled schools—generally in the poorest areas—of funds for infrastructure improvement. The *Chicago Tribune* in December quoted CPS Chief Operating Officer Tim Cawley as stating, “If we think there’s a chance that a building is to be closed in the next five to 10 years, if we think it’s unlikely it’s going to continue to be a school, we’re not going to invest in that building.”

Funds have been directed instead to schools slated for conversion to charter operations, a giant money-making operation for charter school companies and investors in Chicago and across the country. The Emanuel administration has made it clear it intends to close dozens of public schools over the next five years while opening some 60 new charter schools in addition to the 100 charter schools that are already in operation.

The horrific conditions in major urban centers are the product of the destruction of infrastructure and industry and an offensive against working class living standards going back decades. Now the same ruling class that is responsible for the crisis is utilizing it to justify the destruction of all of the gains previously won by teachers in decades of struggle.

The ruling class in the United States has a long-term strategy of undermining and dismantling the public education system. This is why the entire political establishment is viciously opposed to the Chicago teachers strike.

It is not simply a matter of one city. The concern is that if the Chicago teachers are not decisively defeated, teachers throughout the country—and workers in general—will be encouraged to fight back.

Steven Greenhouse, writing in the *New York Times* on Tuesday, pointed to this fact when he noted, “In community after community—even in major cities with strong pro-union traditions, like Los Angeles and Philadelphia—teachers’ unions have faced a push for concessions, whether it is to scrap tenure protections or to rely heavily on student test results to determine who gets a raise and who gets fired.”

Since 2000, charter school enrollments have grown by 17 percent every year, while public school enrollment has remained flat. The process has been intensified in the wake of the economic and financial crisis. Philadelphia announced earlier this year plans to ultimately turn the entire system over to for-profit charter companies. This has already been done in Highland Park, Michigan and is being planned in Muskegon Heights, Michigan.

The unanimity of the political establishment behind the implementation of such education “reforms” was highlighted by the intervention Monday of the Republican Party presidential campaign in support of Emanuel, a Democrat and former White House chief of staff for President Obama. Republican vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan explicitly declared his support for Emanuel’s hard-line stand against the teachers and insisted that “education reform is a bipartisan issue.”

The Obama administration’s pose of official “neutrality” in the strike is a fraud. Emanuel is Obama’s right-hand man. Since taking office, Obama has gone further than the Republicans in promoting charter schools and the privatization of public education. He has outdone his predecessor George W. Bush in scapegoating teachers and encouraging school closures and mass layoffs.

Public school systems nationwide, starved of funding as a result of the economic crisis, have eliminated more than 300,000 teaching positions since 2008. Obama has responded by tying meager federal funds to the elimination of restraints on charter schools and the implementation of test-based evaluation systems.

In this process, the trade unions—including the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)—have been active participants. Whatever their occasional criticisms of Emanuel and other “reformers,” the unions have collaborated every step of the way. At every point they sacrifice the interests of teachers to maintain their political alliance with the Democratic Party.

The CTU put off the strike deadline until after last week’s Democratic National Convention to help the Democrats and Obama posture as friends of working people, even as Emanuel and CPS, with the support of Obama, were preparing strikebreaking operations and a witch-hunt against the teachers.

Since taking office in Chicago, Emanuel has launched one attack on teachers after another, beginning with the rescinding of a promised wage increase. The response of the CTU has been to retreat and seek accommodations. This has only encouraged deeper attacks.

Behind the backs of teachers, the CTU leadership of President Karen Lewis and Vice President Jesse Sharkey helped ensure the passage last year of Senate Bill 7, which restricts the right to strike and expands the use of standardized tests.

The same process is underway in the current strike. While Lewis told the crowd of teachers Tuesday it would be “lunacy” to think the contract would be settled that day, the union is scrambling to reach an agreement with the administration.

Carol Caref, the head of research and teacher evaluation at the CTU, said the union would support an evaluation process implemented earlier this year, which bases 25 percent of teacher ratings on “student growth” as measured by standardized test scores. CPS is demanding that this figure be increased to 40 percent in the fifth year of a new contract.

Caref indicated the union’s willingness to compromise on this issue, saying, “Our proposal is ‘no, we’ll accept what you’re going to implement for this year, but we want you to keep it that way unless we jointly agree to change it.”

For its part, the AFT and its president, Randi Weingarten, have stated that they support the expansion of charters and merit schemes for teachers. The union has asked only that it

retain a “seat at the table” in imposing these policies.

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Articles by: [Joseph Kishore](#)

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