

Neoliberal Democrats Attack: Chicago Teachers Strike

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Global Research, September 11, 2012

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

The unionized teachers in the nation's third-largest school district went on strike Monday. The call to strike from the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) came after receiving the authorization of 98 percent of its members. The dynamics of the struggle in Chicago are ones well known to teachers the nation over. In the name of school "reform," the administrators and board members of the Chicago Public School (CPS) system have sought to impose a merit-based pay scheme for teachers based on standardized testing. Simultaneously, CPS has dangled the promise of "school choice" in front of parents and students in an effort to expand publically funded, privately run charter schools staffed by non-union teachers. The self-proclaimed reformers have all the while tirelessly maintained the now stale mantra that the fault for failing schools lies with subpar teachers.

Of course, Chicago teachers—like workers across the nation—also face the threat of pay cuts and increased health care premiums. Chicago teachers have already forgone a contractual four percent pay increase.

The national significance of the Chicago struggle is that the Obama administration's neoliberal inspired Race to the Top education initiative (favoring so-called merit pay and charter schools) was born in Chicago. In fact, President Obama's Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, was the former head of the CPS and chief architect of Race to the Top. In other words, what happens in the Chicago school system is a harbinger of what is to come nationally.

Quite tellingly, the man leading the fight against the CTU in Chicago today is none other than the city's Democratic mayor, and former Obama chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel. Yet despite leaving the White House, Emanuel (who sends his own kids to private school) retains close ties to President Obama. Until a week ago, Emanuel served as the co-chair of the president's national campaign, having since seamlessly transitioned to preside over the president's faltering super PAC, Priorities USA Action.

There is little question, then, that if Obama were to choose to intervene on behalf of the union in Chicago, the conflict could be swiftly settled. Emanuel would quickly bow to any pressure from the White House. And it would also appear at first glance that such an intervention would be politically advantageous for the president who once promised labor to "walk on that picket line with you" while campaigning four years ago. After all, a confrontation in his hometown between a closely allied Democrat and organized labor would appear to present a danger to Obama's reelection hopes. As [In These Times'](#) David Morberg wrote of the potential threat to Obama, "By provoking a strike, the mayor risks public disapproval, and—as a key fundraiser now for a pro-Obama super-PAC—hurting the Obama campaign."

But such an analysis fails to account for where the Democrats actually raise their funds. According to the [Center for Responsive Politics](#), the financial sector is the top contributor to the Democrats—with Wall Street lining Democratic pockets to the tune of \$40 million so far in the 2012 election cycle. This compares to the \$3 million contributed by labor. Thus, it is Wall Street that Obama and his chief fundraiser Emanuel must appease, not labor. And Emanuel's neoliberal styled school reform in Chicago is a long-favored Wall Street project.

As a 2010 [New York Times](#) story noted, Wall Street has become the main driver behind the charter school movement. As the paper reported, “the money managers are drawn to the businesslike way in which many charter schools are run; their focus on results, primarily measured by test scores; and, not least, their union-free work environments, which give administrators flexibility to require longer days and a longer academic year.”

Improving education, we see, is of little true concern for Wall Street school “reformers.” Instead, the primary incentive behind the interest in public education by financial elites is in the expansion of the insidious neoliberal doctrine. After all, charter schools are an indispensable means through which to privatize public education as a whole. And the privatization of all remaining public assets is, of course, a fundamental tenet of neoliberalism.

And it's easy to see why the privatization of public schooling is so prized. To begin with, there is the monetary factor. A privatized educational system would allow Wall Street to commodify education, paving the way for the transfer of yet further public wealth into the private coffers of the financial class. Much the same as has already been done to a large extent to national defense and public prisons, to take but two examples. And there is indeed much wealth to siphon from public education, as a [2012 Census report](#) placed the value of the U.S. public educational system at just under \$600 billion.

The other reason behind elite interest in school reform pertains to access to education. The elite driven attack on public education is an attack meant to roll back equal access to education won through working class struggle. We can already see the fruits of such a nefarious campaign in the skyrocketing cost of a university education, which is quickly pricing all but the elite out of an opportunity to pursue a college degree. In short then, the ascendant elite of the neoliberal era, after waging a staggeringly successful three decade long assault on the working class, now seek to cement their gains and privileged class status by targeting the institution of public education. They seek to deprive the working class of one of the last remaining vestiges of class mobility.

“Class consciousness is not equally characteristic of all levels of American society,” as C. Wright Mills observed, “it is most apparent in the upper class.”

Teacher unions, though, are the last remaining obstacle standing in the way of a complete privatization of public education. Something those on Wall Street are all too aware of, and have tirelessly sought to counter. As the *Times* article noted, “Hedge fund executives are thus emerging as perhaps the first significant political counterweight to the powerful teachers unions.” And with both parties completely beholden to the hedge fund managers on Wall Street, we see the current bipartisan push for radical school reform—now coming to a head in Chicago, where a neoliberal Democrat leads the attack.

The very fate of the U.S. public education system promises to be decided in the outcome of struggles like that now transpiring in Chicago, along with countless similar struggles in

communities of all sizes across the nation. All those valuing public education, then, must stand in solidarity with the striking teachers of Chicago. For only through such an organized fightback and the use of the greatest working class weapon—the strike—can the elite attack on public education be repelled. It's a fight that must be engaged; a fight that must be won.

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