

Chicago Teachers Union Ratifies Contract in the Aftermath of 11 Day Strike

81% of members of the CTU voted in favor of deal with the city

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Global Research, November 21, 2019

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Chicago educators on November 16 approved by a wide margin the contract negotiated by their union leadership.

On October 17, 25,000 Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) members walked off the job demanding better salaries and working conditions among other issues.

The strike also was joined by members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) which reached a tentative agreement prior to the teachers. A division of SEIU represents thousands of security guards and teachers' assistants in Chicago Public Schools system.

An October 30 tentative agreement between the CTU and the city administration was agreed upon by the executive board ending the strike paving the way for a return to classes for 350,000 students on November 1. The deal created the conditions for schools to open fully staffed since the SEIU said it would not return to work until the city administration reached an agreement with the CTU.

This agreement guarantees all CTU members a 16% salary increase over the five-year life of the contract. The City of Chicago has also pledged to invest \$35 million into the school system in order to reduce class sizes, placing at least one nurse and a social worker in every building by 2023.

Public support for the strike was widespread throughout the city and around the United States as school systems have come under tremendous pressure due to privatization of services, the proliferation of charter schools and tax-funded vouchers for private educational institutions. Although Chicago is a major center for industrial production, retail outlets and finance capital, the majority African American and Latinx communities still suffer from disproportionate allocations for schools.

Many of the students attending the Chicago Public Schools come from families living just above or below the poverty lines. A housing crisis which has plagued many large urban areas has impacted Chicago with the razing of public housing complexes, an epidemic of home foreclosures and the rising costs of rental units.

The recent work stoppage was the second of its kind since 2012. Nonetheless, it appears as if the situation has worsened for students, service employees and teachers over the last seven years.

Two issues raised by the CTU during the strike appear to have remained unresolved: the growing demand for affordable housing and the need to address the shrinking availability of trained librarians within the CPS. Since the previous strike in 2012, the number of librarians has declined.

[An article](#) published in the November 8 edition of American Libraries Magazine says of the situation in Chicago that:

“Roughly 80% of the 514 district-run schools in the CPS system are without a librarian, and Nora Wiltse, the only CPS librarian at the bargaining table during the negotiations, says she believes the situation is likely to get worse under the new contract. Wiltse, a librarian at Coonley Elementary School who has pressed for more funding for librarians since 2012, says there are only 108 full-time working librarians in the district. That’s down from 454 librarians in the 2012–2013 school year, the year of the last Chicago Teachers Union strike.”

The lack of available librarians is the direct result of the austerity which has impacted public schools. In Chicago many of the librarians have either been laid off, resigned or found positions in other sectors.

Some more affluent areas of the city have kept school libraries open through parental and community volunteers. Nonetheless, this is not necessarily an option for distressed neighborhoods and it does not address the pressing need for personnel trained in information science.

This same above-mentioned report published by American Libraries Magazine continues by emphasizing:

“While the new contract commits funding to 120 schools in economically depressed parts of the city to create new positions—though Wiltse says the language of the contract allows the funds to be used for programming or materials, not necessarily for hiring new employees—principals are tasked with making tough decisions on where to allocate those dollars. They could opt to bring librarians back to their schools, but they likely won’t, Wiltse says. ‘This contract had a lot of really big wins for our students, but it’s not going to help the lack of librarians in our school system,’ she says.”

The Chicago Administration and Labor Relations

Chicago’s new Mayor Lori Lightfoot, the first woman and only third African American to serve in that position, was elected to office in April of this year amid a groundswell of dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party political machine. Lightfoot pledged to improve the social conditions of the working class and poor residents of this municipality of 2.7 million people.

However, the mayor failed to negotiate an agreement with the CTU that could have avoided the 11-day strike. Tensions between the administration and the CTU continued after the tentative agreement was announced on October 30 as representatives of the union refused to appear in a proposed joint press conference with Lightfoot.

CTU President Jesse Sharkey wrote an open letter to the public after the tentative

agreement in which he characterized the political atmosphere in the city as lacking representation on the part of the electorate to choose members of the CPS board. The board is selected by the mayor making all of its members political appointees of the city administration.

The [letter](#) also went on to address broader social issues underlying the strike, stressing:

“While a linchpin in our bargaining was the demand to lift our paraprofessionals out of poverty, this was not a strike solely about wages and benefits. We returned to our school communities with the same pay increase that was on the table before our strike. We fought, instead, to shift CPS policy away from a relentless agenda of austerity and privatization toward real student needs, and, by extension, the needs of the neighborhoods our school communities anchor. We fought for the common good of students, and CPS must now — for the first time in decades — invest in the bare minimum: a nurse in every school every day; social workers and counselors; and manageable class sizes, especially in schools with urgent needs.”

Chicago Strike Representative of Nationwide Labor Struggles in Education Sector

The Chicago Teachers’ strike follows similar actions over the last year-and-a-half. Beginning with an unexpected statewide strike in West Virginia, teachers continued to demand better wages and working conditions along with pension guarantees in other districts in Oklahoma, North Carolina, Arizona, Kentucky, Arkansas and Colorado.

Strikes occurred in 2018 and 2019 in Los Angeles and Oakland, California. Similar labor actions have taken place among bus drivers in Georgia and part-time faculty members in Virginia. This trend has been labelled #RedforEd.

November 19 was a day of action by the Indiana State Teachers Association and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) which stayed away from the classroom to stage a rally at the Capitol building in Indianapolis. The union websites published testimonials from teachers deploring the deteriorating conditions under which they are working.

City administrations and school districts are increasingly subjected to the withholding of tax revenues for the purpose of funding high profile prestige economic projects owned and controlled by capitalist corporations. The Lincoln Yards Development in Chicago is a prime example of this process where taxpayers in the city are mandated to provide \$1.3 billion in Tax Increment Funding (TIF).

A major community struggle aimed at blocking the transferal of public funds for corporate profit-making projects is underway in Chicago. Mayor Lightfoot while running for office said she had reservations about the Lincoln Yard Development and its reliance on TIF. Nevertheless, after being elected, Lightfoot gave her support to the project along with a majority of the Board of Alderman.

The Chicago Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights is suing Sterling Bay, the Lincoln Yards Development leader, saying that the utilization of TIF violates the laws of the State of Illinois which suggests that the funds should be invested in distressed communities for the benefit of the people who live there.

Aneel Chablani, chief counsel for the Lawyers Committee, said of the [legal ramifications of](#)

[the project:](#)

“It just doesn’t comply with the state statute – and that’s \$1.3 billion over the next 23 years that should be going to the general tax base. Another goal though is to really step back with the entire TIF program that the city has been administering and to evaluate the kind of impact it’s having on increasing wealth inequality in our city on perpetuating residential racial segregation and economic segregation.”

These issues can potentially link the labor unions with community-based movements against austerity. The current phase of capitalist development requires even greater levels of worker exploitation and the expropriation of public funds for private investments which further enrich the billionaire ruling class.

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