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By George Marlowe
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Bernie Sanders, Democrats claim “victory” as Chicago teachers denounce union’s sellout agreement

After the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) shut down the powerful 11-day strike of more than

25,000 teachers last week, the Democratic Party and the media have rushed to celebrate the

strike’s end and the sellout tentative agreement as a huge “victory.”

Despite the official celebration, the CTU’s tentative agreement for a five-year contract entirely

accepts the terms set by Chicago Democratic Mayor Lori Lightfoot.

Opposition to the contract among teachers was widespread as soon as the CTU announced the

deal. “Those 10 days were a waste! CTU played us as pawns,” said Michelle on the CTU’s Facebook page. “The rank-and-file doesn’t want this!” added Veronica. Kim said, “They sold us

out!” Another teacher, Elizabeth, added, “Horrible contract!”

Chicago teachers fought a bitter battle in one of the longest strikes in three decades, but the

CTU and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) prevented the strike from developing into

a direct conflict with the Democratic Party, which controls Chicago.

Last week, Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders began the victory lap for the CTU's sabotage of the strike, according to the Chicago Tribune.

After CTU President Jesse Sharkey ended the strike following his meeting with Lightfoot in City

Hall, Sanders called him to praise the union's sellout. "I just called to congratulate you and the

union," Sanders told Sharkey, "on what looked to me like a very significant victory at a time of

having a major funding crisis and staffing crisis in public education. You guys have won a victory that will not only be for Chicago but be for the whole country. So very proud of what you

have accomplished. Look forward to working with you in the future."

The tentative agreement is no victory for teachers in Chicago or across the country as Sanders

proclaims. The deal is in fact virtually indistinguishable from the proposals made by Lightfoot

prior to the strike.

Lightfoot called for a five-year contract and a 16 percent raise over five years, with increases in

health care contributions in the fourth and fifth year. The CTU tentative agreement adopts these terms with premium increases of 0.25 percent and 0.5 percent in the final years. The bulk of the pay increase this year will also be eaten up by the concessions the union made over

make-up days, with Lightfoot and CPS agreeing to only five paid days. The CTU also gave up on

prep time, a major demand of teachers.

While the union claims that it has won many gains in the contract on class sizes and staffing,

they are largely toothless and rely on the creation of new joint labor-management committees

between the union and the school board. Such joint committees will only further integrate the

CTU in the restructuring and privatization of public education.

Even as the agreement claims that CPS will provide “adequate social workers and nurses,” only

one per school will be provided if “there are a sufficient number of qualified candidates.” The

school district could easily fail to qualify any candidates to prevent hiring. Moreover, these

measures will only take full effect, if at all, at the end of the contract.

Most glaringly, class size caps for K-8 classrooms are between 29 and 31 students for the first

year but will then increase to 31 in the second year in July of 2020! The agreement also states

there will be only one case manager for every 105-175 students.

“How am I supposed to tell my parents that we went on strike for 10 days and we still won’t

have under 31 students in our first-grade classroom?” said Becky, a teacher angered by the increase in class size caps for the second year.

A paltry sum of \$35 million will be made available each year to address overcrowding, with the

input of the joint committees. None of these caps will seriously be enforced, as has been the

case. Multiple schools today have classrooms with 40 or more students.

From the outset, Lightfoot said there was “no money” for public education in a city that is home to more than a dozen billionaires and numerous Fortune 500 companies. CTU President

Sharkey and Vice President Stacy Davis-Gates pleaded with Lightfoot to be their “partner.”

Towards the end of the strike, CPS and Lightfoot ruthlessly threatened to cut off healthcare for

teachers if the strike continued into November.

Even the paltry funding promises may never materialize. Paul Vallas, the former CPS CEO,

spoke to Crain’s Chicago Business and questioned where the school district would find the money to fund the contract. “It’s going to be impossible for them to come up with that much

dough,” Vallas said, “without major tax increases if [Governor J.B.] Pritzker does not fully fund

the state’s new school-aid formula.” For his part, Pritzker has a fortune of over \$3.4 billion.

Prior to the outbreak of the strike, Sanders spoke at the CTU’s headquarters in September to

provide cover for the union’s efforts to prevent a walkout. Unable to contain the opposition of

teachers to the social crisis they face in the classrooms, however, the CTU was forced to call a

strike hoping it would be a “short” one.

Elizabeth Warren and the AFT’s Randi Weingarten then descended to the pickets to give lip

service to the strike even as Warren has promoted the proliferation of charter schools. In the

face of mass teacher strikes over the last two years, the AFT and the unions have worked to

prevent a nationwide strike of teachers and other sections of the working class.

The most naked subservience of the CTU to the Democratic Party was demonstrated by Sharkey’s phone call with presidential candidate Joe Biden in the middle of the strike, which

became a campaign advertisement. Biden, no friend of public education, oversaw a nationwide

attack on teachers and schools under the Obama administration.

By last week, the political establishment put immense pressure on the CTU to end the strike as

quickly as possible under Lightfoot's terms. Last Wednesday the union hastily called an emergency House of Delegates meeting of teachers from every school to rapidly vote on a 41-

page agreement that most had barely any time to study. Delegates approved the agreement 364-242, with four abstentions, amidst immense opposition.

Teachers now have 10 days after the announcement of the deal and the end of the strike to vote on the new agreement.

The sellout by the CTU can and must be opposed. Teachers should vote no and oppose the attacks on public education by the union, Lightfoot and the Democratic Party. Teachers should

study the contract closely, discuss it with their coworkers before voting and fight to expand

their strike by linking up with the tens of thousands of autoworkers currently in a contract battle with General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler.

In order to wage such a struggle, teachers have to form new rank-and-file committees, independent of the CTU, to fight for higher salary increases, smaller class sizes and more.

Immense resources exist for the funding of high-quality education in this country and internationally. But these resources must be put under the control of the working class and redistributed to meet vast social needs, not the needs of Wall Street and the financial elite.

Contact the WSWS Teachers Newsletter today to get involved and take up this fight.

5 November 2019