

International Communist Current

Solidarity with the Chicago Teachers!

On Monday, September 10th 2012, 26,000 teachers in Chicago struck for the first time in 25 years and after years of suffering attacks on their benefits, wage freezes, and ever more appalling and degrading working conditions.

The situation of teachers

This strike is in continuity with those that have sprung up during the summer by Con-Edison workers in New York City, the janitors in Houston, the pizza workers at Palermo pizza factory in Milwaukee, Wisconsin -to mention just some of the better publicized strikes- and, stretching back more than one year, with the Verizon workers strike, in New York City, and the Madison, Wisconsin public workers mobilizations. Teachers are finally catching up! As part of the working class, teachers have not been spared by the economic crisis and our rulers' relentless attacks against their living and working standards. Yet, because of their position as a part of the public sector in charge of educating the future generation of workers to fulfill the needs of capitalism's drive for profit and competition, teachers have been particularly denigrated and demonized by a brutal media campaign which has two fundamental aims:

1. To divide the working class, to pit one sector of it against another
2. To justify the draconian attacks against job security, benefits, and working conditions with the claim of a much needed "education reform".

These attacks and media campaign are an international phenomenon taking place in France, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Holland, Italy, Great Britain, Germany, Austria, and the rest of the world. The reactions have often been massive not only in the European countries but also in India, in Africa (Swaziland) and Latin America. The mobilization of the Chicago teachers inscribes them in the international arousal of working class combativeness against the bosses' attacks.

Why are teachers striking?

There are many reasons for teachers' discontent. Regardless of Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel's claim

that the strike has no economic cause and, on this ridiculous basis, his request that an injunction be brought against the 'illegally' striking union, there are plenty of economic concerns that have moved the teachers to strike: a longer school day and year; a freeze on health insurance contribution rates; the introduction of a new teacher evaluation tied to students' test performance, i.e. an attack on job security, particularly in the context of the threatened closure of at least 100 schools; and more. The 'wage increase' peddled by the contract would not even be enough to pay for the extended school day and year, and they call it an increase! Are these not economic issues?? Only our bosses and rulers, who have no economic concerns to keep them awake at night, can conceive of these attacks as non-economic! But of course, teachers are totally correct in going beyond the economic issues. They command the respect of all their class brothers and sisters by fighting for their dignity as human beings, by refusing to subject their passion for teaching to a matter measurable by standardized tests; and by refusing to subject their students to the bosses' mentality and practice that views human beings as objects to quantify according to the law of capitalist profitability and competition, reducing humans to mere commodity to sell or toss away. This in essence is the meaning of their vaunted education "reform"! It amounts to an actuarial calculation: how much are the bosses willing to 'waste' on public education in light of the restructuring of the workforce forced upon them by the relentless economic crisis of capitalism! We can only say to our fellow teachers: We admire and support your courage! You are an inspiration for all of us in your same conditions!

What is the most effective way to struggle?

In the media, the ruling class and bosses express their concern at what this strike will mean for the perspective of re-electing a Democratic president versus a Republican. Are they worried that the working class will more and more be able to see through their smoke and mirror mystifications and realize that whether painted blue or red, the size, aims, and content of the attacks is virtually the same? If they are worried that the working class puts it in its head that the real struggle has to be waged in the streets, alongside other workers, and not at the ballot box, the working class would do well to reflect about the role each party plays in the implementation of the attacks, and hence ask the question: who is our real friend? Who do we need to turn to for help? Is the official “unionism” the answer to this question? How can the answer be “yes”, when the union leaders negotiate with the bosses behind closed doors? How can it be possible they are our friends when contract after contract our working and living/economic conditions have deteriorated? How to believe them when they trumpet what to every worker is a defeat as a “victory” because it could have been even “worse”? Isn’t this what Karen Lewis has had the nerve to say when she peddled that Rham Emanuel scaled down his proposal of having the teachers evaluated on the basis of students’ test performance from 40% to 25%? But, if we cannot trust the official union, what else do we have?

Take it to the street and the General Assembly!

The most effective way to wage a struggle is by establishing open General Assemblies, as workers have historically done and are re-learning to do. We have seen these first attempts at re-taking the destiny of the struggle in our own hands in Spain, during the Indignado movement, and here in the States, by the Occupy movement. What these movements point to is the need to create a space for open discussions where we can freely and creatively consider real solutions to our problems. We are the only “experts” and the accountability for our decisions should rest solely in the workers’ General Assemblies themselves, controlled by the workers themselves. When we are able to hold the struggle in our hands, it is possible to extend it to other sectors and workers, to parents and students, and, in this way, gain real strength, unity, and solidarity, and break free of the isolation in which our unions trap us! The sympathy that your strike has aroused in many other workers, even among parents who have been up to a million difficulties to find care for their kids, is a testimony to the urgent need to extend the struggle, to express real solidarity, to trust the rest of the working class. This strike has for now

been drowned in isolation and teachers have returned to work without having gained anything in terms of the contract. But if teachers are able to gain in terms of the lessons about how to struggle more effectively in the future, and who our real class friends and enemies are, they will not have lost.

In the two weeks before the final ratification of the contract, teachers should meet to discuss and draw the lessons of this struggle, and prepare to break out of the isolation imposed by the union by going out to other workers and hold open discussion forums where decisions can be made collectively and can stay in the hands of the workers themselves.

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PO Box 90475

Brooklyn, NY 11209