

What's Behind the CTU's SB7 Debacle?

“We want to stand up and fight back against the bi-partisan war on our jobs, working conditions and hard-won union rights.” That was the message hundreds of Chicago Teachers’ Union (CTU) delegates sent when they voted overwhelmingly in favor of a motion presented by the union’s Executive Board, to oppose the Illinois legislature’s outrageously anti-union Senate Bill 7 (SB7) at their May 4 House of Delegates meeting.

SB7 would drastically curb teachers’ seniority and collective bargaining rights, provide for the lengthening of teaching hours without any necessary increase in pay and effectively end teachers’ right to strike.

The CTU Board’s motion to reject SB7 could seem to indicate a welcome turnaround by the union’s leadership. Weeks before the House of Delegates meeting, CTU president Karen Lewis had stunned teachers by actually endorsing the bill. Lewis was joined by president of the Illinois Education Association (IEA) Ken Swanson and Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) president Dan Montgomery, who declared that they were “proud to support Senate Bill 7, which contains the most significant, bold and comprehensive reforms in education in more than 40 years.”¹

Then, Lewis argued, support for SB7 was necessary because to fight it would only invite worse. Now, the CTU rightly describes the bill as a “Wisconsin-style attack on its collective bargaining rights.”² To explain this extraordinary change of attitude, Lewis claims that the union-busting provisions of SB7 were snuck into the bill at the last minute, and that she was tricked into supporting it when she and the union’s lawyer were given only 15 minutes to review the legislation’s more than 100 pages and endorse it before it was sent to the legislature.

RANK-AND-FILE REBELLION FORCED CTU LEADERS’ TURN AGAINST SB7

The truth is that the CTU Board’s motion rejecting SB7 is not so much an about-face from its earlier capitulation as it is a desperate attempt by the union’s leadership to save face after teachers rebelled against their sellout.

While Lewis now claims to have been duped into supporting SB7, the Board’s rejection of the bill did not come immediately after it supposedly realized its union-busting contents, but over three weeks afterward! In fact the leadership refused to publicly voice any concern about the bill for weeks, though they claim to have been privately lobbying politicians to make union-friendly amendments during that time. As we exposed in an earlier statement,³ as late as April 25 CTU second-in-command, Vice President Jesse Sharkey, was arguing *against* militant teachers’ calls for the union to reject SB7 and mobilize a struggle to defeat it.

¹ “Unions stand together to forge historic education reform,” April 16, 2011; <http://www.ieanea.org/media/2011/04/Sb7-fact-sheet-updated-4-161.pdf>.

² CTU Blog, “Senate Bill 7 – Stay Tuned”; <http://www.ctunet.com/blog/senate-bill-7-stay-tuned>.

³ See our statement “Socialists Cover for Chicago Teachers’ Union Sellout, Democratic Politicians,” April 30, 2011; http://lrp-cofi.org/statements/iso_043011.html.

Despite the union's continued endorsement of the bill and its refusal to publicly criticize it, teachers had learned of just how bad SB7 was from news reports and were furious. The CTU leadership held stubbornly to its support for the bill until it began to hold regional meetings for members to discuss. In those regional meetings, rank-and-file teachers expressed their outrage at the union's support for the bill and left no doubt that the union's leaders would face a tidal wave of opposition at the upcoming House of Delegates meeting. Only then did members of the Board accept the need for a motion to oppose SB7.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported:

Karen Lewis, head of the CTU, said she had worked behind the scenes to resolve the dispute and "it wasn't until Rahm Emanuel started gloating" about his potential newfound powers during public appearances that her membership revolted.⁴

Thus two days before the May 4 House of Delegates meeting, and against Lewis's insistence on continuing to support SB7 while seeking to amend it behind the scenes, a majority of the Board voted to reject the bill and to present a motion to the delegates' meeting. But whether the Board's belated decision to oppose SB7 was a call to fightback against attacks on teachers, or just a face-saving exercise by a leadership that had failed pathetically to stand up to anti-union attacks, would be proven by whether they followed up their words with action.

A "WISCONSIN-STYLE ATTACK" AND NOT A SINGLE PROTEST AGAINST IT!

In our leaflet entitled *Reject SB7! Repudiate the Rotten Deal! CTU Must Start the Fightback with Mass Protest!* that we distributed at the May 4 House of Delegates meeting, we warned that "if [a motion to reject SB7] is not accompanied by a clear call for action, it will only pave the way to more of the sort of lobbying and backroom deals with Democratic Party politicians that got teachers into this mess in the first place." We urged delegates to fight for the union "to organize a massive protest against SB7 and all the other budget cuts and attacks on the working class that are making workers pay for the capitalist crisis and bailout of Wall Street."⁵

Unfortunately, the delegates' meeting accepted a vague motion from the Board promising to "mobilize the membership to fight in order to keep our collective bargaining rights." Thus two weeks later, the union had still to even suggest that a protest against this "Wisconsin-style attack" might be organized. Meanwhile, just days after the delegates' meeting the Illinois House of Representatives approved the bill and it now only requires Illinois Governor Pat Quinn's signature to become law.

A SELLOUT WAS PLANNED ALL ALONG

It cannot be ruled out that Lewis was tricked into endorsing SB7 without realizing some of its last-minute union-busting amendments. But such a pathetic failure of leadership was only possible because despite its militant reputation, the CTU leadership adopted the same approach to the ruling class's anti-union attacks as the rest of the corrupt, sell-out trade union bureaucracy.

1. The Typical Bureaucratic Approach: Avoid Struggle, Offer Concessions, Endorse and Donate to Democrats

The CTU leadership's surrender to the attacks on teachers began long ago. When the politicians and corporate "education reform" groups began campaigning against the union, targeting its right to strike, the union decided that to fight back would be hopeless. Instead of mobilizing teachers in protests to help build the ranks' militancy and organization and prepare it to strike if necessary, the union

⁴ Stephanie Banchero, "Illinois Education Overhaul at Risk," *Wall Street Journal*, May 10, 2011; <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703864204576313613028596174.html>.

⁵ See our leaflet "Reject SB7! Repudiate the Rotten Deal! CTU Must Start the Fightback with Mass Protest!"; http://lrp-cofi.org/statements/ctu_050411.html.

endorsed Democratic Party politicians and donated to their campaigns as usual, as if lining their pockets with workers' money could buy their sympathy. Instead of rallying the union's ranks and the rest of the labor movement, the CTU leadership offered massive givebacks from the beginning. Thus they not only signaled their willingness to accept the weakening of seniority rights, but also volunteered to "take the challenge"⁶ of a new law requiring that 75% of voting members support a strike for such action to be legal. This would have been the most onerous, undemocratic strike vote requirement in the country, until SB7 was amended to require the even more draconian 75% of all bargaining unit members to vote in favor of striking.

In other words, the CTU leadership was planning to sell out workers all along. No wonder Lewis was in secret negotiations with the politicians for months, not reporting on developments to the members and empowered to endorse a deal without even informing the union's Board.

2. Politicians Screw Teachers, Lewis Says Thanks

There is no doubt that Lewis knowingly approved huge givebacks when she endorsed SB7. After the unions agreed to endorse the bill in the early hours of April 13, the *Chicago Tribune* was soon reporting on the agreement to "curb tenure and strikes":

The proposed changes would upend the way teachers long have been treated when financially strapped districts cut staff. ... One key change for Chicago would be a requirement that 75 percent of Chicago Teachers Union members would have to vote to go on strike. ... Under the proposal, Chicago would be able to lengthen the time kids are in school without having to negotiate those time periods.⁷

That news didn't stop Lewis and the other teachers' union presidents from participating in a press conference with the bill's sponsors to endorse the bill *the next day!* The disgraceful scene in which these union leaders line up to express their thanks to Senate Education Committee chair, Democratic Senator Kimberly Lightford, can be viewed on the IEA's website.⁸ As Lewis summed up for the other union heads:

I'd like to thank Senator Lightford ... there are no words for what she's done for us ...

In fact, the day before the press conference, after Lewis had already agreed to support SB7, the CTU's April House of Delegates meeting took place. That meeting could have been the chance for delegates to reject SB7's attacks on their rights and begin organizing a fightback. But the delegates left that meeting not even knowing that a deal had been done. While Lewis addressed the meeting via video from Springfield, she kept her agreement to support the bill a secret. Other union officials present who knew of the deal,⁹ like vice president Sharkey, never said a word.

SOCIALISTS COVER UP THE SELLOUT

Any time any union leadership sells out its members, it is a big deal. But the Chicago Teachers Union right now is far more important than just any union at any time under any leadership. The CTU has been one of the biggest and most militant teachers unions in the country for decades. Teachers unions are under attack by both Republican and Democratic politicians nationwide: the push

⁶ CTU Press Release, "Chicago Teachers Union Governing Body Supports Changes to SB7," May 5, 2011; <http://www.ctunet.com/blog/press-release-chicago-teachers-union-governing-body-supports-changes-to-sb7>.

⁷ Ray Long, Tara Malone and Diane Rado, "Illinois teachers, lawmakers draw up reforms," *Chicago Tribune*, April 13, 2011; http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-04-13/news/ct-met-teacher-union-reforms-0414-20110413_1_negotiations-with-teachers-unions-poor-performing-teachers-new-teachers.

⁸ <http://www.ieanea.org/featured/teachers-support-education-reform-package-that-puts-kids-first/>.

⁹ At a meeting of the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) on April 25, in front of a room full of witnesses, Sharkey admitted that he learned of the deal the night before the House of Delegates meeting. "I was in my pajamas, drinking a beer," Sharkey said, as if to underscore his lack of preparedness for news of the deal.

for SB7 happened right after the battle of Wisconsin. And the CTU doesn't have just any union leadership – it is led by the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) that the members elected last year precisely because CORE claimed to be militants who would reject the sellout methods of the previous leadership.

Moreover, the CTU now has a socialist vice president, Jesse Sharkey of the International Socialist Organization (ISO). And while CORE is not a socialist organization, the union's elected officers and staff include a number of socialists including supporters of the ISO, Solidarity, the Progressive Labor Party, and the Freedom Road Socialist Organization. All of these groups hailed the election of CORE as a great step forward for militant struggle in the labor movement. Since socialists are supposed to stand uncompromisingly for the interests of the working class, one would think that the CTU under CORE's leadership was better placed than any other union to stand up against the wave of attacks on the public sector.

But this leadership has completely failed to fight the attacks. They allowed President Lewis to engage in backroom negotiations with anti-union politicians for months. They did nothing to stop Lewis's plan to give away hard-won union rights like seniority, a plan she made clear to everyone in CORE as early as January. Then Lewis made the sellout deal to support SB7, and no one in the CTU leadership spoke out against it in public for 3 critical weeks.

Now these same groups are engaged in a cover-up of all the leadership's failures. They are pretending that the leadership's reversal on SB7 means an effective resistance to the attacks. They ignore the reality that the reversal doesn't come close to making up for all the damage done by the leadership's original support for the bill. The FRSO's article¹⁰ about the CTU motion against SB7 astonishingly did not even mention the union's original support for the bill!

SHARKEY'S SCANDALOUS SILENCE

CTU vice president Sharkey's three weeks of public silence on SB7 is particularly scandalous, because he is a well-known long-time supporter of the ISO.

Sharkey also took the lead in covering for Lewis and the leadership at CTU Members Regional Meetings such as the one at King High School on April 27. The teachers at the meeting overwhelmingly demanded that the leadership stand up against SB7, but Sharkey responded that the leadership needs to save face by moving to oppose certain clauses without having to admit that they were wrong to endorse the bill in the first place. Sharkey even suggested that members contact legislators in the Illinois House of Representatives to get them to oppose the bill, but to try to do it without making the CTU leadership look bad!

Sharkey's cowardly refusal to report to the CTU House of Delegates meeting on April 13 that Lewis had made a deal to support SB7 when Lewis herself failed to do so was a particularly terrible betrayal. Taking place the day before the Illinois senate voted on SB7, a courageous exposure of the deal to the delegates could have sparked rank-and-file outrage then rather than later, and it could have forced the CTU leadership to back out of the deal immediately. That might have been enough to stop the senate from passing SB7 in the first place. Sharkey was in position to do that, and he chose not to.

LESSONS FOR SOCIALISTS

The leaders of groups like the ISO and Solidarity believe that putting reformist leaders into office is a necessary stage that the working class must go through. That is how these would-be revolutionary socialists become cynics. The notion of completing some type of reform "stage" is wrong on its own terms. Capitalism is sliding toward another Great Depression and cannot afford long-lasting improvements in the masses' living and working conditions. Reforms can be won by mass struggle, but they will always be limited and under threat so long as the capitalists rule.

¹⁰ "Chicago Teachers Union fights anti-bargaining bill SB7," May 8, 2011, <http://www.fightbacknews.org/2011/5/10/chicago-teachers-union-fights-anti-bargaining-bill-sb7>.

Over the course of the last forty years, the ruling class has waged a growing and persistent war on the rights and living standards that workers had won through struggle. The current attacks on public workers are an escalation of this.

There are many ways to facilitate the capitalists' exploitation of the working class. Some are blatant, like the "reforms" of Governor Walker in Wisconsin. Others, like the Illinois Democrats, seek to disguise their aims a little by making deals with union leaders. The vast majority of union leaders in turn are career bureaucrats whose positions indeed depend on their role as facilitators, or brokers, between the capitalists and the workers. That is why even trade union leaders with militant reputations have basically gone along with the ruling-class attacks. They try to soften the blows, most of all through begging capitalist politicians. But they accept the principle that the workers must pay for the crisis of the capitalist system. Whatever claims they make before coming to power, and with whatever amount of sincerity, they are not willing or capable of any systematic fight for the rank-and-file's working and living standards. This also limits how democratic the unions can be. The reformist leaders can ill afford to allow the ranks to exert their will as they oversee increased managerial attacks and repression.

Some of the career union bureaucrats cultivate "leftist" reputations, often using militant rhetoric, but the purpose is to disguise their real role in propping up capitalist exploitation. Karen Lewis is a good example of this. She talks militantly but is tied to the capitalist Democratic Party. Groups like the ISO and Solidarity aim to cultivate friendly relationships with the left-sounding bureaucrats. They may hope to cajole them to take various positions in workers' interests, but they won't criticize them in public when they don't. This is how socialists get sucked into the sad position of participating in sellouts like the CTU's endorsement of SB7. They are tied to the union leaders who are tied to the Democrats.

The ISO and Solidarity have been identified through the years with the building of reformist "rank and file" groups in various unions, in which these supposedly revolutionary socialists never raised revolutionary politics. Over the years the LRP has warned that the building of union opposition groups or caucuses on a reformist basis inevitably leads to support and cover up for reformist misleaders in power. Genuine Leninists and Trotskyists have always argued that the most politically advanced workers must build a working class vanguard which is prepared to speak the truth about capitalism and the misleadership that is holding our class back. The League for the Revolutionary Party (LRP) stands for speaking those truths. For example, we are active in the New York City Transit Workers Union (TWU) Local 100. (See our bulletin *Revolutionary Transit Worker*.¹¹)

In our work in the transit union and other labor struggles, in contrast to groups like the ISO or Solidarity, LRP supporters are open advocates of building the revolutionary party. We say that such a party represents the only leadership that can be trusted to consistently stand for the interests of all workers, union and non-union, in the necessary struggles ahead. We are also open advocates of the need for socialist revolution. Thus while we fight side by side with our fellow workers to build the best possible immediate defense for our class today, we also argue that union leaders tied to the Democratic Party must be replaced. It is only with such a revolutionary perspective that socialist-minded workers can prepare themselves to take positions of leadership in order to marshal the power of the unions – not to capitulate to the ruling class, but to fight back against the capitalist attacks.

We urge our readers, including those in the ranks of other socialist groups, to consider our criticisms and take a deep look at their organizations' politics. In the wake of the debacle in the CTU, nothing less than a thorough examination of the root causes of the sellout is called for. ★

¹¹ See <http://lrp-cofi.org/TWU100/RTW/>.