

Socialists Cover for Chicago Teachers' Union Sellout, Democratic Politicians

“Teachers union activists in Chicago are contending with their union president's decision to back legislation that all but bans them from striking and makes major concessions to the corporate education ‘reform’ agenda.”¹

So wrote International Socialist Organization (ISO) leader Lee Sustar on April 21, a week after the Illinois state senate unanimously passed a bill, SB 7, that dramatically escalates the bi-partisan war that is targeting public sector workers in general and teachers in particular.

As Sustar's article explains, Chicago Teachers' Union (CTU) president Karen Lewis agreed to SB 7's outrageous terms.² The bill would drastically curb teachers' seniority and collective bargaining rights, including effectively ending their right to strike; it even provides for the lengthening of teaching hours without any necessary increase in pay. Then Lewis conspired to hide the truth from the membership, not even mentioning the deal when she spoke to the CTU House of Delegates meeting on April 13, the day after she had approved the legislation!

But Sustar and the rest of the ISO leadership are engaged in their own cover-up. You'd never guess it from Sustar's article, but the CTU's vice president, the union's second-in-command, is the ISO's own Jesse Sharkey! Sharkey was elected to his position on the slate of Lewis's CORE (Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators), and was joined by other supporters of both the ISO and the Solidarity socialist group who accepted positions on the union's staff.

Sustar is avoiding publicizing the ISO's place in the CTU leadership because its role is scandalously indefensible. The fact is that despite Lewis's extraordinary betrayal of her union's members, inside the CTU the ISO continues to support her leadership. As CTU vice president, Sharkey should have been ideally placed to stand up to Lewis's sellout and go to the ranks with a plan to resist it. Instead, in the crucial first weeks after the sellout when resistance to the deal could have made a difference, Sharkey refused to comment in public and covered for Lewis at a CORE meeting.

The ISO leadership now acts shocked by Lewis's sellout, but they have covered for her all the way. They refused to criticize Lewis's decision to join the slate of American Federation of Teachers' President Randi Weingarten, who is leading the drive for teachers' unions to embrace concessions and givebacks nationwide.³ They refused to criticize the CTU's endorsement of Democrats and warn that this policy would inevitably lead to disaster – as it did: the Illinois legislature is controlled by the Democrats. They opposed motions to mobilize the ranks of the CTU for struggle and instead accepted the union bureaucracy's perspective of trying to maintain collective bargaining rights by giving away hard-earned rights like seniority. They only spoke out against the sellout to cover themselves when it was too late to make a difference.

SHARKEY LIES TO COVER FOR LEWIS, HAILS “SPIRIT OF COMPROMISE”

On April 25, CORE members and other militants gathered at the National Association of Letter Carriers' Hall on Chicago's South Side to discuss the rotten deal that their union president and caucus leader had signed. In the absence of President Lewis, Sharkey took the lead in speaking on behalf of the entire union leadership. Reporting that Lewis asked him to tell CORE's members “I'm sorry,” Sharkey explained with

a straight face that now that the union leadership has seen the “fine print,” it thinks supporting SB 7 was a mistake. But two days after privately agreeing to the legislation, Lewis published a letter to the members endorsing the deal and calling on them to “please take the time to read the actual bill.”⁴ In fact, along with Lewis’s letter the union even published its own handy summary of the bill’s “fine print” on its website.⁵ This shows that Sharkey’s suggestion that Lewis did not understand the details of the legislation at the time that she endorsed it is a lie.

At the CORE meeting, a supporter of the League for the Revolutionary Party (LRP) challenged Sharkey to speak out publicly against SB 7 and Lewis’ support of it and use his position as CTU vice president to rally opposition to the bill. CORE activist Earl Silbar attempted to raise a motion that CORE oppose the anti-union attacks in SB 7, inform CTU members to build opposition to the attacks and present a motion to the next House of Delegates meeting that the union mobilize members, and reach out to parents, students and community organizations to oppose the attacks. But as soon as Silbar moved to present his motion, Sharkey contemptuously left the room, and the chairperson pointed to the lack of a quorum as reason not to have the meeting vote on the motion.

Earlier in the meeting, Sharkey promised CORE’s members that the union leadership would now seek to “unwind this thing ... to preserve the spirit of this deal, but remove the union-busting aspects of it.” When CORE militants challenged Sharkey to explain what he thought was worth preserving in the deal, he replied that the “spirit of compromise” that had been established in the months of negotiations between the union and legislators, in which both sides were giving something and getting something “was what was good.” But a “spirit of compromise” with the bosses and their politicians is exactly what working-class militants do not want to encourage; unity and struggle *against* them in order to defend the interests of workers is what we must stand for.

Moreover, it is the CTU leadership’s “spirit of compromise” that invited the school bosses and politicians to mount their extraordinary attack on their rights and working conditions. Since getting elected, the Lewis-Sharkey leadership has actually opposed calls for a militant struggle to defeat the capitalist attacks on their union. Instead, they pursued the same failed strategy as the rest of the trade union bureaucracy, hoping to avoid the worst attacks on the union’s right to strike by offering big concessions on seniority rights and other issues and by endorsing and donating to Democratic Party “friends of labor” in the hopes of buying their cooperation.

Thus at a CORE meeting on January 24, Earl Silbar raised a motion calling on the CTU to mobilize the membership in defense of seniority rights. President Lewis spoke against the motion on the grounds that the union may have to give up seniority rights in order to keep the right to strike. Sharkey then joined Lewis by voting against Silbar’s motion.

Of course, if you offer your hand to the bosses and politicians they move to take your arm. By not preparing the union for a struggle and by instead showing willingness to compromise on teachers’ rights in the hopes of keeping the right to strike, the stage was set for Lewis to go one step further by saying that effectively giving up the right to strike was the only way to avoid losing more.

SHARKEY URGES DELAY IN OPPOSING BILL -- TO “GIVE COVER” TO DEMOCRATS

That the Democratic Party politicians took the union’s endorsements and money and then stabbed teachers in the back should not be surprising. In fact we are sure that the ISO did not want the union to endorse Democrats. But when Lewis went ahead and did so anyway, Sharkey and the rest of the ISO did not speak out in opposition and did not warn the ranks of the union that it was a sure sign that Lewis was

turning away from struggle and toward the union bureaucracy's disastrous strategy of collaboration and compromise with the capitalist attacks.

Incredibly, the ISO is even continuing this approach now. At the April 25 CORE meeting Sharkey urged everyone present to not say anything publicly about the leadership's change of position. The leadership wanted to continue its backroom negotiating with the other Illinois teachers' union leaders, such as IEA President Ken Swanson. But Swanson has openly stated his strategy is to agree to all the concessions the government demands in order to save collective bargaining rights:

“What we’ve shown is you do not have to have draconian, unwarranted attacks on public employee rights (for) collective bargaining. You can do this through collective bargaining. You can do this through bringing the parties to the table. So Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana, other states, look to Illinois, we’ll show you how to do it the right way.”⁶

Swanson is promising the capitalists and politicians that they don't have to push union officials aside to slash workers' throats – the bureaucrats will do it with them. This is the kind of miserable union leadership that Sharkey wants the CTU to be allied with.

And it's not only other union leaders Sharkey wants to bring on board – he further said that before the CTU comes out against the bill, “we have to give cover” to friendly Democratic Party legislators who voted for it. He added that the CTU didn't want to leave their legislator allies in a situation where they couldn't explain why they first supported the bill and then opposed it after the CTU changed its mind.

This touching concern for the feelings and careers of Democratic politicians is standard operating procedure for almost all labor leaders these days. ***But for a self-styled socialist who won union office by promising to fight the attacks, it is a scandal. And for the ISO leadership to play its own role in covering up the betrayal is equally scandalous.***

Sharkey concluded his appeal to the ranks of CORE to conspire to cover up the union leadership's crimes by saying, “Don't scapegoat Karen.” In a sense, we can agree. Karen Lewis should not be singled out as completely to blame for this betrayal. Sharkey and the other elected leaders of the union share the blame. So too do those “socialist” union staffers who have not spoken out against this sellout. Indeed these groups' continued affection for Lewis can be seen by her continued presence as a speaker at Labor Notes' upcoming Chicago Troublemakers' School.⁷

ISO COVERED FOR SELLOUT ALL ALONG

Just ten months ago, Lee Sustar treated readers of *Socialist Worker* to a breathless celebration of CORE's coming to power in the CTU as the dawning of “a new day for teachers.”⁸ Since then the ISO offered the Lewis leadership praise for its “militant,”⁹ “aggressive”¹⁰ stands against “corporate school reform.”

Now the ISO leadership acts like they are shocked by Lewis's sellout. At the CORE meeting Sharkey also claimed to have been taken by surprise. The truth is that Sharkey and the ISO have long known that CTU president Lewis was planning to agree to massive givebacks, and they have covered this up at every step.

Last July, Sustar pointed to the CTU leadership as the “likeliest place for a change of direction” for the AFT, even while reporting that Karen Lewis had joined the Weingarten slate. In October Sustar admitted that “The CTU isn't formally challenging the AFT's direction,” but still covered for Lewis by claiming that “the CTU seeks to challenge the corporate school reformers even as the AFT attempts to find common cause with them.”¹¹

Last fall, a Sustar article opposed the idea of the CTU endorsing Democratic Governor Pat Quinn *before* the endorsement decision was made.¹² But *after* the CTU leadership endorsed Quinn and other Democrats, Sustar and the ISO leadership tacitly accepted it and chose to not make any public criticism of the leadership's decision. Thus not only Sharkey but also Sustar and the rest of the ISO's leaders bear responsibility for this capitulation to the Democrats.

So in fact the signs have been there all along pointing to the CTU leadership's coming sellout. The above evidence shows that the ISO was in a position to warn about it and mobilize workers to oppose it, but deliberately chose not to do so. They only spoke out to cover themselves when it was too late to make a difference.

SELLOUT CTU LEADERSHIP MUST GO!

The sellout of the Chicago Teachers Union is a setback for public workers nationwide, but there are more struggles ahead and there will be more opportunities to turn the tide against the capitalist war on the working class. For workers and unions to start to win some victories, it will be necessary to break from the perspective of allying with the capitalist Democrats and fight against union leaders who deal with the Democrats to sell out their members. Workers should not trust the so-called "socialists" who refuse to lead this fight against the sellout union leaders.

Chicago teachers must take every opportunity to stand up to this disastrous sellout by rejecting SB 7 and demanding that their leaders organize a fightback. At the same time militant teachers will have to launch a struggle against their sellout leaders. The union needs an alternative leadership that can be relied on to not sell out the ranks. We believe that only a revolutionary socialist leadership can meet that task. While looking to work with the broadest possible number of militant workers who want to resist the union bureaucracy's betrayals and advance the working class's struggles, we never cease to explain that the working class's interests are incompatible with capitalism.

For the ranks of the ISO and Solidarity, when the task facing workers is to throw out of office a sellout union leadership that is supported by and even includes members of their own organization, it is time for them to thoroughly re-examine their organization's politics. As we have analyzed at length in the past, the ISO's approach of opportunistically aligning themselves with leftish union bureaucrats and liberals in the hopes of gaining short-term advantages is a recipe for disaster.¹³

Indeed, the debacle in the CTU is only the most recent failure produced by the approach of the ISO, Solidarity and the *Labor Notes* organization, the strategy of building "rank-and-file" groups. This approach has produced nothing but setbacks for the workers' movement, such as their "New Directions" caucus's rise to power in New York City's transit workers' union that stuck its members with a series of terrible contracts and defeats.

Capitalism's deepening crisis is driving the ruling class to attack workers' rights, working and living conditions more and more. The LRP's approach¹⁴ of building openly revolutionary socialist leadership groups in the unions, while taking every opportunity to work with broad numbers of militant workers to advance united struggles against the bosses' attacks, is proving ever more urgently necessary. For example, we have succeeded in building a small group of supporters in New York's Transport Workers' Union Local 100 where we publish an openly revolutionary socialist newsletter, *Revolutionary Transit Worker*.¹⁵ Through our decades of work in Local 100, we have achieved modest victories like getting strike motions passed and winning lower-level union offices.

We urge every honest supporter of the ISO and Solidarity to consider our criticisms of the roots of their organization's disastrously opportunist role in the unions and take up a struggle against it.

¹ Lee Sustar, "A Crisis for Teachers Union Reformers?" April 21, 2011; <http://socialistworker.org/2011/04/21/teachers-union-reform-crisis>.

² The text of the bill can be read online at www.ilga.gov/legislation/97/SB/09700SB0007sam001.htm.

³ See Lee Sustar, "The wrong partner for our schools" July 22, 2010; <http://socialistworker.org/2010/07/22/wrong-partner-for-our-schools> and "Teachers in the crosshairs," October 26, 2010; <http://socialistworker.org/2010/10/26/teachers-in-the-crosshairs>.

⁴ Pres. Karen Lewis, "Senate Bill 7 – Letter from President Lewis," April 14, 2011; <http://www.ctunet.com/blog/sb7letter>.

⁵ "Summary of Illinois Senate Bill 7"; <http://www.ctunet.com/legislative/sb7>.

⁶ Melissa Leu, "Senate passes compromise on teacher collective bargaining, firings," Illinois Statehouse News, April 14, 2011; <http://illinois.statehousenewsonline.com/5744/senate-passes-compromise-on-teacher-collective-bargaining-firings/>; and Cheryl Burton, "Illinois senate passes education reform bill," April 14, 2011, <http://abclocal.go.com/wls/story?section=news/local/illinois&id=8073470>.

⁷ <http://www.labornotes.org/chicago/program>.

⁸ See, for example, Lee Sustar's breathless celebration of Lewis's election, "A New Day in the Chicago Teachers Union," June 14, 2010; <http://socialistworker.org/2010/06/14/new-day-for-chicago-teachers>.

⁹ Lee Sustar, "Teachers in the crosshairs" October 26, 2010; <http://socialistworker.org/2010/10/26/teachers-in-the-crosshairs>.

¹⁰ Lee Sustar, "Stealing the money to save teachers?" August 18, 2010; <http://socialistworker.org/2010/08/19/stealing-money-from-teachers>.

¹¹ Lee Sustar, "Teachers in the crosshairs," October 26, 2010; <http://socialistworker.org/2010/10/26/teachers-in-the-crosshairs>.

¹² See Lee Sustar, "From labor's hope to lesser evil?" October 6, 2010; <http://socialistworker.org/2010/10/06/labors-hope-to-lesser-evil>.

¹³ See, for example, "The ISO's Right Turn to Labor," *Proletarian Revolution* No. 51, Spring 1996; <http://lrp-cofi.org/PR/ISOPR51.html>. For a general analysis of the ISO's politics, see John F., Joseph T. and Tony G., "Open Letter From Three Former ISO Members," <http://lrp-cofi.org/archive/ISOopenltr.html>; and "ISO Versus SWP: Who's More Opportunist?" *Proletarian Revolution* No. 61, Summer 2000; <http://lrp-cofi.org/PR/ISOSWPPR61.html>.

¹⁴ See, for example, "The Sadlowski Campaign: U.S. Labor and the Left," *Socialist Voice* No. 5, Fall 1977, <http://lrp-cofi.org/PR/laborSV5.html>; and "Revolutionary Versus Reformist Methods in the Unions," *Proletarian Revolution* No. 63, Fall 2001; <http://lrp-cofi.org/PR/methodsPR63.html>.

¹⁵ See <http://lrp-cofi.org/TWU100/RTW/index.html>.