

USA: Chicago Teachers Turn to Politics; Oakland Leftist To Run for Mayor

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In the fall of 2012 the 26,000 members of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) struck, shutting down the city's schools that serve 350,000 children in the third largest city in the United States. The strike pitted the union against Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, the former chief-of-staff of President Barack Obama, though in a broader sense it was a strike against Arne Duncan, the Secretary of Education who has encouraged charter schools and pushed for "Common Core Standards" that call for standardized testing. Duncan was previously the CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, appointed by Mayor Richard M. Daley, the son of the famous Richard J. Daley who ran Chicago for the Democratic Party from 1955 to 1976, including, many believe, organizing the fraud that won the 1960 election for President John F. Kennedy.

Chicago's teachers rejected Duncan's education policies and stood up to Mayor Emanuel in a more than weeklong strike that won the support of other unions, community groups, parents and student. It was, in effect—though no one said so at the time—a strike against the Democratic Party by a union which had historically been part of the labor coalition that backs the Democrats and by teachers who vote in the majority for the Democrats. What began as a strike has now become a political rebellion that threatens to upset the Democratic Party in one of its national strongholds.

In early January the CTU voted to create an Independent Political Organization (IPO). The Resolution reads in part, "RESOLVED that the Chicago Teachers Union, along with key allies in the progressive labor movement and amongst progressive community organizations will launch an independent political organization (IPO) that is capable of leading strong electoral and legislative campaigns to benefit working families, our active and retired members, and our communities." The CTU will endorse those who run on a social justice platform. These might be incumbent Democrats, new Democratic Party candidates, and possibly independent candidates, though who they might be is unknown.

The idea of a major labor union in a big city breaking with the Democratic Party and running its own slate of candidates in an election is something unknown in American politics. Throughout the country virtually all of the major unions endorse the Democrats, run the phone banks, do the door-knocking, and get out the vote on election day. While it is not exactly clear what the CTU's new IPO will do, it raises the possibility that the union run independent political candidates for office. If the union were able to recreate on the political level the solidarity it generated in the economic struggle and to run even one independent candidate, this could be a very significant development. Some have suggested that the CTU's President Karen Lewis, should run for Mayor against Emanuel.

Interestingly at the same time a group of about eighty Chicago socialists from various organizations, inspired by the election victory of Khasama Sawant in Seattle, Washington, have come together to investigate the possibility of running a socialist campaign in the next Chicago election. The group met between November and January, forming committees to develop a vision statement, to write a platform, to assess possible races, and to find a treasurer and legal counsel. Like the Sawant campaign, the Chicago socialists' draft platform puts the \$15 an hour minimum wage at the center of its demands. So far the activists involved in this effort come almost entirely out of the white

socialist left, though it will be necessary to win Latino and African American support if the campaign is to take off.

A Leftist Candidate for the Mayor of Oakland

There is also a new development in San Francisco where at the beginning of January Dan Siegel, a longtime leftist attorney and activist has announced that he will run for mayor. Since the 1960s the San Francisco Bay Area has been one of the most radical regions in the country whether one talked of labor unions, the LGBT movement, or militant ethnic communities. The current mayor of Oakland, Jean Quan, came out of the Maoist left and ran for office as a Democrat. When the Occupy movement took over a public plaza in Oakland, her police chief directed officers to clear it out using tear gas, rubber bullets, and flashbang grenades. Quan praised the police chief for his peaceful resolution of the situation, which led Siegel, also a Maoist and an unpaid adviser, to break with her.

So far, Siegel appears to plan to run as an independent, and his central campaign demand is to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour. He also called for making the Oakland safe not by deploying more police officers, but by improving the living conditions of the city's residents. During his campaign announcement he was surrounded by labor union and community leaders who say they will support him. His twitter home page described Siegel as a "Grown-up 60s activist and radical lawyer. Outdoors adventurer. Committed to ending the rule of capital."

Oakland, a largely working class and African American city that lies across the bay from San Francisco, saw the largest and most important actions of the national Occupy movement as thousands of activists shut down one of the country's largest ports in November and December of 2011. African American protests against the transit police murder of Oscar Grant on New Year's Day 2009 and the Occupy movement in 2011 led to the mobilization of thousands and to the creation of a radical activist core in the Bay Area region with its long leftist traditions.

The election of Bill de Blasio as New York mayor, the victory of Khsama Sawant, the Chicago Teachers Union's Independent Political Organization, and the Siegel campaign in Oakland all suggest that some new and important is happening in American politics.

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