

## CHICAGO TEACHERS' FIGHT WILL HAVE FAR-REACHING CONSEQUENCES



The Chicago Teachers' Union (CTU) strike, regardless of its outcome, will have far-reaching consequences for all concerned, and it is predicted that it will bring in its wake a number of new legislations that will address the new issues it brings in its wake. History was made, when almost every single teacher voted in favor of the strike action. Only 1.82 percent voted against it, with a whopping 90 percent giving their assent, sending local administration in shocked dizziness. What was so remarkable about the 90 percent in-favor teachers, more than the numbers, it was a resounding slap in the face of a decree that made it mandatory for union members to get at least 75 percent members to vote in favor of a strike, to enable them to do so. It is believed that Mayor Rahm Emanuel had expressly had this rule enacted, to make it as difficult as possible for the unions to pressurize him and his team, through strikes and prevent him from implementing his layoff, no-raise and extra working day decisions. Snug and complacent that it would be well-nigh impossible to garner a three-fourth support, almost a full support was an eye-opener that the teachers and the unions met business and it was time to dismount their high horses. Moreover, this is Obama territory and victory for the unions would have far-reaching consequences. It would definitely mean eating humble pie for the local administration but a strike could also mean an embarrassment for President Obama, especially in the election year. Its reverberations are already being felt nationwide and it could be the flint that triggers and re-ignites US labor movement in these uncertain economic times. Analysts are saying that more should be read in what the CPS is terming as "school reforms." It's not as innocuous and simple as it sounds. By this those in power are attempting to execute their hidden agenda of busting unions and initiating the process of privatization. It is accepted that since the last two decades, Chicago has been the testing ground for such program and depending on the outcome are then rolled out across the country. It is further claimed that the program has the veiled support of the Democratic leadership, prime amongst them a pro-Obama liberal Davis Guggenheim, who made a film "Waiting for Superman," that was anti-union and contained an extensive attack on teaching unions and paid glowing tributes to the role and contributions of private schools. Chicago proposes to open 60 new privatized, non-union charter schools over the next five years. What bugs the unions is that these new schools are going to be at the cost of public schools. A number of public schools are intended to be closed and capital spending has not merely been reduced but sliced. The Chicago Teacher's Union is saying that underfunding is becoming chronic and continues to linger in spite of their persistent efforts. Moreover; they say the curriculum also needs to be broadened. They are calling the system as one of "educational apartheid" and say that the only remedy is to elect a school board from within the city's population, given they would be more familiar and conversant with the problems that the public schools are facing. But the straw that broke the camel's back was, when a newly elected group of "rookie" candidates, increased teacher's working hours by 20 percent and retracting on a 4 percent promised hike, by saying that it's going to be just 2 percent, take it or leave it. This overconfident and hasty behavior of the new group demonstrated two things. First that they were not willing to be flexible and were hell bent on adopting a rigid unbending attitude towards the genuine problems of the teachers. Secondly it showed that they lacked the ability to address problems at the grassroots and did not have in them to be pliant and negotiate disputes capably, rather they wanted to use their influence and power to bulldoze their way through. In the face of the 90 percent vote and the strike that has now become a distinct possibility, as a face saving device they are telling everyone that this is purely a fiscal problem. The government has a deficit of millions of dollars and that is what they are trying to fix. However, their lie has been exposed, when an information sought under the Freedom of Information Act, the teacher's union were told that the money that was to pay for teachers' salaries has been spent on paying police officers to patrol public schools. Whilst the duplicity was hard to take, it also rammed home that reform, if there was any was going towards coercion and discipline rather than welfare, given that what was taken away from the teachers was going to the police officers. The huge vote in favor of striking shows on whose side the teachers are and that they are determined to see the dispute brought to a conclusion that they would like. However, the success hinges considerably on how much support the unions can garner amongst the parents. Parents are being targeted by the administration, which is attempting to present this dispute as one in which the children are suffering. Mayor Rahm Emmanuel is trying to adopt a non-aligned neutral posture. But when he was elected, he won on a promise of bringing "education reform," a promise this current dispute grossly undermines. His allies are running campaign ads that are maligning and blaming the teachers and asking parents to apply pressure on them to stop their campaign and not to go on strike. On whose sides the parents lean and whether the teachers or the government manage to convince the parents, who is right and who is not, will greatly determine which direction the dispute will take. Membership amongst unions has greatly diminished, all over the country and it is limited to the public sector part. Even though their struggles will impact a huge section of society, it always seems that it is sectional and does not represent a more representative section of society. In the recent recall Governor Scott Walker had the last laugh, when the unions lost a recall vote; they were expected to win, for this very reason. It is hoped that the new negotiations will get results, but if they don't and the strike does happen it will be the first in 25 years. If they win it will be a huge boost for the unions but if they lose it will be a setback for labor movements for a very long time.