
WORKERS VANGUARD

Chicago Elections: Union Tops/Left Betray

No Vote for Johnson or Vallas!

Lori Lightfoot's reign over "Segregation City" came to an end in February with her third-place finish in the first round of the Chicago mayoral elections. From frequent feuds with the Chicago Teachers Union, to enforcing the devastating lockdowns during the pandemic, to carrying out massive police repression during the height of the BLM protests in 2020, Lightfoot's tenure showed just what workers and the oppressed have to gain from backing a "progressive" bourgeois politician to be the top cop in Chicago: more misery and repression.

Since Lightfoot took office as a "reformer" in 2019, riding the wave of anger over the cop killing of Laquan McDonald and its coverup, everything has gotten worse. Schools are even more segregated and dilapidated; housing prices are driving black and working-class Chicagoans out of the city or turning them onto the streets as part of a surging homeless population; and the prices of everything keep going up while wages fall far behind. Unemployment in the ghettos remains at depression levels, and cop terror continues. All of this despite waves of protests, strikes, and union orga-

nizing drives enveloping the city over the last decade. The question is: Why, in spite of the thousands protesting the Laquan McDonald and George Floyd murders, has black life in Chicago only gotten worse? Why, despite two major teachers strikes in 2012 and 2019, has education continued to get worse?

The answer lies in the contradiction between the aspirations of workers and the oppressed and the liberal program pushed by their leaders. The bankrupt strategy of the union bureaucrats and their fake-socialist tails is building alliances with the class enemy, looking for capitalist politicians who will supposedly run the capitalist state to work in their interests. This strategy ensures any struggles remain within the parameters set by the bosses' profit system, though none of the problems facing the working class—education, segregation, housing—can be solved within this framework. To advance, workers require a leadership that can unite the class across racial divisions and lead their struggles as part of a broader strategy for workers power.

The race to replace Lightfoot is yet another example of

For a Multiracial Revolutionary Workers Party!

workers' leaders pushing a dead-end strategy. Like everything else in this city, this election is polarized along racial lines. The leadership of the working class is building the campaigns of Brandon Johnson, a black Democratic Party "progressive," and Paul Vallas, a white establishment Democrat. The reformist left backing Johnson presents this as a titanic contest between "progress" and "reaction," between racism and anti-racism. *Don't be fooled!* As mayor of Chicago, an executive officer of the capitalist state, it will be their job to defend capitalist profits and maintain the forcible segregation and oppression of black people. The mayor runs the city on behalf of the LaSalle street bankers and bosses, not workers or the oppressed. They command the cops that torture black people, terrorize the ghettos, beat demonstrators, break picket lines and bust unions. While Vallas and Johnson have tactical differences on the most effective way to administer capitalist misery, they are both committed to its preservation. Should the city hire 2,000 cops, or 200 detectives and bring in the ATF? Is the best way to bust the teachers union smashing them outright or through backchannel dealings? Neither of these Democrats represent the interests of workers and the oppressed, and anybody telling you otherwise is lining you up behind the same liberal dead-end strategy that got us here in the first place. *No vote to Johnson or Vallas!*

What Is To Be Done

The problems facing the working class and the oppressed demand major struggles *against* the capitalist class and their interests, not support to their representatives. To even begin integrating Chicago would require massive public works projects to build low-cost, quality housing. Ending mass unemployment in the ghettos requires shortening the workweek and spreading the available work with no loss in pay, and training and hiring thousands of people. Even these basic measures are fundamentally *counterposed* to the interests of capital. The bourgeoisie *requires* black oppression to drive down all workers' living standards and to prop up their rule by keeping the working class divided along racial lines.

The sorry state of education in Chicago is only going to be improved by building state-of-the-art, integrated schools, abolishing the charters, parochial, and private schools, and hiring tens of thousands more teachers. But the bourgeoisie is only interested in educating the proletariat insofar as is necessary to exploit them profitably, and with U.S. imperialism in terminal decline and massive deindustrialization, they can well settle for schools that resemble prisons for black and Latino children. It wouldn't be a good return on investment to educate the students in Chicago Public Schools for careers they won't have and jobs which barely exist. There are massive profits to be had in every one of these sectors of the economy, and they will be defended by the bourgeoisie, their state, and their politicians. Progress can only be made in struggle against the capitalists, and the ultimate solution lies only in their overthrow. Despite industrial decline, Chicago remains a union town, with key industry. Workers could shut this city down!

But instead, the "solution" being offered by the trade-

union leaders and the reformist left is to back one or the other of these capitalist candidates for mayor. For the reformist left, the preferred candidate is Brandon Johnson. A former teacher and organizer for the CTU and full-time capitalist politician as a Cook County commissioner, Johnson was virtually unknown before rocketing from 3 percent in the polls to second place in the first round thanks to relentless promotion by the reformists and the CTU, who funneled \$2.2 million in donations from the union's treasury into his campaign.

Johnson's rise from relative obscurity reflects both the anger in the city at the mounting misery and the lack of leadership pointing the path forward for the oppressed. He promises to tax the rich to fund education, give people housing, provide childcare and stay the hand of the police. But the promises of bourgeois "progressives" like Johnson are simply lies to garner votes and push the illusion that one can clean up the worst excesses of capitalist rule while maintaining the underlying property relations producing them. Take housing, for example: Johnson, like Lightfoot before him, is proposing a one-time tax on property valued over \$1 million to fund affordable housing. But housing is a font of wealth for the bourgeoisie, whether as landlords gouging tenants or as real estate magnates in the Gold Coast planning out the next phases of gentrification across the city. Fixing Chicago housing requires a major transfer of wealth out of the hands of the real estate speculators, landlords, and banks, not tinkering around with tax rates. Johnson is committed to defending capitalist property, so he will never take the measures needed to actually address the problem, in fact he'll drop his reform plans like a hot potato the minute he hears a cry of protest from the housing speculators, the landlords, and the banks.

Real struggles are needed for housing, education, childcare, and against racial oppression, and they will inevitably clash with the capitalists and their state. Unions like the CTU, SEIU, and AFSCME endorse Johnson, arguing that with him at the helm, they'll have "one of their own" sitting across the table, and workers will get a fair deal. But Johnson's background as a CTU organizer only makes him a more effective agent of the capitalists. His connections with the unions better position him to force concessions than someone like Vallas, an open enemy of teachers unions and pusher of privatization. Johnson has stated his commitment to the bosses openly, saying, "There will be some tough decisions to be made when I am mayor of the city of Chicago. And there might be a point within negotiations that the Chicago Teachers Union quest and fight for more resources—we might not be able to do it. Who is better able to deliver bad news to a friend than a friend?"

Segregation City

Support for Johnson is also based on illusions that as a black mayor he will defend black people, because he understands their struggles. Chicago has had three black mayors and has been run by the "friends of blacks and labor" Democratic Party for 90 years. The sprawling South and West Side ghettos are just as crummy as ever, cop-infested and impoverished. The reality is black politicians like Johnson

and Lightfoot and the black masses *do not share a common interest*. While all black people are oppressed due to their skin color, the black petty bourgeoisie, from whom black Democratic Party politicians like Johnson, Lightfoot, and the celebrated Harold Washington sprang, draw their influence and a large part of their successes from the *maintenance* of segregation. Johnson represents the West Side ghetto and some largely black western suburbs on the county commission. Because of how segregated and racially polarized Chicago is, politicians like Johnson find a captive and receptive audience, especially when the only alternative is a racist white Democrat. Johnson, and black Democrats like him, represent the pro-capitalist ambitions of the black petty bourgeoisie, not the oppressed masses.

In this election, the racist Vallas is presented as a stand-in for Trump by his opponents, despite being a fairly mainstream Democratic Party politician. The reformists and “progressive” trade-union leaders are doing Johnson’s donkey work by trying to replicate the anti-Trump popular front that blamed Trump supporters for racial oppression, and brought Biden to power—a total disaster for working people and the oppressed. On the other side, Vallas has the support of the mainly white craft unions, some Teamsters locals, and the firefighters, who after years of being screwed by Lightfoot look to him to address their worsening economic and social conditions. The union bureaucracies backing either of these candidates are *dividing* the working class, *disarming* them, *reinforcing* racial divisions, and subordinating black and working-class struggles to bourgeois electoralism. By backing Vallas, the “business unionists” reinforce skepticism black people have toward white workers, *especially* the building trades, whose bureaucrats run them as majority-white job trusts. Chicago is essentially evenly divided between black, white and Latino, with Latinos historically being used as pawns in the swing vote. However, workers of any race or ethnicity have no interest in supporting Vallas, Johnson, or Chuy Garcia for that matter.

Black oppression doesn’t come from the backward ideas of racist white workers, it comes from the capitalist class, who use it as a means of keeping workers divided. White workers are pushed to see black people as their enemies and competitors for a shrinking number of jobs, homes, child-care, and educational opportunities for their children. But white workers don’t benefit from black oppression, they’re harmed by it. Having a permanently depressed layer underneath them drives down their wages and lowers their standard of living. White workers need to fight for black liberation because it’s the only way to advance their material interests. The bourgeoisie will use racial divisions against them to undermine those struggles, and so in order to fight against their exploitation and liberate themselves from wage slavery, they have to fight black oppression.

Similarly, black people must be won to fight on a communist program. Integrating black people into American society runs counter to the bourgeoisie’s interests, and because black oppression is rooted in the maintenance of capitalist rule, only fighting for the destruction of capitalism can lead to the full integration of black people. Without smashing

the color line and uniting the class across racial divisions, any struggles waged can only be at the expense of one or another and will quickly turn out to be a temporary and reversible respite. Black liberation cannot come through an alliance with capitalist politicians, nor can workers make any advance toward ending their exploitation in an alliance with the bourgeoisie.

Only a leadership which unites the struggle for black liberation with the struggle for workers’ emancipation can defend black people and workers and advance their day-to-day struggles. This requires a multiracial revolutionary party that unites the working class on the communist program.

Cops, Crime, and Capitalism

Both candidates have put crime and policing at the center of their campaigns, and support gun control. While Vallas tries to gin up anti-black racism with his calls to crack down on crime, Johnson says he will stay the hand of the Chicago police and hold them accountable. But crime is endemic to the poverty and oppression that flow from capitalism, which is only made worse by the decay of imperialism, and the resulting lack of jobs and utter destitution facing the proletariat. The bourgeoisie’s answer is always more police repression and disarming the population. Victims are left defenseless. *We say: No to gun control! For the right of armed self-defense!* The only way to end crime and police violence is to end the social system that produces them, and which the police and both candidates defend: capitalism.

Johnson is the epitome of a BLM police reform candidate. But BLM’s liberal program has done nothing for black people, and police reform is no reform at all. It’s a deadly trap because it involves black people and workers in administering their own repression by the capitalist state. The police are the armed fist of the capitalists, and their job is to uphold capitalist property relations and maintain forcible segregation. Johnson and his supporters tie the oppressed to their oppressors and build the illusion that the capitalist state can be made to act in their interests.

For example, the Stalinist Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO) backs Johnson, and ran for and celebrated the establishment of the “police district councils.” Criminally, they sought to take responsibility for and align themselves with the capitalist state. To struggle for black liberation one must break with police reform and fight against all who conciliate such liberal illusions. Instead of relying on the capitalist state, workers must defend themselves, whether on the picket line or in the face of race terrorists like the Proud Boys. *For labor/black defense committees to defend minorities!*

Lockdowns and Labor Traitors

The central argument behind the liberal program of the trade-union misleaders and the reformists is that the capitalist state can be made to serve working-class interests. For example, during the pandemic, the trade-union bureaucrats and the reformists totally capitulated to the bourgeoisie and embraced the lockdowns. The bureaucrats echoed the lie that to save lives, everyone had to stay home, and if workers went

out on strike to defend themselves, they would be killing people. Faced with the most severe social crisis in a generation, the leaders of the working-class betrayed. The CTU bureaucrats in particular, along with the reformists, advocated for harsher and stronger lockdowns.

The whole strategy of the bureaucrats, by relying on the capitalist state to defend the health and safety of workers, only weakened the union, and atomized the membership. The lockdowns were especially devastating for workers, black people, women and youth. Women were thrown out of work and back into the home. As part of their betrayal during the reopening, the CTU bureaucrats criminally built class-collaborationist union/management safety committees.

But the interests of the working class and the bourgeoisie in the pandemic, as with everything else, were fundamentally counterposed. The bourgeoisie used lockdowns as a cheap way to stave off the total collapse of the decrepit medical system. While the bosses only need a working class fit enough to exploit at the lowest possible cost, the working class needs the best possible health and safety conditions for all. Workers needed to struggle for *independent union control of safety*, to reopen the economy, and to expand production, housing, schools and healthcare. Supporting the lockdowns meant the only way of actually getting these things—fighting against the capitalists and for workers to call the shots—was taken off the table by the union leaders and the reformists.

Bootlickers and Brandon

What have the so-called “revolutionaries” been doing to combat the disastrous course of the union misleaders, from the pandemic to this election? They’ve been busy building illusions in the bourgeois politicians and the trade-union leaders who tie workers to the capitalist state. From the FRSO to the social-democratic Socialist Revolution, they build the illusion that “Brandon is Better.”

While the FRSO enthusiastically lauds Johnson’s campaign, social democrats like Socialist Alternative and

Socialist Revolution have a slightly different approach. They act as unsolicited advisers for Johnson and other Democratic Party “progressives.” Both Socialist Alternative and Socialist Revolution call for capitalist politicians like Bernie Sanders, Johnson, and DSA aldermen to run independently of the Democrats so as to better dupe the workers. In all cases, this is only a call for a nominally independent social-democratic party. What is needed is not merely an *organizational* break with the main parties of capitalism, but for workers to *politically* break with the program of liberalism and class collaboration, which undermines their struggles at every step.

The fake socialists prostitute Marxism in the service of reformism, implying a workers government is an independent reformist party administering capitalism. Socialist Revolution absurdly writes, “...a genuine workers’ government in Chicago could ameliorate some conditions and unify the working class while linking up with workers everywhere to struggle against the state and federal government’s austerity policies. Instead, these Alderman [sic] have largely fallen into line with the needs of the capitalists, despite this or that radical speech or pronouncement.” No. A workers government means the workers take power through the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the complete expropriation of the capitalist class. For the working class to be *politically* independent of the capitalists, it has to be led by a party on the basis of fighting for a workers government—the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Workers need revolutionary leadership to advance their struggles. Trade unionists must fight to oust the bureaucrats tying them to the bosses’ parties and their state. Members of “socialist” organizations must ask themselves why their organizations promote the same capitalist politicians and build the credentials of labor’s misleaders. Those fed up with the dead-end strategy of the bureaucrats and the reformists must be won to the genuine revolutionary perspective the Spartacist League is fighting for. Contact us.

— Chicago Spartacist League
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