

Movement Alders Flip to Pass Austerity Budget

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City Council just approved Chicago mayor Lori Lightfoot's antiworker austerity budget, with 29 voting in favor and 21 voting against it. Lightfoot's property tax increase passed with a slightly narrower margin of 28 for, 22 against. A large but strange assemblage spanning from the left-wing Alderwoman Jeanette Taylor to the notoriously corrupt boss Alderman Ed Burke found themselves voting against the mayor's budget together. Opposition to the budget came primarily from those opposed to the hike in property taxes and from those opposed to another nail in the coffin of working Chicago.

Next year's budget will be a combination of cutbacks, layoffs, and regressive tax hikes that will cause a great deal of pain for poor and working class people in Chicago. Notably, however, the budget makes hardly any concessions to the growing movement against racist police violence in Chicago and all over the country. Scores of activists have been organizing for months to defund the police in a context where cops take 40 percent of the city's annual operating budget. That's millions of dollars for repression and punishment that would be much better spent on schools, social workers, medical care, and jobs programs. Lightfoot's budget, however, brushes aside these demands and keeps the status quo intact.

As Lightfoot recently put it: "I have been very clear that I do not support defunding police. . . . And I also reject the false narrative that it's either fund the police or fund the community." Chicagoans disagree, however: in a recent survey (conducted by the mayor's office no less), 84 percent of respondents said they want the CPD to be defunded.

One contentious point of the budget was the Treatment Not Trauma plan to add a public, nonpolice program of mental health responders to mental health emergencies. Lightfoot cynically added a severely underfunded version of the plan to the budget but alongside another plan involving police as co-responders that was rejected by Treatment Not Trauma sponsor, 33rd ward alderperson Rossana Rodriguez, and the city's antiracist movement.

In the runup to the vote, Lightfoot resorted to the time-honored Chicago machine tradition of threatening to punish anyone who dares to oppose the mayor's proposed budget. She told the members of the Black Caucus that she wouldn't prioritize their wards in the city's capital improvement plan if they vote against her proposal. She threatened the Latino Caucus that she might not close loopholes in the Welcoming City Ordinance if they vote against her—a move which would leave many Chicagoans vulnerable to deportation.

Yet despite these and other threats of retaliation, Lightfoot's budget barely passed—indeed, since 26 votes in favor are required by law in order for it to pass, the margin of victory came down to four votes.

This isn't how things typically go in Chicago politics, where city government has been notoriously top-down and dominated by the mayor for decades. This is probably the most contentious budget vote in Chicago in a generation or more. As recently as 2017, Rahm Emanuel had his proposed budget approved unanimously. What explains the change?

Two factors seem important. First of all, Chicago—like everywhere else in the United States at the moment—is reeling from the pandemic and all of the economic turmoil it has caused (and continues to cause). In this context it's even harder than usual to sell austerity to a population suffering under the weight of a public health crisis and what is, in effect, a recession.

The second factor is that City Council is not the rubber stamp it once was. During the last round of aldermanic elections in 2019 a wave of movement-backed candidates swept into office promising to shake things up and challenge the grip corporate-funded politicians have on public policy. Indeed, socialist alderpeople such as Carlos Ramirez-Rosa and Jeanette Taylor gave bold, principled, and fiery speeches at yesterday's City Council meeting, denouncing the mayor's budget and standing up for working-class Chicagoans.

Had all of the movement-backed candidates voted against Lightfoot's budget, it probably wouldn't have passed. Lightfoot won this battle because four Progressive Caucus members—Sue Sadlowski-Garza (10th ward), Andre Vasquez (40th ward), Maria Hadden (49th ward) and Mike Rodriguez (22nd ward)—broke ranks with the city's social movements and voted in favor of austerity. Garza, Hadden, and Rodriguez were all elected after receiving substantial backing and endorsements from United Working Families, an organization funded by the Chicago Teachers Union, SEIU Health Care Illinois-Indiana, and other unions and community groups. Of the eighteen alderpeople in City Council's Progressive Caucus, eleven (over 60 percent) voted for the antiworker budget. Given the evidence, the progressive label for the caucus, much like at the national level, has proven to be a meaningless and deceptive nicety.

Andre Vasquez, currently a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), won office with the support of the Chicago chapter of the DSA and Reclaim Chicago, a coalition backed by National Nurses United and the People's Lobby.

So, to sum up: left-leaning unions, socialist political organizations, and a variety of movement activists helped elect these four alderpeople in order to fight against austerity. But when the game was on the line, they helped the opposing team score a goal.

Why did they do this? Maria Hadden justified her flip-flop on Treatment Not Trauma by citing the inclusion of an option for a nonpolice responder model—a scarcely funded and heavily compromised nonsolution that movement organizers have rightly pointed out was never Hadden’s to bargain with in the first place. Andre Vasquez deflected blame for his own capitulation toward the federal government and COVID-19, citing his own calls to the mayor and the mayor’s superior staff resources with awe during the council meeting. Due to his actions, it appears that Vasquez’s days as a member of the DSA are numbered, as the Chicago chapter voted to censure him and demand his resignation from the organization.

The bigger question, however, is: what should we do differently next time around so that we get better results? The crux of the issue is how trade unions and left organizations can ensure that their participation in electoral politics bears real fruit for workers and the oppressed. The current model used by UWF, Reclaim Chicago, and the DSA involves endorsing candidates running for office based on the extent to which those campaigns overlap with the “values” of those organizations. This approach, however, is weak when it comes to ensuring that the candidates who receive endorsements actually follow through on their campaign promises and remain accountable to those who helped put them in office.

The DSA’s decision to censure (and potentially even expel) Vasquez is a positive example of how to respond constructively to this problem. By publicly denouncing the antiworker vote of Vasquez, the Chicago DSA has taken a vital step toward rebuilding credibility for the socialist movement among the workers who will be most affected by this bosses’ budget. Other left-wing organizations should follow this example.

What exactly comes next, however, is less clear. At some point the labor movement, the DSA and other left organizations need to talk about running their own candidates and holding them accountable to a democratically determined set of political demands. Rather than endorsing a politically uneven assortment of candidates over whom we’ll have limited control once they win office, we need a political party that is internally democratic, membership-based, which fields its own candidates and can hold them accountable.

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