

Union leadership undermines fights for honest elections

By Theresa D. Daniels

When the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) House of Delegates met on February 15, 2006, President Marilyn Stewart and her administration kept it a secret from the House that their version of the referendum on the mail ballot to the homes of members would be held at the schools on April 4th, the day before the next meeting of the House of Delegates would take place April 5th. The March meeting of the House had already been cancelled due to the Delegates Workshop March 24th and 25th.

So much for the "supreme power" of the House that the CTU Constitution and By-laws guarantee when delegates are not so much as given an opportunity to discuss and debate such an important issue, let alone vote on the proposed ballot, its wording, and the placement or order of the propositions on it. The normal procedure would have been for the delegates to make a recommendation after discussion and debate, and to set a date based on the recommendation of the officers.

The Rules-Election Committee, which has been purged of all "dissidents" as President Stewart calls those who don't follow her United Progressive Caucus (UPC) party line, put the two Union leadership's propositions first on the ballot. Their Proposition #1 (which they are promoting in their literature to the schools) is to have elections done as always in the schools.

This leaves some 600 polling places where problems can arise. The votes then can be counted by partisans in the union hall where there is no more security for the ballots there than there was in the schools, and where those who conduct the vote count are not professional tabulators and can make mistakes (just as can those who act as election judges in the schools), or can be partisans who take advantage of the loopholes for cheating that abound.

Election count observers in the Union hall cannot "observe" anything in these kinds of counts because they cannot see whether what the ballot says is even reflected in the counters' hatch marks, as happened in the recent retiree delegate election January, 2006. If the count is done at the schools, the vote tally can also easily be switched there or in the union hall either by mistake or deliberately leaving the election wide open to fraud. UPC administrations have routinely fought hiring an independent certified agency to do the tabulating in most elections.

The leadership's Proposition #2 has the ballot mailed to members at their school instead of to the home address of record, and says that the election would be "administered by a certified independent tabulating company." A mailing to members at their school presents many problems since the Union rosters of school members are notoriously inaccurate, as delegates know, with members who have retired or left years ago sometimes on the roster, and members who have been at the school for years sometimes still not on the roster year after year, despite delegates' attempts to correct this with the Union.

In this scenario, clerks (or delegates?) at schools would either have to place the ballots in mailboxes which are not secured and where anyone can steal a ballot, or have members sign for their ballots. The procedure to be followed is not known, as the House of Delegates was not given the opportunity to have this discussion to learn what procedures the leadership had envisioned. And, what happens to the ballots sent to the school in error? They could easily be used fraudulently.

Both Propositions, #1 and #2 are labor intensive for the schools and the members, and do not promote election integrity.

The leadership's argument that mailing the ballots to the schools is part of their so-called "Residency Protection Act" falls flat on its face since the Chicago Public Schools Board (CPS) mails everything to the members' address of record and the few members who are not following residency rules have no doubt made accommodations. The Union also had to use the addresses on its own list to send a mailing informing members of this referendum.

So much for thinking that this Union under the "new/old" United Progressive Caucus (UPC) would ever want to ensure honest elections and do what all the other large unions have done—which is to have mail ballots sent to the homes of members. This despite the fact that the parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), strongly recommended that our Union go to a mail ballot to homes after the contested election of 2004 where 900 ballots went missing in an election with a 500-ballot vote margin. In this election President Marilyn Stewart was appointed to office by the AFT.

The PACT proposal for honest elections

Proposition #3, placed last on the ballot by the Stewart administration without the fairness a draw for position (nothing done within the purview of the House), is what the referendum should have been voting up or down. The ProActive Chicago Teachers and School Employees (PACT) Caucus petition for a referendum proposed that the ballots would be mailed to the members' address of record in an election administered by a certified independent tabulating company.

When asked again at this February meeting about the referendum that the Stewart administration had stalled on since last May of 2005 when they received the PACT Caucus petition for a referendum signed by 2,500 members, Financial Secretary Mark Ochoa would not give a date, but said, as he had said at every meeting in answer to these questions, that they were still working on the wording.

In his Financial Secretary's Report, Ochoa claimed at this meeting that they had to work out an inclusion of "Keep it the same" for the sake of the members who wanted no change. What errant nonsense he spoke, when it's obvious to everyone that if the referendum had dealt with the PACT proposition alone, as it should have, a defeat of that proposition would have left things "the same."

Undermining the Union Constitution and the will of the Union members who signed this petition by not putting the PACT initiative up for a vote immediately after the unconscionable length of time they took to "verify" the signatures (from May to November, 2005), instead the Stewart administration gathered signatures for their own competing petition reflected now in the first two propositions, and worked, they said, on the "wording."

The March, 2006 issue of the Union newspaper, The Chicago Union Teacher, presented arguments for the propositions of the Union administration, while giving a shoddy and confusing presentation, especially in the chart, for the PACT proposition.

PACT initiatives for honest elections

The Stewart administration has worked in secret for almost a year to orchestrate a defeat for this latest PACT attempt to keep elections free of fraud. Through another referendum in 2001, PACT had already won the posting of a school-by-school count after every election in the Union newspaper so that members at schools could have a sense of whether or not their votes were registered accurately.

The UPC, which had been in power for almost thirty years, always posed the ridiculous argument that the CPS Board might somehow retaliate against a school if it knew how the school voted. The present leadership argues in its current literature against the PACT proposition by saying that publishing this school-by-school count in their own newspaper costs them 90,000.

A second initiative won by PACT was the documentation of the number of ballots printed. Astoundingly, that number was never previously revealed. With these two initiatives in place, it was finally possible for PACT to overthrow the UPC dynasty in the election of June, 2001 when Deborah Lynch and the PACT slate were elected.

The outcome of this referendum of April 4, 2006 for the mail-in ballot will only be known after the deadline for Substance is past.

The President's Report

After we newly seated delegates as of the elections in January, 2006 took our oath of office wherein we swore to faithfully "executive" our duties as delegates and to uphold the "principals" of the CTU (corrections later duly noted by Recording Secretary Mary McGuire), President Marilyn Stewart gave her report. The oath was administered by Clerk of State David Orr who spoke movingly of the time long past when teachers were still respected and of his proudest moments when Mayor Harold Washington and Dawn Clark Netsch, the first woman to hold state office, were elected.

In her speech to the House, President Stewart addressed the Union's constant fight to protect its members against the closings of schools by a Board who constantly changes the policies for school closings. She said community groups and our coalition of unions—Chicago United for Education—were fighting the closings despite how the hearings on closings were scheduled for minimal public access. She said the aldermen were waking up and finally speaking against Renaissance 2010 [the mayor's plan to destroy public education in Chicago so his friends could have some charter schools by which to profit].

She was applauded by the delegates when she said that she was going to tell the mayor to forget about the Board's annual event "Principal for a Day," but to come and be "Teacher for a Day." She said the mayor picks on the constituency that's least threatening to him, and that he's using the schools to divert attention from his other problems. The polls don't look that good for him, she said, and he might have to be in a run-off election.

She said that teachers were buying uniforms for children, and doing the laundry as well. "A nine-year-old comes in cussing," she said. "What happened to him last night?" She said in school the children are safe, and told the teachers to pat themselves on the back for doing it, what they love, every day.

She said that recently a teacher was made fun of in the press for retiring with 300 sick days and marveled at how the mayor dumps on teachers and threatens to announce their number of sick days while teachers who at great cost to themselves don't allow themselves sick days are also mocked. A real Catch-22, I say.

[In the official question period deliberately scheduled towards the end of the meeting so fewer delegates can take part or hear other sides of the story, Medical Benefits Coordinator Peter Ardito more specifically stated that it was a colleague from Prosser High School who had been put up as an object of derision for retiring with 315 sick days, whereas the Board saves money on a teacher like this because otherwise they would have to pay not only the sick day benefit, but the substitute teacher as well.]

President Stewart spoke of the Union's goals to provide the membership with good health benefits and good packages for those trying to retire, and to restore seniority rights.

She pointed out that the Board is again telling us the same story about how much money they don't have. She said that they are trying to balance their budget on the backs of Union members. She said that the Board has taken a ten-year holiday from funding our pension with a total of \$1.1 billion diverted, and was now trying to renege on its promise to pay if the funding fell below 90%, trying to take the funding level down to 80%.

"We're not having it," she said. "It's our money. We worked for it."

During her report, President Stewart had Union coordinator Diana Sheffer report. Sheffer urged the delegates to go to

the Union website daily. She said it was uploaded with new information sometimes as often as three times a day.

Sheffer spoke of the Union advocacy campaigns where members can send on letters to politicians. Raising the specter of Big Brother Is Watching, she said she could see who was sending out letters. She repeated that with glee, and said she knew exactly who sent what and to who and that “our most vociferous retiree delegates are not participating in these campaigns.” [Ooooooh! I say it’s a good thing to click and send on a uniform prepared letter, but better yet is personal or phone contact or original letters—maybe where you’re not monitored by Big Brother.]

Sheffer said that 2,000 Union advocacy letters went out against the mayor’s teacher absentee statements. She said that the advocacy faxes to Board members clogged up their phone system, according to the Board employees.

Retiree Delegates still need not apply

During her report, President Stewart also had coordinator Nick Cannella address the coming Delegates Workshop. During the Stewart administration, unlike what had always been the practice, delegates have been told that no questions could interrupt the President’s Report, including questions to the speakers Stewart calls on to report during her report.

This was the first meeting during the Stewart administration where the microphones weren’t hijacked to the very front of the hall lest any delegate even dream of asking a question. Though the mikes stayed in place during this meeting, they were at times turned off. I’ve asked my questions without a mike at certain meetings using the teacher voice we’ve all developed.

At this meeting, I asked President Stewart if I could ask Nick Cannella a question, and she allowed it. I asked if the elected retiree delegates would be allowed to attend the workshop this year, as they had been barred from attending last year by the Stewart administration, unlike how they were welcomed during former President Lynch’s administration.

Cannella answered that No, they would not be allowed to attend, and Stewart added that the Union could not afford to host the retiree delegates.

When I exclaimed how preposterous Stewart’s statement was with given that so few delegates attended last year, my mike was turned off. As I tried to talk about the obscene salaries and perks that Union officers and staff have that they have never fully revealed and that would total close to \$150,000 or more for each officer and staff member, Stewart started yelling, “You’re out of order.”

I didn’t have a chance to address the Christmas bonuses of approximately \$2,000 each that they gave themselves for the second year in a row now, something they don’t deny. In terms of union dues going for personal enrichment of union administration, the CTU is the Cadillac of unions, as the expression goes, though nowadays we should probably name a more expensive car.

This year, just as last year, there was a “City-wide Delegate” box on the workshop application in the delegates packet to check off, a designation which also applies to the retiree delegates. Last year, five of the thirty elected retiree delegates, including me, submitted their applications and checks (reimbursed later if you attend) only to have the checks returned by Nick Cannella who told me, “Don’t shoot the messenger.” Some delegates speculate that perhaps it’s because retirees pay only \$24 a year for union dues. More importantly, retirees can’t vote in the election for union officers, so to the Stewart administration, I guess we’re expendable and therefore to be treated in a discriminatory way.

There must be a special circle in heaven for those who don’t respect the expertise and experience of their elders, and in this case, who don’t allow a workshop meant for the training of delegates—especially with so many new delegates—to benefit from the knowledge retirees have gained over long years of work in the Union and the schools.

A young, newly elected active (working) delegate who had never served before remarked to me after the meeting that she was astounded that retiree delegates would be treated so deplorably by their Union. She asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals.

Linda Mitchell, recently retired Union Field Representative, and now elected retiree delegate, said in anger to those around her at the last monthly retiree meeting held March 22, that perhaps the officers (some with relatively little experience in union work) don't want anyone showing them up at the workshops. Mitchell had just been told she could not attend the workshop this year.

At these monthly retiree meetings (no meetings in January and February, as if all retirees take off for warmer climes), retirees are further marginalized by the cycle of travelogue, senior safety, investment, tax, and insurance presentations, with virtually no political information or exchange allowed. It is as if we're too senile to be engaged politically or to follow parliamentary procedure. Ironically, if these meetings are to be social events, then why is there nothing built into the program for retirees to be able to meet and greet?

With the notice for the March retiree meeting, came a questionnaire asking if the retiree wanted to continue getting notices of these meetings. It's hard to understand why such a question would even be asked since the meeting date is often left off the Union newspaper calendar and is not published elsewhere.

Since the Pension Fund provides all services to retirees, and the Union doesn't need to do any special work for them, like file any grievances or work on pension check problems, the approximately \$75,000 plus in dues money the retirees bring into Union coffers yearly could be considered a "cash cow," according to James Alexander, former Financial Secretary and retiree liaison, who has recently been elected as a retiree delegate and named by the AFT as one of a list of most "e-fluential" advocacy letter campaign e-mailers.

And furthermore, this year the Stewart administration canceled Bus Lobby Day, an annual event where teachers go to speak to their legislators in Springfield on educational issues. It was canceled because of "delayed ISAT tests," meaning active teachers would not be able to go.

If the Union cared to organize retirees, what contingents could have gone! No need to cancel Bus Lobby Day! To what better use could you put all that retiree wisdom and grace?

President Stewart did not address in her speech the many school riots, discipline problems, and other mayhem routinely happening in the schools today most often not reported in the media. Some say her administration is avoiding the real issues while she has her Safety and Security Coordinator chasing down leaky faucets.

Your dues dollars at work

In this Corvette of Unions for officers and staff, where greed for personal gain runs it, and a Field Representative reportedly was able to pay off her Corvette with the "transportation allowance" perk the Union provides, the pot sweetener for delegates is the Delegates Workshop get-away and Friday night sleep-over at a fancy downtown hotel. This perk is a small token of appreciation for the largely unremunerated work of the school delegate and I is much deserved.

During the tenure of previous Union administrations, intensive union educating went on during this get-away. However, under the Stewart administration, this Union workshop time has deteriorated for the second year into largely a drinking party, according to Sarah Loftus, delegate from Marquette School and former Union coordinator.

After registering at the Holiday Inn Mart Plaza on Friday, March 24th after school, the delegates had a cocktail hour from 5—6:00 p.m. which was followed by dinner in the ballroom. During past administrations there were some meetings held during this cocktail hour time (either a delegates meeting or workshops) and during the dinner there would be some serious union speeches delivered, unlike this year.

This year what followed the dinner was a second open-bar reception from 7:30—11:00 p.m. sponsored by Union vendors. One of the vendors was the firm of Poltrock and Poltrock, the present attorneys for the CTU.

On Saturday, after breakfast, there was a three-hour session of workshops. A two-hour lunch afterwards was followed by another one-hour workshop session.

Then another open-ended and open-bar reception ensued. One delegate said that delegates wondered why they were even there with so little delegate training (only four hours) taking place.

Stewart administration puts another Union member under arrest

I guess because pressing union issues have no place at such a workshop event, the Union had Judy Dever arrested for leafleting inside the Holiday Inn. Dever is a long-time union activist and a former Union Executive Board member. She is now retired and was leafleting about the mail ballot and the restoration of our Union bargaining rights. Reportedly the complaint for trespassing was signed by Union Coordinator Nick Cannella and Dever was in jail till 5:00 a.m.

Arresting Union members seems to have become a pattern with the Stewart administration as they had former President Deborah Lynch arrested at the June, 2005 delegates meeting.

At the 4:00 pre-meeting question period of this February House of Delegates meeting, Tony Gudwien, delegate from Kelvyn Park High School, said that if indeed Union Attorney Larry Poltrock on behalf of the Stewart administration had former President Debbie Lynch arrested, "then this administration should be gone." President Marilyn Stewart responded to his statement by denying any involvement by Poltrock or of anyone in her administration, saying she didn't know how that happened. I rose to a mike with a point of information to say that Stewart was lying, and that Lynch had finally been able to procure the police report in December, 2005 as proof. Stewart at that point shouted that it had taken the Union that long too. The police report as published previously in Substance showed conclusively that "Attorney Lawrence A. Poltrock of 123 West Madison, Suite #2100, phone (312) 236-0606" was the complaining witness against Lynch, saying that she was causing disturbances. Everyone sitting around her saw Lynch merely sitting and taking notes.

I was told I was out of order, while Sergeant-at-Arms Anthony Abboreno did a sideways football run across the front of the hall waving his arms for my microphone to be shut off. I checked his I.D. badge later. It said he was a "non-voting delegate." Past Union practice of other administration had elected delegates serve as sergeants-at-arms, but this is often not the case now. Abboreno did not succeed in his bid to be elected retiree delegate in the January election.

PAC political contributions not disclosed

The Items for Action for the February meeting followed the President's Report and consisted of six motions for which the Union Executive Board recommended the House of Delegates approval. The first one was "A. Approve the endorsements for the March 2006 Primary Elections."

During the discussion of this motion, Lou Pyster, elected retiree delegate and former Union Director of Research, was able to elaborate on an issue he tried to raise, among others, during the pre-meeting question period. He had said that the Union had adopted a policy in 1983 that twice a year, in January and in June, the Union would publish a list showing to whom the Political Action Committee (PAC) money contributed by Union members had gone. He said that in the year and a half during the Stewart administration there had been no such list published.

Treasurer Linda Porter responded with, "Lou, Lou, Lou, you're talking about 1983 when this is 2006." Her nonsensical evasion of the question was reminiscent of other UPC administrations when they would try to shut Pyster down at the mike. The party cohort would boo Pyster's questions, and current lobbyist and former Recording Secretary Pam Massarsky would deliberately address him as Mr. "Pisster."

Later in the meeting Treasurer Porter claimed the list had been placed in the delegates packets once during this administration, and Pyster reiterated that established policy was publishing the list twice a year.

In a phone interview, Pyster told me that the list showing where PAC monies have gone is important because the Union must avoid conflicts of interest. For example, Was it a conflict of interest, he said, for the Union to make a contribution in

2005 of \$2,000 to John Osteburg, who besides being the Mayor of Park Forest is also the paid editor of the Union newspaper.

Pyster told me that in 1983 Robert Healy gave a \$6000 contribution to Jane Byrne which was not published and so not known.

Pyster also brought up the fact that because three employees of the Union have now also been elected as active trustees of the Pension Fund, there is an added danger of conflict of interest. The trustees in question are Connee Fitch-Blank, Maria Rodriguez, and Union Treasurer Linda Porter, who is also on the executive board of the Union PAC committee. This creates, he said, the most direct connecting link between the Union, PAC, and the Pension Fund.

A question arises too, he said, when vendors contribute to PAC through the legislators' dinner (LEAD) and do business with the Union or the Pension Fund. Pension trustees make final decisions on hiring and firing investment managers causing a possible conflict of interest which counsel for the Pension Fund has been directed to investigate. Treasurer Porter stated that the Union solicited no contributions.

Pyster also asked that all of the legislative bills upon which the candidates' endorsements were based (as indicated by the number of stars candidates are given in the endorsement literature presented to the delegates) would be published as had always been done in the past, but not done with these March election endorsements. He said he hoped the administration could work this out for the coming October election endorsements.

Motion A. to endorse certain candidates passed.

Endorsement of governor briefly put on hold

Motion B. was "Delay endorsement of gubernatorial candidates pending the outcome of discussions be the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) and the Governor. Permit the executive committee to determine if a gubernatorial endorsement is made by the CTU and to whom it is made." This motion passed.

After this meeting, the Union endorsed Governor Rod Blagojavich, even though he reneged the very next day on a promise to the IFT about refraining from promising to reduce taxes. It's considered, however, that he has increased school funding and the amount of per-pupil spending, and will continue in this vein.

In a mailing to the members, the Union stated that the House had voted to endorse him for the primary, but that further consideration would be necessary.

Miscounting of House votes continues

Motion C. was "Issue a reprimand to Board President Michael Scott and CEO Arne Duncan for the outrageous lack of respect accorded our membership—from focusing on teachers' absence to unfairly closing schools without offering the support needed to effect real change."

Former President Deborah Lynch, now Elementary Functional Vice President on the Executive Board of the Union, put up the following NO CONFIDENCE substitute motion: "Due to the continuing attack on Chicago Public Schools in low income neighborhoods, which are being closed supposedly for academic reason, the members of the CTU House of Delegates hereby issue a vote of NO CONFIDENCE in the leadership abilities of CPS CEO Arne Duncan and CBE (Chicago Board of Education) President Michael Scott."

The counts given on this substitute motion by Stewart's counters, who do not tell the House what their section count is, were added up by the officers to be 201 against and 142 for the motion. Interestingly, a voice vote wasn't taken by President Stewart who went straight to a standing vote. Norine Gutekanst, delegate from Inter-American School, wondered if Stewart was afraid to take a voice vote lest it be an undeniably overwhelming yes vote like the one that

deferred consideration of the contract proposals from the January meeting to the April meeting.

[At Substance deadline, April 3rd, neither the promised corrected contract proposal package which delegates were to be able to study and share with colleagues, NOR the meeting notice for the April 5th meeting has been received by the delegates!]

Counters in the balcony on the substitute motion said it looked close, with their numbers showing the Lynch motion winning by a slight margin. No way, they said, was there the 59-vote difference reported by Stewart.

The original Motion C. was then passed by the House.

The rest of the motions were readily approved by the House. They were the slightly repetitious Motion D. "Demand the elimination of the Mayor's plan to publicize teacher attendance at the beginning of each school year, beginning next year"; Motion E. "Approve the Resolution on Ending Dating/Relationship Violence"; and Motion F. "Approve the Resolution Prohibiting Sexual Harassment".

The "minutes" still a goofy

In the minutes provided for the January 11, 2006 House meeting, Recording Secretary Mary McGuire had written, "The Executive Board recommended the approval of the following motions" because she sticks too closely to that meeting's original agenda when she should be reporting what actually happened to those motions at the meeting. She should have written, "The following motions recommended by the Executive Board were approved."

McGuire came down from the stage to talk to me at the mike I was speaking from, rather than have me discuss the corrections at the mike. When she had difficulty understanding the mistake I've described here, I told her this could be considered a technicality. The more egregious error was that she had written that the House had approved the motion to lay the contract proposals on the table "until the February House meeting," whereas they had been postponed to the April meeting.

All of this came up when I again insisted at the mike that the recording secretary must ask for corrections of the minutes, as the new parliamentarian had written Allegra Podrovsky, delegate from Kelvyn Park High School.

After the Officers Reports and the official Question, Comment, and Motion Period (where too many UPC party-line delegates rush the mikes, not giving the "dissidents" or independent delegates a fair shot), Union staffer Diana Sheffer motioned for adjournment, and the meeting was adjourned at approximately 6:30 p.m.