

# USA: Chicago's Socialist Wave in Municipal Politics

Wednesday 17 April 2019, by [BLOOM Will](#) (Date first published: 3 April 2019).

**Chicago socialists did very well in recent municipal elections, winning as many as six socialist city council members. The city's left has a historic opportunity to push back years of gentrification, police brutality, and austerity. It will also face challenges from the new mayor Lori Lightfoot. Celebrated by much of the liberal media as a successful black and lesbian politician, Lightfoot has a clear record of anti-poor and pro-developer policies. She also supports heavy policing of the poor.**

A red wave has crashed into Chicago.

After last night's runoff elections, Chicago's fifty-member city council will have at least five, and likely six, socialists who have committed to establish and join a Socialist Caucus. They will be joined by several other new left-liberal aldermen who will help make the body's Progressive Caucus one of its largest organized groups.

These victories, in which citywide organizations like United Working Families (UWF) and the Chicago Democratic Socialists of America (CDSA) played a key role, mark a sea change in Chicago. They are a rare opportunity for progressive unions, radical social movements, and resurgent socialists to demand the working class have a say in Chicago.

## The Roots of a Socialist Upsurge

These results are the product of political forces that have been developing for years. The alliance of the city's progressive unions, led primarily by the Chicago Teachers Union, and community groups across the city's South and West sides was born in their work together on the [2012 teachers strike](#) and the fight against Rahm Emanuel in [the 2015 mayoral race](#), in which [Chuy Garcia](#) managed to force a runoff election.

The movement for criminal justice reform and against police violence has also played a key role, emerging in response to the murders of [Laquan McDonald](#), Rekia Boyd, and other black people by Chicago police officers, led primarily by young activists of color in groups like Assata's Daughters and BYP100, had already forced the exit of Police Commissioner Garry McCarthy and State's Attorney Anita Alvarez before playing a major role in [Rahm's surprise announcement](#) last year that he wouldn't run for a third term. And the emergence of socialism as a vital political current has swept across Chicago, driving rapid growth in the Chicago DSA and infusing an explicit critique of capitalism into the city's political discussion.

Several scandals have also forced Chicago's ruling elite onto the back foot.

Rahm's role in covering up Laquan McDonald's murder helped crater his popularity and led to his decision not to run for a third term. Ed Burke, the city council's most senior alderman and one of the most powerful politicians in the city, is under federal investigation into kickbacks he sought for help

in zoning changes — an investigation aided by another alderman, Danny Solis, wearing a wire for the FBI to record conversations with Burke, in an effort to mitigate his own corruption investigations. Burke's fall has damaged many politicians who took donations from him, including other aldermen and mayoral candidate [Toni Preckwinkle](#), who lost by a three-to-one margin last night.

The rise in progressive and socialist power and the hits taken by establishment politicians has resulted in a municipal election dominated by the Left's priorities. Mayoral and aldermanic candidates were forced to talk about an [elected representative school board](#) (the city's school board is currently handpicked by the mayor), a [civilian police accountability commission](#), [rent control](#), and fighting a \$95 million [new police training academy](#) and a [massive taxpayer subsidy](#) to the upscale Lincoln Yards real estate development.

These were winning issues for progressive and leftist candidates. Carlos Rosa, the only self-identified socialist currently on city council, built his campaign around fighting the Cop Academy and for rent control in a rapidly gentrifying ward. He was opposed by a Rahm-backed opponent and local developer Mark Fishman, who felt so threatened by Rosa that he gave Rosa's opponent tens of thousands of dollars and free advertising in the windows of his vacant properties, and even bought the building Rosa housed his ward office in and tried to evict him.

Despite it all, Rosa won a twenty-point victory and a mandate for his next four years in City Council. (Read Rosa's 2017 interview with *Jacobin* [here](#).)

Where Rosa has fought major developers, in the neighboring first ward, Proco Joe Moreno has enabled them since Mayor Daley appointed him to the seat in 2010. On his watch, the ward has seen an exodus from historically working-class Latino neighborhoods like Logan Square and Humboldt Park. He was challenged by Daniel La Spata, a political newcomer who had been a member of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, an organization fighting developers.

In a result that shocked nearly everyone, La Spata crushed Moreno in February by a two-to-one margin. (Moreno did himself no favors with a late-breaking scandal involving him lending his car to his girlfriend and then reporting the car stolen, then bizarrely [telling a reporter](#), "She's a single mom. I was trying to help out.")

La Spata, a DSA member whose campaign was largely backed by the progressive group Reclaim Chicago, has said he'll join Rosa in a new Socialist Caucus in City Council.

After last night, they won't be alone. In the twentieth ward, where the sitting alderman faces more than a year in prison for wire fraud, Jeanette Taylor beat Nicole Johnson nearly 20 percent. Taylor is a lifelong Chicagoan and a longtime activist, as she explained in a [recent \*Jacobin\* interview](#), having led a thirty-four-day hunger strike that stopped the closing of Dyett High School in 2015. Taylor has also been central in the fight for the forthcoming Obama Presidential Library to only be built if developers agree to a community benefits agreement.

In the twenty-fifth ward, Byron Sigcho-Lopez, a community organizer, topped Alex Acevedo by almost 10 percent. Byron is the executive director of the Pilsen Alliance, which has led fights against developers in the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood — much of which was overseen by the ward's recently disgraced, wire-wearing alderman Danny Solis. (Read *Jacobin's* interview with Sigcho Lopez [here](#).)

As of this morning, Rossana Rodriguez leads incumbent thirty-third ward alderman Deb Mell by sixty-four votes, with mail ballots left to be counted over the next few days. In the first-round vote,

mail-in ballots favored Rodriguez. The razor-thin margins of the race, which at one point last night had the two candidates separated by a single vote, is a recurring theme in this ward. The first round saw Rodriguez lead Mell by only eighty-three votes. Rodriguez's campaign, driven by 33<sup>rd</sup> Ward Working Families, came out of the campaign of Mell's last challenger, Tim Meegan, who was seventeen votes away from forcing a runoff in 2015.

Mell is an unimpressive member of a Chicago political dynasty. Her father is Dick Mell, who held the seat for decades before giving it to Deb in 2013; her sister is Patty Blagojevich, wife of imprisoned former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich, who got his start in electoral politics when Dick ran him for state representative against one of his political rivals.

Rodriguez, by contrast, got her start in politics in Puerto Rico, where she was born. As she explained in an [interview with Jacobin](#), she grew up in a family fighting US imperialism on the island. She has remained a dedicated activist after moving to Chicago ten years ago, working on Meegan's 2015 campaign and fighting evictions and deportations in Albany Park.

In the fortieth ward, Andre Vasquez toppled incumbent Pat O'Connor by just under 8 percent. O'Connor has a long history in City Council; he and Ed Burke are the last two sitting members to have been part of the Vrdolyak 29, the voting bloc that spent the mid-1980s viciously opposing the city's first black mayor, Harold Washington.

O'Connor has continued to be a reactionary force in council politics in his role as Rahm's floor leader, where he has shepherded the mayor's agenda through a body increasingly unwilling to serve their historical role as a rubber stamp; his exit at the behest of a CDSA member and candidate backed by Reclaim Chicago is welcome.

### **No Friend on the Fifth Floor**

This new socialist power bloc is unlikely to have much of an ally in Chicago's new mayor. Lori Lightfoot, a relative unknown prior to the election, swept into office on a campaign denouncing corruption and promising to "bring in the light." But her background and her campaign donors tell another story.

Lightfoot's previous experience in government service was as a Rahm-appointed chair of the Police Accountability Task Force, in which position she resisted calls to hold the police murderer of Rekia Boyd, as well as many other perpetrators of police violence, to account. She also served as a federal prosecutor, putting many people in prison as part of the war on drugs. In private practice, she worked for Mayer Brown, where she represented corporate interests — and, incredibly, the Republican Party.

While there was an enormous amount to criticize in her opponent Toni Preckwinkle, Lori's background is as an agent of capital and defender of police repression. Her supporters in this election suggest this won't change once she occupies city hall, as she has been backed by major developers and financiers, as well as figures like Alderman Nicholas Sposato, who has gone on Tucker Carlson's show to [attack undocumented immigrants](#).

While Lightfoot is likely to side with the rich and powerful, she is unlikely to have anything approaching the power Rahm Emanuel had as mayor. Emanuel, and Richard M. Daley before him, were able to exert influence far beyond what power the official role of mayor holds. This is because of their vast networks of donors and political allies, through which they could fill the coffers of aldermen, or their challengers, across the city in exchange for support in council — a method of control that was particularly effective in the parts of the South and West sides, which have

experienced deep disinvestment, often as a result of policies those mayors pushed.

Lightfoot, however, has few of those relationships. Her lack of connection to any existing political force in the city will now make it hard for her to govern. She is the proverbial “nobody nobody sent.”

What this will likely mean is that power in city government will shift away from the mayor and toward a city council with a large Progressive Caucus (though that group hasn’t been a consistently and coherently “progressive” body in recent years) and a sizable Socialist Caucus. With the declining political power of veteran aldermen like Burke and the ouster of figures like O’Connor, the progressives are likely to be one of the most powerful organized blocs in city council.

The Socialist Caucus will also be strengthened by their close relationships with mass working-class organizations. All six candidates received varying levels of support from unions of education and health care workers, including CTU and SEIU HCII. Rodriguez emerged from Working Families 33<sup>rd</sup> Ward, which has built deep roots in the working-class immigrant neighborhood of Albany Park through their work on housing justice and immigrant defense. Rodriguez has also been active in her support for the Albany Park Defense Network, an immigrant rights group, including speaking at press conference in defense of neighborhood residents facing deportation.

Taylor came to politics through her activism fighting school closings, and is still closely connected with the CTU and the broader movement against austerity. Sigcho comes out of Pilsen Alliance and La Spata is a longtime member of LSNA, both key organizations in the fight against gentrification and for rent control.

All members of the caucus are also members of DSA, which has active campaigns in Chicago fighting for rent control, single-payer health care, and the municipalization and decarbonization of municipal power provider ComEd.

These relationships between elected officials and mass organizations should produce a broad push for left priorities in the face of a hostile mayor. These aldermen can use their platforms to act as organizers for socialism and tribunes for the working class, arguing for demands like an elected school board and rent control and connecting them to a broader socialist political vision to a citywide audience. Mass organizations will be able to deepen that support while increasing the pressure on city government through rallies, occupations, and strikes. In turn, the aldermen can serve as a pole in city council that can pull their indecisive and vulnerable colleagues, resulting in working-class gains while drawing thousands of new people into these movements and developing class consciousness across Chicago in a way that hasn’t been seen in a century.

If you told someone the day after the 2015 municipal election about the results of this year’s election, all but a few would have thought you delusional. Chicago’s left, through years of hard work, has an enormous opportunity. If the city’s left can use its momentum to win victories against capital, it could establish itself as a real, lasting political force and a model for leftists across the country.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Will Bloom is a labor and immigration attorney in Chicago. He is a member of the National Organization of Legal Service Workers, UAW Local 2320, and the Democratic Socialists of America.

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