

NEWS & POLITICS

'Not the way a transparent, democratic process should work'

Chicago community organizers and police reform advocates question the lack of transparency surrounding the city's new contract with the FOP and say Mayor Brandon Johnson should've pushed for greater accountability for cops, not less.

by **Maia McDonald**
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Police accountability advocates urge greater transparency surrounding negotiations with the police union.

Credit: Scott Rodgeron

Police reform advocates are calling for greater transparency and accountability following a new labor agreement recently ratified with Chicago police. The City Council approved **a contract extension** with the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) Lodge 7 in mid-December—the result of a 47–7 vote without prior debate and where neither the City Council nor Mayor Brandon Johnson’s administration disseminated exact contract details to the public beforehand.

The contract affords **new protections to officers** accused of misconduct, significantly changes how body cameras can be used, and ushers in some of the highest salary increases of any group of city employees starting in 2024.

The council’s Workforce Development Committee decided against another provision that would have allowed officers facing termination or suspensions of a year or more to have their cases **heard confidentially by an arbitrator** as opposed to at a public police board hearing. But local activists, civil rights lawyers, and others working in police reform argue the public should have been able to review these and other provisions before they were voted on.

Alexandra Block, director of the Criminal Legal System and Policing Project at the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Illinois, said she was disappointed to see this lack of transparency from the city in the FOP contract extension approval process.

“Not only did members of the City Council not have adequate time to review the provisions, but organizations like the ACLU and a number of our partner organizations—and we work with a coalition on issues of police accountability—we were just not given enough time to review and analyze the contract,” Block said. “That’s just not the way a transparent, democratic process should work, especially not in Chicago, where we have such a long history of lack of police accountability, and we’ve been struggling for years to encourage more oversight over the police.”

With the contract newly approved, officers represented by the FOP will receive 5 percent raises in 2024 and 2025. The changes could cost the city **between \$188 million and \$207 million** over the next three and a half years, according to an analysis from the Better Government Association (BGA). It will be the largest package of raises for a union representing city employees in modern history, the BGA reported.

Additionally, officers facing suspensions of 30 days or fewer can now have expedited hearings through **a new process called the “Peoples’ Court,”** and provisions regarding the use of body cameras say the devices

cannot be used where officers should have a reasonable expectation of privacy, like in locker rooms and restrooms.

Officers also now have the option to review body camera footage before writing any report, something they're also not required to note in the report itself. Most notably, the provision also disallows footage of postincident conversations or conversations with supervisors in disciplinary proceedings.

Block believes new provisions concerning the use of body cameras contradict state law and Chicago Police Department (CPD) policies and have the potential to confuse officers without further clarification from the city. The cameras are an essential tool in preventing collusion among officers after misconduct occurs, and such restrictions on their use only encourage an existing "code of silence," she said.

Local organizers like Asha Ransby-Sporn, who founded the Black-led abolitionist campaign Defund CPD and penned an open letter republished by the TRiiBE in response to this year's police budget, agree there should be greater accountability in FOP contract negotiations and for police officers, a category of worker that has "all this access and the possibility to do great harm and violence."

Ransby-Sporn also said the city should spend less on policing altogether. The city's resources should, rather, be invested in solutions that promote public safety, she said.

"We need to be looking for ways to reduce the enormous amount that the city spends on policing and, instead, investing [in] those resources and real root-cause solutions that promote safety," Ransby-Sporn said. "This unprecedented raise is simply . . . not a move that's going to make anyone safer and our police in Chicago are already finding ways to make more money at the expense of the safety of Chicagoans."

Investing in housing and youth jobs, mental health infrastructure and violence prevention services, and other "systems of care" are important alternatives to policing, Ransby-Sporn believes.

When Johnson launched his mayoral campaign in 2022, it was with a platform that aimed to address the root causes of crime and poverty and stressed the importance of increased police accountability, though he later wavered on the issue of defunding the police.


Those like Ransby-Sporn, an early supporter of the Johnson campaign, and Steve Art, an attorney with Chicago-based civil rights practice Loevy & Loevy, say the administration's recent actions haven't been consistent with the progressive ideals on which the mayor ran.

Art says the new contract continues “the same practices” as previous administrations that have slow-walked calls for greater police accountability and investment in communities often victimized by police. “That’s the real surprise: to have an administration that ran on a platform of police reform and accountability turn around in its first months in office, hand the police a contract that is unjustifiable on many grounds, while simultaneously ignoring the communities and the individuals who’ve been the victims of police misconduct,” Art said.

He added, “What needs to be done is any level of engagement resembling a real interest in police accountability and reform, and, so far, we’ve seen absolutely none.”

For now, Block would like to see the CPD clarify its policies in writing to stave off confusion from differing FOP contract provisions, she said. She’d also like to see the CPD complete a workforce allocation study, as required by court-ordered reform measures under the city’s consent decree, to address overpolicing and to determine the actual need of officers across the city.

With the new FOP contract active through June 2027, Block hopes the Johnson administration will see the public’s wish for greater transparency and implement it in future contract negotiations, she said.

“This is now a done deal—and it was a done deal, and voted on as a done deal, before anyone ever really knew what was even in the contract,” Block said. “That process itself is a problem, and, really, a missed opportunity to set a new tone for how Mayor Johnson’s administration is going to deal with police transparency issues. So, we hope the next time an FOP contract comes up for renegotiation, the process looks very different and much more transparent.” 

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