

USA: Chicago teachers demonstrate a new approach to organising

Friday 31 October 2014, by [UETRICHT Micah](#) (Date first published: October 2014).

A strike by Chicago teachers shows how unions can resist the dismantling of public education. Micah Uetricht takes up the story

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When I stumbled out of my apartment on 10 September 2012, I immediately heard chanting. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) was going on strike that morning, hitting the picket lines at 6.30am, and dozens of teachers at the elementary school a few blocks away, decked out in the union's signature red, were bellowing against Mayor Rahm Emanuel and his free market education policies. I cycled past them, only to encounter another group of raucous educators half a mile further on, then another, and another. The city was buzzing with striking teachers in red, highly visible – and audible – in every neighbourhood. Chicago felt like it belonged to them.

The CTU strike came during dark days for the US education system and labour movement. Neoliberal education reform had picked up steam, bent on dismantling much of public education as we know it. And labour's multi-decade slide saw union membership, strikes and workers' power at all-time lows.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, Chicago teachers walked off the job – and, remarkably, won some of their demands, handing the free market education reform 'movement' its most significant setback to date in the US.

The strike's success, limited though it may have been, is noteworthy because the neoliberal education reform agenda has marched forward unimpeded, in the US and elsewhere, for so long. But it wasn't out of nowhere. Union activists had spent years building a new kind of militant, democratic trade unionism that clearly identified the racism and class inequality that characterised the city's school system and took the demands of students, parents, and community members seriously enough to fight for their desires alongside the teachers' own.

A union joyriding

Free market education reform has torn through the US school system at a ferocious speed. Standardised testing has become an obsession, while educators and their unions have become punch bags not only for conservatives but many liberals too. In some cities, such as New Orleans, traditional public schools have basically ceased to exist, rapidly pushed out of the city by privately-

run charter schools, which receive public money but aren't subject to public control, are free to reject students deemed too difficult (or costly) to educate and are almost entirely non-union. Cloaked in a supposed concern for students' wellbeing, this agenda has only worsened the inequality in America's education system.

Chicago has been one of the key cities where it has been put to the test. In 2004, Chicago Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan, now education secretary under President Obama, brought the city 'Renaissance 2010', a plan that was to close or 'turn around' 80 public schools while aiming to open 100 charters. The process involved firing all a school's staff if it was deemed a 'failure' according to standardised test scores and handing over control over to a private operator. Charters' share of the annual CPS budget has grown every year (reaching \$567 million in 2014) as neighbourhood schools' funding has eroded. Longtime teachers, particularly teachers of colour, lost jobs by the thousands as schools serving poor students of colour in segregated neighbourhoods were shut down one by one.

Meanwhile, as teachers took a beating in the classroom, their union leadership proved uninterested in mounting a fightback – although their own pay and perks remained lavish. 'They weren't just asleep at the wheel,' says union staff coordinator and teacher Jackson Potter. 'They were joyriding.'

The desire of union members for a different kind of leadership had shown itself back in 2000, when Debbie Lynch, a longtime advocate of reform within the union, ran for president and won. She promised a more transparent and competent leadership, but offered no vision for a changed relationship with the CTU's 30,000 members. Rather than increasing union democracy and engaging with members to make them the primary movers of the union's agenda, Lynch encouraged members to hand her the reins and everything would be all right.

Lynch served a single term before being voted out, doomed after negotiating a contract with some poor provisions but insisting to the membership, 'You asked me to bring home the bacon, and I brought home the whole hog.' Feeling deceived and treated like children who couldn't read the contract for themselves, members brought back the old leadership.

Push from below

Having seen the hunger for change but also the disgust at hapless reform patronisingly imposed from above, a small number of CTU members began building a new group to push the union from below. That push wouldn't be carried out in isolation: from the beginning, the teachers built the group alongside community organisations and parents, who had their own ideas about reforming CPS.

The group rapidly evolved from a handful of teachers and community members to a fully-fledged opposition caucus in the union, growing as members spoke to teachers and parents testifying at school closure hearings and encouraged them to join. Public forums on the neoliberal reform plans drew hundreds of parents and teachers. The teacher activists spoke out at the meetings of the House of Delegates, the union's governing body of nearly 600 teachers, and organised mass public protests with community groups independently of the official union, eventually forcing reluctant leaders to endorse them.

Eventually, the group gave itself a name, the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE). Urged on by community groups, CORE decided to run a slate of candidates for the union leadership, promising to both reform the union and to make the members themselves responsible for running it. In 2010, they won, with Karen Lewis becoming union president. Lewis made clear that the new leadership would take a hard line against corporate reformers. 'This election shows the unity of 30,000

educators standing strong to put business in its place – out of our schools,’ she said after winning.

CORE quickly got to work restructuring the union. The new leaders immediately lowered their union salaries, matching them to those of ordinary members. Resources were shifted away from ‘servicing’ members towards training them to handle their own problems at the classroom level and establishing a new organising department. Existing structures of democratic control such as the union’s committees and the House of Delegates were expanded, and a summer programme was set up to train rank-and-file members in the basic tenets of organising. This was designed so they could develop links with parents and other community members in their schools’ neighbourhoods, allowing them to both make their case as a teachers’ union and hear from parents about the problems in their schools and communities.

Painstakingly, member by member, the union was moving to a democratic structure that engaged its members in new ways and, for the first time, made the concerns of the community a genuine part of its agenda.

Mission impossible

The new approach to organising enabled the union to achieve what many had thought was impossible: a vote to go on strike. In the face of a new state law requiring 75 per cent of all members to approve any strike action, 90 per cent of CTU members voted to strike.

When the strike came, multiple polls showed the Chicago public backing the teachers. After just a few years of determinedly organising alongside community groups and publicly making the concerns of poor students of colour and their parents central to its agenda, the union had won unprecedented support and trust. ‘Across the board, on every issue, the teachers got a more favourable outcome than the school system,’ University of Illinois labour studies professor Robert Bruno told CNN.

After nine days on the picket lines, the union ended its strike. The teachers did not win everything they wanted. ‘This is an austerity contract,’ Karen Lewis said on the strike’s final day. ‘This is not a contract [in which] we can get all that we want.’

But the action did hold back key neoliberal provisions such as merit pay, and it limited draconian demands for teacher assessments to be based on standardised test scores. More importantly, according to the educational policy analyst and historian Diane Ravitch, the strike ‘gave a spine to teachers everywhere’. It showed that it was possible to fight back against the GERM agenda.

The strike may have been a victory, albeit a limited one, but the union has lost several key battles since. These include the closure of 50 public schools in mostly African-American neighbourhoods despite massive protests led by the CTU and community groups.

But while the closures were a crushing defeat, the union’s mass mobilisation, two days of marches to each of the 50 schools, and refusal to meet the mayor halfway on nearly all of his education proposals have helped to produce political openings in the city that no one could have foreseen. Mayor Emanuel’s approval ratings have slumped since the strike and the closures, particularly among African-Americans, who voted for him overwhelmingly in 2011. Despite his huge financial backing, Emanuel now appears vulnerable to a challenge in 2015 – and CTU president Karen Lewis appears to be the frontrunner for the race.

Core issues

Since the strike, CORE has won re-election in the union with almost four fifths of the vote. The caucus continues to work alongside community groups and grow within the union itself. Rank-and-file teachers and CORE members led the push within the CTU nationally to oppose the 'Common Core' national curriculum adopted by 44 of the 50 US states and widely criticised by parents and teachers for its obsessive focus on test preparation, eliminating teacher autonomy and creativity in teaching, and preventing teacher-to-teacher collaboration. At this year's annual convention of the American Federation of Teachers, the national federation to which the CTU belongs, CORE members led an unsuccessful push to officially condemn the standards.

The CTU and CORE's accomplishments over the past decade are inspiring. But no one should be carried away with rosy proclamations for the near future. The union has lost more battles than it has won, even since CORE entered office. For all its efforts in defence of teachers' rights and educational equality, the forces representing privatisation and privation are still winning the day.

But if public education is to have any chance of surviving the next decade or two, it will require the kind of trade unionism that puts democracy, militancy and coalition-building at its core. That model has begun to spread to other places, such as Los Angeles and Massachusetts, where CORE-style reformers have taken over teachers' union leadership. GERM has proven contagious in recent history, but the CTU has shown that can be combated.

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P.S.

* From Red Pepper:

<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/chicago-teachers-demonstrate-a-new-approach-to-organising/>

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