

The Forge



Courtesy of Jackson Potter

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The Resurgence of Teachers Unions

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Two members of the Chicago Teachers Union's (CTU) big bargaining team visited Los Angeles in the summer of 2018, months into the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) contract campaign, to share lessons from their historic 2012 strike. Their presentation received a standing ovation. However, the contract demands that garnered the most applause and energy were for green spaces and community gardens at schools, affordable housing for students and their families, and efforts to expand a new union/community model for sustainable community schools with wraparound supports and culturally-relevant curriculum.

A renewed orientation toward social justice unionism has transformed contract bargaining for teachers unions over the past decade. In the five years

leading up to the 2018 contract campaign and subsequent strike, UTLA organizers held thousands of conversations — in person, on the phone, at rallies, in groups, and one on one — with members, allies, and parents. Through this spadework, the union built broad consensus around demands that would have an impact outside the classrooms, as well as inside.

Putting these kinds of common good demands at the core of our bargaining is no small part of the story behind the resurgence of teachers unions over the last decade. No less than twenty teacher strikes in the past eight years have injected hope and momentum into the labor movement's landscape. From Arizona to West Virginia to St. Paul, teachers waged strikes that led to unprecedented victories in school investment, class sizes, staffing formulas, and common good demands after decades of underfunding, privatization, and demonization of public school teachers and staff. In most of these efforts, teachers have won because they've run strong contract campaigns focused on what organizer and author Jane McAlevey has referred to as "structure tests." Organizers engaged every member to take part in escalating actions that advanced a clear set of public good demands.

In this essay, we look at two case studies: the 2019 UTLA and CTU strikes. We hope that by detailing the methods we used to prepare and launch our largely successful contract campaigns, we can help revive a labor movement that has remained largely dormant, even in the midst of historic teacher strikes. Now is the time to build on the grassroots organizing of teachers unions and grow a more militant labor movement across the country.

Los Angeles 2019, by Arlene Inouye

UTLA's six-day strike in January 2019 was only the third strike in our union's fifty-year history. UTLA is the second-largest teachers union in the country, with 35,000 educators in a school district with ninety percent students of color, 85 percent low-income students, and large populations of foster,

homeless, and special needs students. Because there are over 1,000 schools spread across the district, we had to be intentional about each step of our organizing plan. We knew that to win, our members needed to feel connected to each other and to the union and receive clear and consistent information (e.g. infographics on the key issues). We also needed to build union structures that engaged and empowered workers by recruiting leaders at every school and supporting them with UTLA staff.

UTLA was a testing ground for how to build a strong union. In the five years leading up to the strike, a group of progressive leaders had transformed UTLA from a service model with a backlog of 3,000 grievances to an organized, fighting union. We won all officer positions and a majority of the Board of Director positions with a commitment to take on the fundamental issues facing teachers and schools: institutional racism, declining public school funding, the expansion of charter schools, and weak relationships with parents and community organizations.

To accomplish this, we shifted our staffing to support an organizing culture, identified and engaged new member leaders, began organizing parents, students, and community members, and created a research department to support an expanded communications team. We looked at the necessary and sequential steps to gain the confidence and trust of our membership. First, we needed to win a salary increase, as we hadn't had one in eight years; then, we needed to raise dues so we could invest in organizing to become a fighting union; finally, we needed to build school site structures to prepare to strike.

Building School Site Structures

The heart of our organizing program was centered at the school sites. We needed all 34,000 members to receive union information, engage personally on the issues, and take sequential actions that required greater investment

and risk. To do this, we had to build the relationships and structures that could deliver this ambitious program.

Because of the sheer size and spread of our members, our UTLA structure divides the city into eight areas with four elected Board of Directors members and a steering committee from each area responsible for supporting school sites. One of our initial steps was to make it a priority for every school site to have a chapter chair and regular school site meetings. The UTLA area leaders, along with two staff organizers, recruited chapter leaders and trained them in how to have one-on-one conversations and build Chapter Action Teams (CATs).

Ideally, one CAT leader took responsibility for ten members with whom they engaged regularly on union issues, including members who worked at multiple schools, such as counselors, psychologists, therapists, and nurses. The CAT training included how to identify leaders, map your school site, and have difficult one-on-one conversations, including techniques such as redirecting and inoculating members. When the district put out memos saying that our members couldn't talk to parents or that special education teachers couldn't strike, the CAT leaders helped members work through their fear, uncertainty, and doubt (FUD). The CAT leader training also addressed how members could walk each other through FUD. Initially, members would give a million reasons why they couldn't strike. Many of their concerns were compelling, such as, "I'm a single Mom; I can't afford to strike." Members would allay these fears by reminding each other what we were striking for, and how the gains were greater than the risks.

We heard from many new leaders who stepped up to be the chapter leader at their school that, for the first time, they felt that the union needed them. At a citywide meeting for all of our chapter leaders during the winter break in 2018, we had over 1,000 school site chapter leaders — nearly double what we usually had. We passed out picket signs and told the assembled leaders about the latest district roadblocks to keep us from striking. The leaders yelled, "Strike! Strike Strike!" While we weren't able to get CAT leaders at every

school in the district, it is an ongoing and critical effort. Building Chapter Action Teams requires members to take an active role in the union and creates a school culture of accountability and community — essential when organizing for a strike.

Structure Tests

One of the first things we had to do to build an engaged and strike-ready membership was to clean up our data. In past years, we did not have the correct contact information for most members, making the kind of one-on-one organizing we set out to do nearly impossible. To remedy this, we launched a union-wide outreach campaign to secure accurate information from our members through our chapter chairs, CAT teams, and staff. Our new research team designed and created a database with thousands of updated emails and cell phone numbers, which allowed us to track every action members took on our cell phones and computers.

Each action was a structure test to see where we were strong and where we needed to focus our organizing efforts. We started with regional rallies in November 2014 and planned our first citywide rally in February 2015. 15,000 members attended, making it the largest action since the 1989 strike.

A pivotal structure test was the membership-wide union election vote in February 2016. The “Build the Future, Fund the Fight” campaign, including a thirty percent dues increase, was on the ballot. A majority of the UTLA members voted, and a resounding 82 percent voted yes, giving us confidence that the members supported the direction the union was taking. Other structure tests included petitions about members’ willingness to take actions and to put themselves on the line. While effective at first, petitions eventually became routine and less of a gauge of commitment and involvement. These structure tests need to be adapted so they are most effective at any given time.

In another powerful structure test, we called upon UTLA members to wear red on Tuesdays — moving our members to publicly identify with UTLA and sparking conversations with colleagues, parents, and school administration about union issues. The simple act of wearing red affirmed members' identity as part of a union collective and allowed us to see how strong we were at each school site. We then used this information to direct our organizing efforts — recruiting more CAT leaders or offering additional support to existing leaders.

We used social media to publicize all of our organizing efforts as well as members' stories about their working conditions, from having forty students in a class to not having a nurse at the school site. We also had weekly (later daily) videos explaining where we were in contract bargaining so that our members had up-to-date information leading up to the strike. Finally, we featured parents, students, community, and union members as they expressed their solidarity with us, underscoring the broad coalition we were building around our common good demands.

Forging Strong Relationships with Parents and Students

For our strike to be successful, UTLA needed to gain the trust of community, civil rights, and advocacy organizations, some of whom we had strained relationships with. In the past, some community groups disagreed with the union over issues such as seniority, curriculum reform, and suspension and other harsh discipline policies that disproportionately impacted Black and brown students. Other progressive organizations resented UTLA because they never heard from us unless we needed their support.

This changed in 2014 when the new UTLA leadership reached out to progressive organizations across the city to repair the harms of the past and build mutually respectful relationships. We also hired an experienced community organizer to work with rank-and-file educators to build a school-

based infrastructure through which teachers could organize parents and students around broader public education and community challenges.

We started with an educational roundtable with community organizations and advocacy groups. But instead of building unity and consensus, the meetings brought out deep fundamental differences, particularly around the expansion of charter schools. Some of the local progressive groups relied on funding from charter school corporations, making it extremely difficult if not impossible to work together. So we pivoted, forging a coalition modeled after the national AFT and NEA Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS), which had generated enthusiasm across the country in 2013 and 2014 for its coordinated national fight against corporate educational reform by teachers unions, community organizations, and youth-led networks.

After months of discussion, we formed a new coalition called Reclaim our Schools LA, or ROSLA. The coalition brought together four anchor groups: The Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE), the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), Students Deserve, and UTLA. Together we agreed to build a movement for broad-based education reform that would engage teachers, students, parents, and community members. As [Leigh Dingerson wrote](#) in a 2019 report on ROSLA, “The cornerstone of the campaign was the agreement by each anchor group on several key practices: the development of a shared analysis, strategy, and platform; a commitment to leadership development and grassroots voice; a systematic and scientific approach to organizing; and bold, escalating action.”

The coalition was key to building for our strike and expanding our set of demands beyond wages, hours, and working conditions. We held regular meetings to discuss the priority issues to take into negotiations, including expanding green space on campus and stopping independent charter schools from co-locating on our public school campuses. The students were most concerned with the demeaning school district policy of wand-ing students and their belongings for weapons; they wanted to replace the police presence on campus with restorative justice programs and student supports,

such as counselors. We also introduced other issues that we weren't able to get an agreement on, such as repurposing vacant buildings that the district owned as low-income housing. The students mounted their own campaign leading up to the strike, including a button campaign, one-on-one conversations, and Black Lives Matter in Schools events. During the strike, the students were leaders and speakers on the picket line and at rallies. ROSLA also created its own strike school, "La Escuelita de Lideres," where community members learned the latest information about the strike and practiced how to speak to the media. Parents, students, and community members of ROSLA held picketing actions at school board members' homes in the evening and were leaders on the picket line. Each action contributed to the strength and momentum of the strike.

In the end, sixty-to-seventy thousand parents, community members, students, and teachers took to the streets of L.A., demanding not just smaller class sizes, nurses at every school, and more counselors, librarians, special education programs, and ethnic studies programs but also green spaces, an immigrant support fund, an end to the discriminatory practice of wandering, funding for community schools, and support for a statewide legislative charter school accountability measure. The power we built within our schools and the broader community allowed us to make gains in all of these critical areas, not just the narrow wages and working conditions typically negotiated over in union contracts. We have continued to build on these wins over the past two years. For example, the Board of Education recently put forward a resolution funding more green space and community schools.

We won because we systematically built up our union to be a collective power — engaging the public and empowering new and dedicated chapter leaders, who continue to lead us forward today.



Chicago 2019, by Jackson Potter

The Chicago Teachers Union members were inspired by the historic wins in the L.A. contract and UTLA's successful engagement with the public to win green space, class size reductions, sustainable community schools, and affordable housing. Labor's decline since WWII is in no small part a function of our tendency to focus on the thousands of members inside our bargaining units rather than the millions who can benefit from our advocacy outside of them. UTLA's wins made it clear that winning more is both possible and necessary.

A number of people on CTU staff and in the rank and file made regular pilgrimages to L.A. to learn from and expand upon shared tactics, organizational forms, and movement goals. When it was our turn to strike, we had incorporated many of the lessons from their strike, such as:

- **Organizing all leaders of the union on common good demands.** These demands had to be seen as integral to the entire contract package by union leaders and members. In L.A., every speaker repeated these community-based priorities to joyous applause from their member leaders, who clearly had talked about them plenty and integrated them as their own key demands.
- **Tracking member data.** UTLA tracked all organizing conversations, attendance at rallies, mock votes, actual votes, and wear red Fridays. We fortified some of our systems trying to emulate them.
- **Using social media.** UTLA's excellent use of social media and member profiles in explaining key contract demands, bargaining updates, and actions was something we stole hook, line, and sinker.

Slow and Steady Organizing

In the last months of 2018, the Chicago Teachers Union collected hundreds of proposals from our 27,000 members. We intentionally built our big bargaining team to include key member leaders in special education,

bilingual education, early childhood programs, as well as among members who work primarily with homeless students and paraprofessionals (the lowest-paid group in our bargaining unit, school clerks and teacher assistants who are 84 percent Black and Latinx women). This ensured that there were strong advocates within the bargaining process on the key issues identified by members.

In the end, we developed a democratically-determined list of four hundred proposals, which we then whittled down to a more concise and manageable bargaining submission. We demanded that the city prohibit coordination between the school district and ICE in locating or identifying undocumented students and families and called for the dissolution of the city's gang database, which overwhelmingly targeted students of color and perpetuated the school-to-prison pipeline.

We also demanded the school district provide affordable housing for all 18,000 homeless students through a real estate transfer tax, corporate head tax, and/or surplus from the city's ubiquitous tax increment financing program (TIF). TIF dollars are diverted from libraries, schools, and parks, mainly to fund the vanity projects of the rich in downtown Chicago. We were the first group in the city to force the Mayor to release TIF funds back to schools and other taxing bodies. Our ability to fund many of the programs and staff models of all our contracts from 2012 to the present has been dependent on our ability to win new revenue, like that from TIF surpluses, into our schools. Each of our proposals explicitly referenced new revenue, to the chagrin of management.

To popularize these common good demands, we built on a decade of slow and steady organizing. Since 2011, the CTU has run a summer organizing institute. The program provides thirty-to-forty emerging leaders with high-level organizing training, political education, and campaign planning skills. We encourage applications from key groups in the union — that is, members who work in areas that lend themselves to critical struggles, such as special education teachers, clerks and teacher assistants, bilingual educators, and

members working directly with immigrant communities, clinicians, or Black neighborhoods targeted for school closures. This new crop of leaders was able to lead committee work and campaigns that morphed into contract demands relevant to those key areas of work.

Many of the members who attended our organizing institute became new school delegates, members of the union's executive board, and district organizers who, for a small stipend, helped CTU identify and mobilize delegates. They were key presenters and advocates in city-wide trainings CTU hosted to prepare for upcoming fights. Eventually, we innovated our annual delegate workshops to include a weekend version that welcomed any and all members to learn the same skills for mapping their schools, leading building-level campaigns, and identifying key contract issues.

In the buildup to the strike, this wave of new delegates, summer organizing grads, and other emerging leaders was charged with strengthening Contract Action Teams (strike teams) in all five hundred of our buildings, recruiting to key union committees that helped draft contract language and related campaigns, and helping coordinate city-wide actions and coalition work, from wearing red on Fridays to mobilizing downtown.

Prior to the expiration of our contract, we asked delegates and school leaders to assemble a broader group of members, from every department in their buildings, to act as branches of the phone tree as we mobilized towards a strike. Delegates were prodded by the union's governing bodies to recruit new members to existing CAT teams to expand leadership and capacity. Once we went on strike, these teams also led pickets, food and flyer distribution, marches, and afternoon city-wide action mobilizations by getting their school staff to join in union-wide protests downtown and at various places across the city that could illustrate our demands. One afternoon, we sent all 30,000 members to a construction site where the city was subsidizing a luxury residential development with \$1 billion, half of which would otherwise go to schools.

We also held monthly meetings to educate members around the importance of affordable housing demands and sanctuary protections for students of color. Prominent leaders in the Grassroots Collaborative and Grassroots Education Movement (coalitions for educational, racial, and social justice in Chicago, of which CTU is a member) addressed multiple House of Delegates meetings and linked the fight against school closings with the need to advance more affordable housing.

Nevertheless, it was difficult to make these common good positions resonate as contract priorities because most members did not see them as critical for contract settlement. Unlike UTLA, we did not integrate these demands as early in our process. Therefore, we lost precious time helping members connect broader community demands to their own pressing, school-based issues in organizing conversations, summer outreach, and member training. However, once our governing bodies did approve the entire proposal in December 2018, leadership, staff, and key member leaders consistently and systematically lifted up common good areas in every membership meeting, communication, organizing discussion, and officer speech — a necessary level of engagement to elevate proposals that go beyond traditional bargaining experiences and the legal constraints of bargaining law.

Still, there were occasions when members of our own executive board would ask, “Are we just saying these things, or do we mean to implement them?” This is a critical issue, and one we set about addressing in the 2019 contract. Unlike in 2012, the 2019 contract resulted in a robust set of member-led, community-directed committees prioritized by leadership to monitor the implementation of these transformative demands and expand their reach beyond the confines of contract language. In the aftermath of the 2019 strike, the CTU launched committees on housing, environmental justice, sustainable community schools, and racial justice to enact and monitor our progress in these crucial areas.

As this work suggests, common good contract wins require tremendous staffing, organizational resources, and time to implement and enact.

Therefore, we must do a better job of considering the implications of our proposals, the commitments implied, and the ongoing involvement required to properly implement and realize the intent of common good demands, including establishing member committees and hosting trainings to maintain member commitment. Anything less risks creating the dynamic that occurred in our e-board: members see the propagandistic value of common good demands but doubt the intention of the union to follow through. While we did a better job after the 2019 strike than we had in previous years, with the district losing 60,000 students over the last decade from housing displacement and immigration restrictions, our advocacy in these areas will have to exponentially increase in future contract cycles. In fact, I would argue that our primary demands must center around making Chicago a livable city for our students and their families if our union is to continue to flourish.

Once CTU went on strike on October 17th, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot played to our members' concerns, arguing that the contract was not the "appropriate place" to address the needs of homeless students. Lightfoot claimed she would add more social workers and nurses to the school budget but refused to put it in the collective bargaining agreement.

By the end of the strike, we had definitive wins in both areas. For the first time, our contract established a guaranteed staffing formula to put social workers and nurses in all schools as well as a method for school communities to vote out police officers in their buildings. We won dedicated staff and resources for homeless students, case manager positions for diverse learner populations, sanctuary language to protect undocumented students from ICE, and living wages for our lowest-paid paraprofessional members.

Still, we did not secure any additional units of affordable housing. In hindsight, to win on these demands, we would need more robust political education and careful analysis of how our power is intimately linked to student wellbeing and enrollment levels, as many Black and Latinx families leave the city because of insufficient economic opportunity and high levels of

violence. We have to make the case to our members more consistently that their jobs are tied to student enrollment — and the factors that push students and families out of the city — in order for them to fight for housing as a contract priority.

Lightfoot ultimately adopted the majority of our agenda to curry favor with voters who had rejected school closings, undemocratic school boards, and privatization, in no small part due to CTU's advocacy over the preceding ten years. While it eventually took an 11-day strike to force the Mayor to adopt many of those demands, our prior success at broadening the expectations of members, allies, and the public about what a collective bargaining agreement could achieve made gains in common good areas more possible than ever. In particular, CTU's previous district and charter school strikes established a more experienced, strike-ready, and well-organized membership.

Labor Solidarity

Another key to the CTU victory in 2019 was labor solidarity. Chicago teachers struck alongside the 7,000-plus school employees in SEIU local 73, a bargaining unit composed overwhelmingly of Black and Latinx workers who do the custodial, security, and special education assistant work in the schools. The alignment between the two unions was years in the making; the union's leadership change in 2010 created the conditions to go out on strike together for the first time ever in 2018. It was also critical for us to lift up the demands of our paraprofessional members who have much in common with their SEIU counterparts; by bringing the two unions together, we were able to align contract demands for the lowest paid union members for the first time..

Both SEIU and CTU developed differentiated organizing raps and psychometrics to better engage these members and center their interests as key priorities for the entire union. This initially involved a clerks campaign in the immediate aftermath of our 2016 contract fight when the district

attempted to eliminate school clerk positions and force teachers to submit their own timecards. We launched online petitions and social media actions to “Save Our Clerks.” Teacher members submitted letters to their principals to express concern for the district plan and solidarity for our clerk colleagues. We even had a raucous bargaining session where delegates from all over the city laid into the district’s head of labor relations about the clerk plan, to the point that he walked out of the room fuming. This was hugely important in building the confidence of our PSRP (Paraprofessionals and School-Related Personnel) leaders that the union would fight for them and signaled to the rest of the membership that the demands of these workers would take priority. The result was that we won the biggest salary increase for PSRPs and the members of SEIU 73 of any single cycle in the history of both unions.

In addition, both the CTU and UTLA strikes were preceded by wildly successful, visible, and historic strikes in our charter divisions. The success of the 2019 strike in Chicago required years of campaigning to merge CTU with the Chicago charter school teacher local and to align the 11 charter school contracts with the CTU contracts. The successful merger between the CTU and Chicago ACTS set the stage for the first strike by charter school teachers in U.S. history, when teachers at the United Neighborhood Organization (now called Acero and the largest charter school operator in the state) led a four-day work stoppage during the winter of 2018. The strike allowed CTU members to see charter teachers as strategic partners in stopping the privatization movement. As a result of the strike, for instance, UNO had to pay its teachers more — and was thereby prevented from opening eight additional schools.

To win more, public sector unions must find ways to align with private sector unions and tap into the hopes and dreams of workers who have not yet unionized. Successful private-public sector organizing experiments take considerable time and resources. The charter merger and contract alignment fight in Chicago took almost a decade, with many hits and misses in between. But until we can develop the conditions for these kinds of class-wide contract fights, labor’s victories will eventually meet their limits.

Conclusion

The trajectory of the CTU victory in 2019 was characterized by protracted struggle, punctuated by strikes but continued in between contracts with pitched political fights, charter school organizing, and school closing battles that kept the membership engaged and mobilized. We built upon victories in the first charter school strike in U.S. history, the L.A. teacher strikes, and the Boston teacher contract campaign, which also won language on class size restrictions.

In no small way, both the CTU and UTLA 2019 strikes were connected to a rising movement of teachers who have permanently altered the political and labor landscape across the country. A clear focus on wealth redistribution to address racial and economic disparities in the city and the schools has been absolutely indispensable in creating a vision, organizing raps, public support, and membership commitment to policies that are capable of creating transformational change. Hopefully, we will look back on the 2018-2020 strikes in Arizona, Chicago, West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Oakland, Denver, St. Paul, and Los Angeles as the moment when [#RedForEd](#) began to supplant austerity and corporate education reform with educational equity and investments in our BIPOC school communities. While we are far from matching the school funding received by wealthy white suburban districts, our innovative bargaining approach — centered around common good demands to advance racial justice and halt privatization — has positioned CTU and UTLA to win unprecedented victories.

Read the issue: Debriefing the Resistance



About **Jackson Potter**

Jackson Potter is a Chicago Public Schools graduate. He was a high school activist who led a walk-out at Whitney Young in 1995 to push for equitable funding for schools in Illinois. He became a teacher at Englewood High School and was the union delegate there when former



About **Arlene Inouye**

Arlene Inouye is the UTLA Secretary and the UTLA Bargaining Team Co-Chair during the historic contract fight and UTLA strike in January 2019 to the present. She has also served as UTLA Treasurer and led UTLA through the “Build the Future Fund the Fight” campaign that add