



Chicago teachers and support staff held a rally at Columbus Park next to DePriest Elementary School on October 22 in the South Austin neighborhood of Chicago. Photo by Joeff Davis.

How Chicago Teachers Built Power Between Strikes

It's easy to glamorize the seeming spontaneity of a “strike wave” and miss the long processes of union organizing.

by Sarah Jaffe
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The Chicago Teachers Union’s 2012 strike changed the labor movement in the United States. Not only did it revive the strike—years before the [current “wave”](#) of public school walkouts began—but it brought to us a new vocabulary for how to think about public schools, public sector unions, and collective bargaining. Now that CTU is once again striking in 2019, one can see how the ground has shifted. Way back in 2011, as protests rippled around the world and landed in Wisconsin, where public sector workers fought against Scott Walker’s anti-union bill, political analyst Matt Stoller [suggested](#) that “People might only like unions when they see strikes, otherwise all they hear about is backroom negotiations.” Years later, unions in the United States are at their highest approval rating in years, [up 16 points](#) since 2009 to 64 percent, after multiple teachers strikes, the Fight for \$15, major strikes at Verizon and now General Motors, and more. The strike

major strikes at Verizon and now General Motors, and more. The strike matters, and the CTU deserves credit for reviving it, as [I wrote recently](#). As of this writing, the 2019 Chicago Teachers Union strike has entered its sixth day. On the picket lines, [32,500 teachers](#) and support staff—including bus aides, custodians, and special education classroom aides represented by the Service Employees International Union, SEIU Local 73—are once again demanding improvements to the schools that go far beyond raises.

But we should also take a close look at what CTU has done in-between strikes, because it's been far more than just backroom negotiations. We should remember the hard work of organizing to become a fighting union with a razor-sharp political analysis—a yearslong process that saw the union overcome setbacks to defeat a popular mayor (Rahm Emanuel) linked to a popular President (Barack Obama).

Before the CTU strike, teachers were often pilloried as greedy, selfish, and lazy, demanding raises while their students suffered. After 2012, we became accustomed to hearing teachers say they were fighting for the schools their students deserve, directly challenging the language of “care” put forth by hand-wringing mayors and school board officials.

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“Teachers have been an easy target, primarily because we’re not used to fighting,” then-CTU president Karen Lewis [told](#) Josh Eidelson and me in 2013. “We’re used to saying, ‘Whatever you want me to do, I’ll do it because we all care about what’s best for kids.’” But the CTU turned that message on its head, Lewis explained, arguing that, in fact, it cared much more about public school students than wealthy elites who didn’t bother to send their own children to Chicago’s public schools. According to Illinois state law the only [“mandatory”](#) things the CTU can

According to Illinois state law, the only [mandatory](#) things the CTU can bring to the bargaining table are wages, benefits, and working time. Yet from the moment that the Caucus of Rank and File Educators took power within the union in 2010—spurring other reform caucuses within unions around the country, many of which also took power—they knew that their fight was [not just for raises](#) but against neoliberalism itself. It was a fight to change politics in Chicago and in the country; it was big, and it was going to require allies. That meant figuring out a way to bring the community's issues to the bargaining table, in what we [now call](#) “bargaining for the common good.”

This year, the union's fight is explicitly around [housing justice](#). In a district with 17,000 homeless students, this is not, as the teachers have repeatedly pointed out, an issue that can be separated from that of education. Students whose home situations are unstable show up in no shape to learn, and the teacher might be the only one who knows what a kid is going through. Yet that same teacher will be held accountable for the student's failure to ace a state test. So the CTU, as teacher and bargaining team member Kenzo Shibata says, wants the district to do more for those kids. And they want it in their contract.

New Mayor Lori Lightfoot, though, doesn't want to do that. “She was quoted as saying ‘I told them that I was going to put it in writing,’ in terms of hiring more nurses and counselors, but she actually didn't present us anything in writing,” Shibata tells me in a phone interview.

The union's demands, in other words, are about much more than what are often called “common-denominator issues” for the working class. While there are still some on the left and in the labor movement who argue for such an approach, common-denominator issues often become least-common-denominator issues, meaning anything that won't

offend a perceived white working-class Trump voter.

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The CTU explicitly rejects such an approach, placing race and gender in the center of its fight. When, after the 2012 strike, Rahm Emanuel struck back by closing [forty-nine schools](#), most with predominantly black student populations, the union focused on the historic inequities in the schools, noting that again and again, “reforms” to Chicago schools come on the backs of black and brown students. The union fought alongside parents to keep those schools open. And it remembers those moments in the current fight.

“We’re really trying to use the contract negotiations to right the historical wrongs of the Chicago Public Schools,” Shibata says.

The union did that not by creating a cult of personality around the charismatic Lewis, but by delegating and distributing power and leadership across the union, spending money on an [organizing department](#) to make sure members were all involved in making decisions. It’s an approach adopted by other reformers around the country, in places like Los Angeles, where the United Teachers Los Angeles successfully [won its strike](#) earlier this year. It’s an approach that has rooted the union in neighborhoods around the city, with rank-and-file members working with the parents and students to make demands.

And it’s work. Organizing is slow and messy; that most of the CTU’s between-strikes work has not garnered national headlines the way the 2012 strike and now today’s strike have means that a lot of it has been overlooked.

It’s easy to glamorize the seeming spontaneity of a “strike wave” and miss the long processes of rebuilding that have gone into making the

union the powerhouse it is. And it might have been easy for Lightfoot to come to office on promises to change Chicago and think that the CTU's power had lessened in the interim. Lightfoot, Shibata says, "conflates power and authority, and she has a lot of authority but she really doesn't have any power right now."

The power the union has built is visible now in aldermen, elected in part [through CTU's organizing](#), showing up on [picket lines](#) and community members joining picket dance-offs, in mass marches [twice the size](#) of the ones in 2012. It shows in [glowing profiles](#) of the union's new leaders, like Stacy Davis Gates, even in the mainstream Chicago papers. It shows, Shibata says, at every school in Chicago, every day the union remains out.

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