

PUBLIC SCHOOLS TEACHERS LABOR STRIKES

The Chicago Teachers Strike Was a Lesson in 21st-Century Organizing

Despite the Janus decision and years of labor losses, the Chicago Teachers Union has figured out how to organize—and win.

By Sarah Jaffe

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Thousands of striking Chicago teachers and their supporters march around City Hall before Mayor Lori Lightfoot was scheduled to deliver her first budget address during the Chicago City Council meeting on October 23. (Ashlee Rezin Garcia / Chicago Sun-Times via AP)

In 2012, the Chicago Teachers Union wrote the playbook that has been successfully used by teachers around the country to reform their unions and win at the bargaining table and on the picket line. That was the year Chicago's teachers waged a new kind of strike, one that redefined solidarity and began to change the narrative around the public good. Now, seven years later, the CTU has shown us all how it's done, reclaiming its place at the center of the conversation about union power in the United States.

The CTU's 2019 strike began on October 17, and lasted 11 school days, longer than the teachers' 2012 strike. As in 2012, they fought for much more than raises and benefits for themselves: They demanded smaller class sizes, prep time, nurses and counselors in every school. They put racial justice at the center of their demands, arguing for fair resources for schools that serve black and brown students, sanctuary schools for immigrants, and restorative justice practices to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. Most important, they made the strike a referendum on housing in Chicago by demanding landmark resources for homeless students and refusing to back down when the mayor and her allies argued that such issues had no place at the bargaining table.

On November 15, the teachers ratified a new contract with Chicago Public Schools, sealing a significant victory: They won the resources they had requested for homeless students; they won hard caps on class sizes for the first time; they won a nurse and counselor in every school. They also won raises and sanctuary schools, and, most

important, they shifted the balance of power in the schools a bit further in the direction of the teachers, students, and parents.



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Strikes always require sacrifice, risk, and preparation. For teachers, they come with the knowledge that the students for whom they care and are responsible are losing learning time, but with the hope that what they win will make it up to those children. Strikes are scary, even for the strongest union. But this CTU strike erupted in a city that had already been transformed by years of organizing by the union and its allies in the progressive trenches. Although the newly elected Mayor Lori Lightfoot is no radical, she had repeatedly said that she agreed with the teachers' demands to bring more nurses and more counselors into schools. At the same time, when the moment arrived to bargain with the union, the teachers wanted those promises written into their contracts, and the mayor didn't want to budge. Lightfoot had also made them a pretty big salary offer up front, but anyone who had paid attention to

the CTU's previous battle with then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel would have known that this union isn't satisfied either with verbal promises or "bread and butter" issues. It wants to transform public education in Chicago, and it's playing a long game.

That long game has not always been easy. It has meant the occasionally frustrating process of remaking the union—and it has meant both ecstatic wins and sharp, painful losses, among them, the closure of 49 schools the year after that victorious 2012 strike, as well as the layoffs of several activist teachers. It has meant organizing alongside the community for a hunger strike to save a beloved school, and it has meant taking its fight to the electoral arena. It has meant working alongside other unions, particularly SEIU Local 73, which represents the school staffers who struck alongside the CTU, to build broader solidarity across the city. And it has meant that, at times, the CTU has fallen out of the headlines—that its role in crafting the formula that has since been replicated in Massachusetts, St. Paul, Los Angeles, Seattle, and elsewhere has been left out of the story that too many commentators think began in West Virginia.

Now, it has also meant another successful strike that has reminded Chicago's teachers—and students and parents—just what educators are fighting for.

Before the Chicago teachers first struck, teacher strikes were almost always cast—by politicians, the media, this or that administration—as “care-offs,” with administrators clutching their pearls and worrying to the press that the teachers simply didn't care enough about the students.

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Even self-identified progressive commentators had gotten used to dismissing teachers' unions as selfish. This language was echoed in popular myths like that of the "rubber room," where supposedly lazy, bad teachers who couldn't be fired were sent to hang out for years on end, getting fat on the taxpayer dime. Like the welfare mothers of Reagan's racist narrative, teachers who made any demands for themselves were seen, as Megan Erickson wrote in *Class War*, as "*bad people*." Erickson noted that teaching "is a task so critical to the maintenance of social life that those who are entrusted with it are expected to undertake it out of sheer joy with no eye to monetary 'rewards'—and so vital to the perpetuation of economic life that failure is unacceptable."

Now, in 2019, that conversation has been flipped. There is no longer any question that teachers love their students and their work; indeed, the CTU fought Lightfoot after an agreement had been reached, demanding to make up the 11 days lost to the strike, while the mayor insisted on just five make-up days.

Again and again, Chicago's teachers have successfully made the point that it is they who care about the students, the schools, and the city as a whole. They have fought for a revitalized public sector, for an understanding that no issue

is outside their purview. Two mayors and state law have said that certain issues—anything outside of wages and benefits—don’t belong at the bargaining table, and two mayors have now written those issues into contracts at the end of a strike. In fighting for “the Schools Chicago Students Deserve,” they made the slogan “Our working conditions are our students’ learning conditions” into a mantra for educators around the country. They have made “bargaining for the common good” into a strategy to be studied.

It is this strategy that has proved now, decisively, that the *Janus v. AFSCME* case didn’t work. *Janus*, which was decided by the Supreme Court’s conservative majority in 2018, was designed to be a death blow to public-sector unions—specifically, those pesky teachers. Under the decision, public-sector unions are no longer allowed to charge fees to nonmembers for the costs of representation, meaning that these unions must now stand or fall based on how many members voluntarily choose to pay dues, even as they are legally bound to represent every worker covered by their contracts.

The *Janus* decision was widely expected to starve public-sector unions into irrelevance. But what it’s done instead is make organizing, communication, and expansion necessities rather than things unions ignore or circumvent, as Jane McAlevey writes. It made the CTU’s model not just a recipe for reform but also a program for survival. Investing in an internal organizing department as well as

community outreach, making the union's structures open and democratic—these are the best ways for members to feel like they are the union.

Many worried that the retirement of charismatic CTU president Karen Lewis, who led the union from 2010 until 2018, would mean the CTU would falter. With this strike, the union proved that its power was never about one person but about building a structure that allowed new leaders to step up and, more important, empowered every member to have a say. The union's political positions come from the everyday experiences of Chicago teachers, and it is those everyday experiences that have put racial justice at the center of the union's fight.

The CTU strike and ratification vote came just weeks after the vote by United Auto Workers members to ratify their own contract and bring a 40-day strike at General Motors to a close. Neither union won all it demanded, but the CTU made gains, while the UAW mostly clung on by its fingernails, winning a few improvements for the highest-tier members but accepting, to a degree, the status quo of plant closures and temporary workers filling GM's plants.

One reason for the difference, as labor sociologist Ruth Milkman noted, is that auto manufacturing workers simply have less power these days, and not all of that can be laid at the feet of the union. While teachers are embedded in their communities, making explicitly political fights about budgeting priorities that involve, implicitly, everyone who

lives within a certain jurisdiction, private-sector workers are at the whim of a company that may or may not make something most people need or want.

What can private-sector unions learn from the teacher strikes? One clear lesson is that their power won't simply come from shutting down production, not when management also wants to shut down production to move it elsewhere. Their power has to come from a different kind of disruption, backed by a community. And their power may well have to come from returning to the old questions of who controls the production process, anyway.

This political moment presents opportunities for real change, even as things look grim for manufacturing workers. As climate change wreaks increasing havoc, and as interventions like the Green New Deal gain momentum, manufacturing and caring workers have the opportunity to come together around a set of demands that will affect us all. As it is, a climate transition powered by business will see working people continue to bear the brunt of the crisis: GM wanted to ensure that the green (or greener, at least) jobs it is considering adding would be worse jobs, that new jobs in new battery plants for electric vehicles would be outside the regular contract with the UAW, meaning lower pay and fewer benefits.

We don't know what it would have looked like for the UAW to put demands around green jobs at the center of its fight, to connect workers' lives on the shop floor to the lives of their friends and neighbors off of it. But the challenge of halting climate catastrophe is too big to be left to the private sector to decide for itself. Political candidates

around the world, including Bernie Sanders, are putting forward plans not just for green job creation but also for changing the structure of corporations in order to give workers an ownership stake. Unions have a chance to start thinking bigger.

They can take a cue from the CTU's demand for naps for preschoolers and consider the question of shorter working hours, and take health care permanently off the bargaining table by fighting for Medicare for All. They can understand that caring jobs are low-carbon jobs, that the potential to reshape the economy is in the hands of the people who make it run or can make it grind to a halt. They can think about the way power is distributed, and how organizing can change that, and consider how to harness the power of momentum that comes from strike after strike to raise workers' expectations of what is possible.

And they can remember, in looking at the photos of the past few weeks in Chicago, that just because the union's gone a little quiet lately doesn't mean the fight hasn't been building.

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