

# Chicago Teachers Union President Launches Campaign for Mayor

September 17, 2014



*The likely candidacy of the president of the Chicago Teachers Union, which led one of the most important strikes in recent years in the USA, against the incumbent Democrat Rahm Emanuel, formerly the chief-of-staff of the White House and a champion of the privatization of the school system, is a major political event.*

Karen Lewis, the President of the Chicago Teachers Union, while she has not formally announced her candidacy, has clearly launched her campaign to oust the current Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Emanuel, who formerly served as President Barack Obama's Chief-of-Staff, has won the reputation of "Mayor 1%" for his pro-corporate programs. In September 2012 Lewis led the CTU's 30,000 members out on strike against Emanuel's educational reform policies that had detrimentally affected teachers, parents, and students. It was an inspiring strike that brought her union a partial victory but failed to stop a number of public school closings.

Now Lewis is back again to challenge Emanuel in the political arena. The candidacy of a union leader such as Lewis in a big city election is a novelty in contemporary American politics. Will she be able to trounce him? And if so, what will it mean for the labor left that she leads and for Chicago's working class?

The still unofficial campaign is up and running. The Chicago Teachers Union House of Delegates, a body of hundreds, has endorsed her. She has an exploratory committee that has recruited volunteers who are now out collecting the 12,500 signatures she will need to get on the ballot. She has personally contributed a \$40,000 "loan" to her own campaign. The American Federation of Teachers has promised one million dollars for her campaign if she runs. She has scheduled a meeting with African American businessmen and has begun a series of meetings throughout the city with teachers, police officers, firefighters and public school parents.

For 22 years, Karen Lewis was a high school teacher who taught chemistry in the Chicago Public School. An African American woman who converted to Judaism, she has been an outspoken critic of Emanuel's policies. She blames Emanuel for closing libraries, police stations, mental health clinics and schools. "If you take the institutions out of the neighborhood, what are you left with? This has got to stop, and it will not stop if we continue to have the same kind of top down autocratic leadership that does not listen to the people," says Lewis. "We are in an unsustainable death spiral if we continue this notion of subtraction."

The mayoral race is a non-partisan election, so Karen Lewis will not be a candidate of any political party. She will, however, be attempting to win the support of the so-called "lake front liberals" or "progressive Democrats," a middle class constituency largely organized in the Independent Voters of

Illinois-Independent Precinct Organization (IVI-IPO). She will also be attempting to win the support of Chicago's African American economic elite, historically the most important black business group in the country. Though black business has seen some decline, African Americans in Chicago own some 50,000 businesses. As the corporations have consolidated their hold over American politics, both middle class liberals and black businesspeople have found their options narrowing. Can a teacher union president and her working class constituency provide leadership to such groups—or will they lose their character in such a coalition?

Lewis' chances, at least at this stage, look good. An August 14 poll by the conservative *Chicago Tribune* found that if the election were held on that date, Lewis would defeat Emanuel by 43 to 39 percent with 14 percent undecided. Emanuel who had a 59 percent approval rating among white voters is now down to 44 percent with the same group, while 60 percent of black voters disapprove of his performance. As an African American, Lewis can expect to capitalize on that discontent among black voters. She will be a black woman candidate and no doubt the black women's candidate, a tremendous organizing force in African American communities. Many working class voters of all ethnicities will see this as a chance to knock down the arrogant Rahm a peg or two.

### **What Is the Balance of Forces?**

While the CTU's inspiring 2012 strike brought a partial victory to teachers and inspired other teacher groups throughout the country, it also revealed that virtually no other major union in the city was prepared to follow its example and stand up and fight back against the powers-that-be. By and large, Chicago's labor unions remain completely tied to the Democratic Party, and it is unlikely that many will break away to support Lewis. Still, even if, as seems very likely, the union leaders stay the course with Emanuel, some and perhaps many of their members could be expected to vote for Lewis.

Chicago's major African American and Latino organizations, most of them nominally non-partisan not-for-profits, have also been pillars of the Democratic Party establishment. Similarly with women's and LGBT organizations. All of these groups have historically feared that organizing or voting against the Democratic Party would lead to political and financial punishment. Lewis and her supporters will be challenged to find the methods and program that can break these groups from the machine. While it is unlikely she can move the leaders, will she be able to win away the base of these organizations?

What about the neighborhoods? The CTU created an Independent Political Organization that subsequently formed an alliance with a number of Chicago community groups and created United Working Families as an organization to campaign around neighborhood issue. United Working Families hired a Democratic Party operative, Kristen Crowell who had organized voter campaigns in neighboring Wisconsin. Crowell now plays a central role in shaping Lewis' political message. Will Lewis's campaign become simply a liberal or progressive Democrat affair, or will she propose a program, a strategy for struggle for the Chicago working class organized around workers' needs for education, health care, more equitable taxes, \$15 an hour and full employment? Time will tell—but our own organizing efforts could make the difference.

\*This article was originally published in the Swiss Solidarités Journal *solidarités*.