Education Workers in Chicago Are Challenging the U.S. Ruling Class

written by Lois Weiner | October 18, 2019



Though the media is casting the strike of education workers in the Chicago Public Schools as (just) another episode in the wave of teachers' strikes, and the press in Chicago is doing its best to defeat the union, this contract campaign has already set a new bar for resistance to policies on education and the economy in place for decades.

Two unions whose members are mostly women, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and the union representing Chicago Public Schools support workers, SEIU Local 73, are directly challenging not only the billionaires who control the GOP and want policies that benefit their profits and strengthen their hold on government, but also the Democratic Party's shell game of claiming to be friends of labor and education while continuing the disastrous bipartisan policies that have fostered inequality and degraded public education, especially in low-income communities of color.

Since publication of "A Nation at Risk in 1983, which launched what in hindsight we know was the U.S. iteration of the neoliberal project in education, schools and teaching throughout the U.S. have been transformed. Supported by liberals, labor, and the education establishment, which bought the rationale schools and teachers could save the economy by adopting "excellence" reforms and later, privatization. Though groups of activist teachers and parents have been struggling to make schools more than joyless sorting machines based on standardized tests, economic austerity has intensified the pain and unfairness of a narrowed curriculum tied to testing. Cutbacks in social services in the schools and in communities have made conditions in classrooms even worse.

Damage is most intense in the low-income Hispanic and African American communities that most depend on schools to be a refuge and help some students climb out of poverty. Chicago is no exception. Its schools are dirty, cleaned less often and less well, often by janitors working for private companies with whom principals and teachers have no contact; school buses are less safe because aides aren't present to protect kids from bullying or get help if there's a medical problem; as class sizes grow, unchecked by law or union contracts, students who have questions or feel lost in an assignment are left to flounder without help from aides or teachers.

One factor virtually ignored by media coverage of the Chicago strike or in the "teacher revolt" sparked by the Chicago Teachers Union 2012 strike, is how bipartisan policies have pushed to destroy teaching as a career, making the occupation a revolving door of barely-trained college grads. As the World Bank's rationale for its education reforms in the global South explains, the well-orchestrated attacks on teachers unions are intended to curtail expenditures on teachers' pay and benefits. Hence in the U.S. we have seen teachers' pensions cast as as unaffordable, a strategy accompanied by pay practices to rescind or limit salary increases based on years of experience and

education. The intent is to push out older, experienced teachers, making the teaching force cheaper and more compliant, in the process eliminating what has historically been a path for working class women to move into the middle class.

What makes the CTU's contract campaign so singular is its simultaneous pushback on so many elements of this project and its willingness to take on Lori Lightfoot, who has assumed responsibility for what the Democratic Party, represented in Chicago by Arne Duncan and Rahm Emanuel began and oversaw. The campaign embodies an understanding that the morass of neglect in Chicago and its schools is not an accident, nor the result of reformers' good intentions gone awry, but the product of a project to refashion education to serve the needs of transnational corporations that want a docile populace, profits from the education sector, and a workforce whose education is synchronized with the desires of capital in the new global economy.

Every CTU demand hits the mark, addressing the nitty-gritty of school life. They have called for class size to be reduced, including untenable teacher-student ratios in early childhood education. They have insisted on testing being curtailed. They want experienced teachers to be paid a salary that defends teaching as a profession and a career. They want social workers and support personnel hired to help students who face social problems that would make many adults break. They insist on help for special needs students, a librarian and a nurse in every school, and want written commitments for more schools to become sanctuaries for immigrant students and families. CTU has called for community schools that are truly rooted in what communities want and need, rejecting the programs CPS has pushed in services for early childhood education that give big profits to companies that keep kids from receiving services, in a model called "Pay for Success" that includes data-mining. They want programs that make schools safer by supporting students' social needs, rather than making schools more prison-like. Most recently the union bargaining team had coaches explain the human cost of the district's financial neglect of athletic programs. In sum, this union insists on learning and teaching conditions the affluent take for granted for their children.

And they also insist that Chicago students should have conditions outside the school that support learning. Facing ridicule about its "far-fetched" contract demand for Chicago to confront the crisis of affordable housing – the conditions producing homelessness – the CTU has simultaneously insisted on and won more support for schools to help students and their families in temporary living situations. In asserting their power and responsibility as union members to improve what goes on in schools and classrooms as well as the city outside, Chicago's education workers are showing us how to use union power to confront and turn back the conditions so many Americans now see and abhor. Following Sanders' lead, Harris, Warren, and Biden, have expressed support for union demands, exposing Lightfoot's pro-big business economic program.

CTU is standing up to the Democrats and the U.S. ruling class as it did a decade ago, on behalf of children who live in conditions we should not countenance, morally or politically. Again the union is leading a struggle that is a watershed for labor and for popular resistance to neoliberalism. Chicago's education workers, many women of color, are at the front. We need to have their back because their fight is about our children's well-being and our collective future.

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