

But CORE was re-energized by the test. Leaders did not want to just eke out a win; they wanted a strong showing from a wide base. The results were an endorsement, not just of popular leaders, but of a vision for what a union should be—and a strategy for what it should do. As Gutekanst said, “It showed the members want a fighting union.”

## Lessons

- ⇒ CTU was not complacent after the strike but used its momentum to battle school closings.
- ⇒ CTU didn’t impose an agenda on community partners. At each school threatened with closing, teachers met with parents and community members to devise strategies together.
- ⇒ Leaders weren’t defensive about contract shortcomings, but engaged disgruntled members in fixing problems.
- ⇒ CORE members sought a big reelection victory as a mandate to continue their work; in the process, they re-energized CORE and developed new leaders.
- ⇒ CORE met with teacher activists in other cities to share Chicago’s lessons and help ignite the battle against the corporate reformers nationally.

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### Lessons

It’s happened time and again: Reformers take over at the union hall. They’re sick of seeing management run roughshod over their local, so they put together a slate and a plan to mobilize the members. When it works, reformers can transform dormant locals, channel union power into grassroots hands, and put management on notice.

But too often reformers fail. Either they don’t accomplish much and they get voted out, or they do achieve something but fail to involve members, and still get the boot. Too many don’t know how to step off the path of least resistance, so they slide into the well-worn grooves of their predecessors—and members don’t see enough change.

We asked two teachers who’d been with CORE since the very beginning how CORE and the new leaders were able to get so many members involved. Why was CORE’s experience different from that of other reformers who wanted to mobilize members to take on management, but weren’t able to? For that matter, why was their public support so much greater than that of other public employees who’ve struck to defend their conditions?

Al Ramirez, who teaches elementary school, said CORE encountered a “perfect storm.” “One, we had the perfect villain—Rahm Emanuel. Two, we had a lot of smart, hard-working people. And three, teachers were working under horrible conditions and they reached the boiling point.”

Of course, lots of caucuses are made up of smart people, and there are plenty of management villains out there, who all create horrible conditions. Ramirez continued, “We tried to build a base inside every school and a Contract Action Committee in every school. We always started with ‘what are our issues here in this school?’ and connected them to the contract fight.





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“Plus we made lots of opportunities for people to get involved.” Members could choose their level of involvement. “You could go leafleting or have an informational picket in your community. And people were expected to reach out to parents.”

Norine Gutekanst, who became CTU’s organizing director, added, “We gave them the information to use with parents about why what the board wanted was bad for the kids. For members who hadn’t cared so much about the union piece—well, they did care about the kids. Now the union could be a way to fight for them, too.”

“And we talked about how racist the school system was. Anyone who worked in a black or brown community, they felt it or knew it, but it hadn’t been given voice before.”

“Our members were always butting their heads up against the system. What we did freed them to say, ‘My kids are getting shortchanged, and I’m getting shortchanged, and it’s the system that’s the problem.’”

It’s worth adding that CORE wasn’t organized primarily as an electoral vehicle or around a single candidate. CORE’s critique of the union leadership grew out of its criticisms of management and the whole educational system in Chicago. By putting those ideas into action even before taking office, CORE was able to make the union election a referendum on strategy and on compet-

ing visions of the union, rather than an apolitical “who can make the trains the run on time?”



The CTU experience allows us to say:

**It’s Possible to Confront the Austerity Agenda.** Public employees in city after city have fallen victim to politicians’ cry of “tighten your belts.” But instead of accepting the idea that there is no alternative to austerity, CTU went after the folks with deep pockets.

With its community allies, CTU used direct action and creative tactics to confront corporations and the 1%, to demonstrate with word and deed that there is plenty of money out there for schools. It’s just in the wrong hands.

By the time of the strike, CTU members and parents weren’t swayed by the argument that “there is no alternative to cuts.” They were on the side of CTU.

**It’s Possible to Confront the Wall Street Democrats.** President Karen Lewis has said, “In education, we don’t have political allies we can count on. It’s one place Democrats and Republicans can agree.”

The kind of confrontation represented by the strike wasn’t supposed to happen. Rahm Emanuel swept into the mayor’s office like a force of nature. Most of Chicago’s union leaders were afraid of getting crushed by President Obama’s former chief of staff.

It was also a presidential election year. A strike would be a black eye for the president, the union’s foes chided, and could cost him his reelection. But CTU took on the city, state, and national Democratic establishments, on an issue that unites today’s Democratic (and Republican) politicians almost unanimously—school reform. By the time they were through, Emanuel had overreached and looked desperate, and the implications for Obama were a non-issue.

CTU managed almost singlehandedly to turn the common sense about school reform on its head. The debate was no longer about merit pay and getting rid of “bad teachers”; it was about air conditioning and books for students on the first day of school, access to art and world language teachers, and why all the schools targeted for closure were in black and Latino neighborhoods.





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**Speaking Out about “Educational Apartheid” Struck a Nerve.** CTU didn’t shy away from making the strike about racial justice, going so far as to call the CPS system Exhibit A for educational apartheid. By giving voice to an unspoken truth many parents knew, they positioned the union as a passionate champion of the public interest, not a defender of the status quo. As a result, parents trusted the teachers more than the mayor—because the teachers called it like it was.

**Leaders Trusted Members to Grow through Their Experiences.** Making an issue of the dramatic loss of African American teachers, and the racism of the schools in general, could have been controversial among CTU’s white members. It took time, but support for this issue grew. Leaders knew that action opens minds, and they actively wanted to raise consciousness and build a common core of beliefs. The union’s organizing for racial justice had as big an impact on its own members as it did on the community as a whole.

**It’s Possible to Fight for Bread and Butter and the Big Picture at the Same Time.** The union made it clear, not just at contract time but for the two years prior, that its members were fighting for the students, not just for their own conditions. As important, CTU made clear how dumping on teachers and turning classrooms into a revolving door for inexperienced teachers would worsen students’ lot, not improve it.

CTU showed that fighting against contract concessions and fighting for community demands were two sides of the same coin. Both sets of issues were forced on students and teachers by the same corporate forces for the same reasons. At a moment when the world was being told that greedy unions were the cause of budget problems, instead community allies were convinced that a strong union was part of the solution.

The union’s message to members and allies was clear: teachers and students are not competing with each other for resources and money. They are both competing with the bankers, billionaires, and politicians who drive and profit from the austerity agenda.

**It’s Possible to Raise Expectations and Aim High.** Too many union leaders have spent the past 30 years managing labor’s decline and lowering members’ expectations. They have consistently aimed too low, both in estimating what members are capable of and in figuring out what they could win. CTU leaders knew that members could organize themselves if given the tools and the go-ahead. And they refused to bargain against themselves by making preemptive concessions.

Leaders recognized that members could change if their expectations were raised. A few years ago CTU was not a union of thousands of militant, activist members. A majority didn’t necessarily agree with all the arguments the CORE leaders put forth (scary tactics, issues that seemed “too radical,” untested strategies like parent alliances). But those leaders argued for a clear vision and dove into democratic debate over the way forward, with faith that the members would come to the same conclusions they had.

**Putting People Power to Work Requires Real Organizing, Not Just Mobilizing.** Leaders got 90 percent of the members voting “yes” to strike, with hundreds of self-organized picket lines across the city—crossed by only a minuscule number of scabs—because they weren’t just “doing turnout.” They spent two years giving members the tools, structures, and space to do it themselves. Rank and filers did the heavy lifting—building relationships with co-workers and parents, charting their areas of strength and pockets of weakness, and ultimately moving fellow members into action.



Real organizing requires a lot more work on the front end, which the union's new leaders began immediately after taking office. (In fact, they began some of it even *before* taking office.) But it requires far less staff work on the back end, and exponentially expands what the union can accomplish.

**Education Happens through Action.** Members learned not just through union position papers or public forums but by engaging in struggles and experiences that gave them the confidence to demand more, dream bigger, take risks.

**Union Democracy Made the Difference.** The union's leadership had formed through a rank-and-file struggle to make their union into the organization they wanted it to be. Being a dissident caucus ensured plenty of debate and even discord, before and after they got elected. Once they got into office, they didn't tell everyone to go home and let them handle things. They pushed for more involvement, more debate, more discussion. Sometimes that debate was rough-and-tumble. Sometimes it took a lot of time.

But leaders recognized that, if you want people to take big risks and do big things, they have to own the decisions. They knew members were grown-ups, and grown-ups can tell when they're in charge and when they're not. Members' insistence on extending the strike by two days so they could review the proposals (see Chapter 9) showed that the rank and file realized something had changed.

Leaders also knew they would be under a lot of pressure to tone it down: bad advice from other labor leaders, threats from management, enduring union culture, legitimate fears about trying for something big and failing. CTU leaders knew that they needed the members to be demanding, in order to sustain their own bold instincts.

**It's Possible to Buck Union Headquarters.** On testing, evaluations, and merit pay, the national AFT was headed in a different direction from CTU. Yet CTU was able to have the strike it wanted, with the politics it wanted, because the local was so strong. AFT President Randi Weingarten knew when she was standing on stage in front of 7,000 fired-up members in May 2012 that she didn't want to try to get in their way. CTU leaders didn't just criticize the higher-ups but showed that they had an alternative strat-

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egy that could move members and score victories.

**A Strike Can Still Wield Power.** This wasn't a symbolic strike. It was a far cry from one-day walkouts that serve more as protests than as sand in the gears. Members completely shut down the schools and disrupted everyday functioning for a big chunk of the city's residents, creating a political crisis the powers-that-be couldn't ignore.

At first blush public school teachers might seem to have no economic leverage. When they walk out, the district actually saves money, and working class parents are the ones inconvenienced. But crucially—thanks to CTU's track record—parents blamed the mayor, not the teachers, for the crisis, and that made it a crisis for him.

**Public Employees Can Win Over the Public.** Teachers may be better positioned than most to wins hearts and minds, but all public employees understand the ways their services are undermined by the bosses, the politicians, and business interests. The CTU experience shows that demanding a better system, and using the power of workers with collective bargaining rights to fight



for the public interest, is a viable strategy. Making common cause with those who use public services, and positioning unionized employees as watchdogs of the public interest, wins support—unlike trying to fly under the radar and hoping no one notices public workers' pay and pensions.

**It's Possible to Take Risks and Win.** After CTU bargainers got a deal to bring 512 teachers back to work to cover the extra hours created by the longer school day—a major win on what Emanuel had made his signature issue—they could have settled the contract without a strike. It would have been safer. But leaders knew that in the long run they had to have a much more direct confrontation with the city's power structure. They had to engage in a riskier strategy and tackle riskier issues if they wanted a lasting victory.

**It's a Marathon, Not a Sprint.** CTU educated members that winning the battle for public education would take much more than a strike. And it's a good thing, because Rahm Emanuel didn't put his tail between his legs and slink offstage. He spent the next year shuttering a record 47 schools, the largest wave of school closings in the nation's history.

The closings were designed to demoralize and disorient the city's parents and teachers. But they embraced their own newfound militancy, reelecting the CORE slate by a 4 to 1 margin. The vote showed Emanuel hadn't made teachers regret their strike; he'd only shown them the need for a union with a fighting spirit and a plan to win.

## Appendix

### Understanding the Assault on Schools and Teachers

Teachers in the U.S. today face an incredibly hostile political landscape.

The showdown in Chicago pitted the Chicago Teachers Union against a high-powered national network of billionaires and politicians of both parties, who've spent decades and huge sums stacking the laws against teachers and making a blame-the-teacher ideology the conventional wisdom.

Here we examine why educators find themselves such a focus of animosity, tracing the national legislative and rhetorical attacks against them by Republicans, Democrats, foundations, private companies, and a complex of advocacy groups.

#### **Pitting the Public against the Public Sector**

Public sector workers have been the target of conservative politicians for decades, but since the 2008 financial meltdown they've also become a convenient scapegoat for what ails the economy.

Unfortunately, voters have been all too ready to believe that librarians and lunch ladies—and their modest pensions—are responsible for the tidal wave of red ink engulfing cities and states. As a result, most state and local governments have taken the ax to their budgets rather than reevaluate two generations of tax breaks they've given to corporations and the well-to-do.

The attacks on unionized public employees reached a fever pitch in 2010—just as reformers in the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators took over CTU. Politicians across the political spectrum spent that election season campaigning against government employees, especially anyone with a union card in their pocket. They made a blunt, ugly appeal to workers angry about plummeting standards in the private sector—“You don't have a pension or