5

Getting Organized in Every Workplace

It was clear from the day CORE took the helm July 1, 2010 that to defend the students and the members—in fact, to save public education in Chicago—the union would need to be prepared to strike when its contract expired in 2012. The aggressiveness of the school board and the corporate education reformers pushed the union in that direction.

Leaders knew they would have to get parents, students, and community organizations on board to oppose the district's destructive strategy. They would also have to activate members for a contract fight like they hadn't seen in years.

But with the local's last strike more than two decades back, in 1987, most CTU members had never even participated in a vigorous contract campaign. No more than one in five had been around for the last strike.

So the new leaders had to transform their union culture: they had to inspire and train teachers in every school to step up. And they had two years to do it.

Organizing at the Building Level

A first step was to rebuild the union as a force within the schools, with delegates (the elected reps in each school) and rank and filers taking responsibility for enforcing the contract. This went hand in hand with educating all members about the huge threats facing the union and the students—but with the message that winning was possible if large numbers were in motion.

The new leaders realized that lack of confidence was their biggest barrier to organizing. Members knew that the sky was falling in on public education; they were not so convinced they could do anything about it. Many members believed that parents blamed them for bad schools.

So many, many union meetings at the schools were spent

trying to convince members that parents could and would support them. To build confidence and expand members' view of what was possible, they also needed *experiences* that proved parents would work alongside them and that victories were possible; Chapters 6 and 7 are about those fights. This chapter explains the internal organizing that was happening at the same time.

History teacher Jackson Potter, who became the CTU staff coordinator, sketched out their goal: "We'd like to see members taking on their principals and organizing with parents and the community before they so much as pick up the phone to call the union office."

One key decision was to start an Organizing Department, which had not existed before (as well as a Research Department). Elementary teacher Norine Gutekanst was tapped to head it. She hired four organizers from the ranks of teachers and paraprofessionals (one of them from the UPC caucus), who were able to go on loan from their jobs in the district. One experienced organizer from another union was also hired, Matthew Luskin from the Service Employees (SEIU) health care local in Chicago. Luskin, a former organizing director, was a strategist who had led large campaigns and managed teams of organizers.

Most of the new staff organizers had not received any formal training. Some went to their national union, the AFT, for basic organizing and communication skills. And after Luskin was hired, he gave classes.

"We trained ourselves," Gutekanst said, "how to move beyond just being an activist to actually convincing other people that through acting together we could accomplish something.

"We learned a very specific rap, a series of steps to go through in every organizing conversation, and tried to stick to it. It involves looking for issues that the member cares about and relating those to the situation the union is in.

"Then who is it who has the power that we need to take back? And how are we going to do that? By working together through our power in numbers."

Revitalizing Old Structures

Using their new Organizing Department, CTU leaders set out to breathe life into their old, existing structures and redefine

An Organizing Conversation

The *issues* part of the conversation means asking questions—and really listening to the answers—to learn what the member cares about, before asking her to take an action like coming to a meeting or signing a petition.

The fact that other members are fired up about, say, a threat to their pensions doesn't mean that's what motivates this person. Maybe she is most concerned about keeping music in the schools, or staffing for special education. Asking her to get involved will be more successful once the conversation is grounded in the issue she cares about most.

Agitation is where the member acknowledges that the problem she's just mentioned isn't okay with her, and isn't going to go away on its own. Telling her this is not nearly as useful as asking her the right question that gets her to say it herself; most of us generally remember what we said, not what the other person said.

Often a good strategy is to ask questions based on what the person has told you: "How long has that been going on? Is that okay with you? Do you see any way that's going to change if we don't take action?" Anyone who works a job knows the answers to these questions, but when we aren't organizing we often avoid facing them, just to get through the day. By reacting, the organizer can help the other person feel "permission" to be angry.

Someone's to Blame

Polarization is about pointing out that someone (an abusive principal, the board of education, billionaire "reformers") is responsible for creating these problems. Asking "Why do you think we're having this problem?" often gets to who is to blame. Often we feel our problems are just "the way things are." Realizing that bad conditions for workers didn't just fall from the sky can be very empowering: if someone made the decisions that made things this way, that also means they could *un*make those decisions.

Once the member is angry, the organizer had better be ready to offer some hope. The *vision of change* means talking about power in numbers and the union's plan to win, making the connection between the member's own issue and the action at hand.

It's important here to emphasize the idea of having a voice. People are motivated by many different concerns, but generally what unites them all is that the people making the decisions aren't the ones most affected by them. For workers, power in numbers is our only way to get a say.

The *commitment* part of a good organizing conversation is asking the member to decide to do something about it. Once she agrees with the vision of change and sees it as a way to win on the issues she's concerned about, asking her to take action is easy. She already believes that taking action with her co-workers is the only way to win; signing the petition, coming to the meeting, or voting yes to strike is the next step in that fight.

If someone is fearful or reluctant to act, it's a lot easier to help her through it when you're challenging her to act on what she believes—rather than being pushy about an action you are trying to "sell." Most people's reservations about taking action have real reasons behind them. Her fears aren't crazy, but still, things won't get better unless she gets involved. The organizer's job isn't to convince her that she's wrong about her fears, but that she needs to act despite her reservations. In other words, the organizer is helping her think like an organizer.

Of course, following this outline doesn't mean following a script mechanically—organizers still talk to people like human beings. But using the organizing "rap" as a guide ensures that the conversation actually moves the organizing forward, and the member isn't left feeling like her time's been wasted with a spiel or a gripe session.

A successful organizing conversation strengthens both the member and the union, and leads to action. ☼

the union's traditional roles. Those included the school-site representatives (delegates) and the monthly House of Delegates meetings, the Professional Problems Committees in each school, and a union position with the unfortunate title "district supervisor." Each layer had its problems.

At first, each organizer was responsible for 150 schools, grouped by region. (Later, when more organizers were hired, that number was cut to 100.) With about 250 delegate slots empty, out of 800, the organizers' first priority was to make sure that every school had a delegate. (Larger schools were supposed to have more than one.) Many schools had no delegate, or they were not doing the job, though the role of a delegate was minimal: to attend the monthly House of Delegates meetings and report back to fellow teachers.

The union had no accountability system to make sure that communication was happening—and boring House of Delegates meetings often produced little to report. Meetings were averaging only 400 delegates. (At the height of the strike, in contrast, 750

came, and the following year typically saw 650-700.)

Delegates had never been expected to write grievances. If a member needed one, the delegate would call a field rep from the Grievance Department. "People who took pride in themselves as good unionists and went to delegate meetings were fairly good at ensuring the basic bureaucratic functions of their role," said Potter. "Maybe 25 percent were doing it.

"But it goes back to the question around the role of delegates. Expectations were so low. Very few actually had the skills and wherewithal to organize their buildings to combat any sort of tyrannical decision-making by the administration, or deal with contract violations.

"What we wanted was a web of people to facilitate everybody being involved at the school level."

So once the CORE slate took office, the duties of a delegate changed. "It was organizing," said Financial Secretary Kristine Mayle. "And educating. We started education at meetings that was more substantive. We started talking school funding and the power structure in Chicago and charters and big picture reform stuff. That's what started the delegates being more active."

To recruit new delegates, organizers went to schools to talk to members in the parking lots or as they were signing out. They called after-school meetings to explain how leaders saw what the members were up against, and they cajoled people to take on the job. If more than one person stepped up in a school, an election was held.

At the same time, the Professional Problems Committees needed to be rebuilt; they had fallen into disrepair in three-quarters of the schools. These are school-based committees of three to five, mandated by the contract and led by the delegate, that are supposed to meet monthly with the principal to resolve issues before they become grievances. They are elected annually, with members serving as the eyes and ears of the delegate around the building.

"We talked to people very directly about what we saw as the changing role of delegates," Luskin said. "Delegates would have to be leaders in their building and organizers of their staff, parents, and school community."

Training about what it meant to be an organizer was specific.

Social studies teacher Tim Meegan, an intern in summer 2013, said he'd learned how to encourage people who agree with the union's goals but are reluctant to take action. Knocking on doors, he registered voters, identified community leaders such as block-club presidents, and promoted community meetings to make an action plan on school closings and budget cuts.

"The union is not saying 'here's what we're going to do,'" he explained. "We're calling a meeting to say 'what can we do about it?' The union can't fight this stuff by itself."

Interns gathered petition signatures in 2013 for a graduated income tax in Illinois (one of only a handful of states with a flat tax). CTU is part of a statewide coalition to change the constitution to allow this tax. "We know at the end of the day you can't fight austerity without changing the distribution of wealth," Potter said. "It's a practical campaign that allows you to talk about the root cause of the problems we're having."

Grievance Department

CTU grievances were traditionally handled by full-time staff in the Grievance Department, and still are, but delegates have been trained and encouraged to write grievances rather than always calling a field rep. The separation between organizing and contract enforcement still exists, though, and the union is "grappling with how to make it more seamless," in Potter's words.

He believes it was right to start by forming an Organizing Department and put the emphasis there. "Field staff had become very traditionally oriented," he said, "talking almost entirely about ways you can protect yourself from child abuse allegations or file grievances if you're retaliated against. But most members didn't face that. It was important for us to disrupt that and to send people out who could engage more broadly and figure out what was making people tick—and how to deal with *those* issues."

Of course, the issues at the top of members' minds weren't necessarily contract violations. They were everything from bullying principals to charter school expansion to the loss of black teachers to wanting more special education services. Members wanted things they didn't know they could look to the union for. Part of organizers' job was to change the perception of "union issues."

CORE Sticks Around

After the CORE slate was elected, a majority of its leaders were involved in running the local, as executive board members, staffers, DSs, or chairs of union committees. But there was never any doubt that CORE should remain an active caucus.

Before the reformers knew they would win, they had discussed how important it would be to keep CORE going. Those who'd been involved in the earlier PACT caucus (see Chapter 3) knew that leaders needed a mechanism for keeping in touch with rank-and-file sentiment. They were well aware of the inevitable conservatizing effect of holding office, with a big institution to run and with leaders no longer experiencing the day-to-day problems of classroom teachers.

"Even though the officers don't want to become disconnected, their reality is different from the reality of a teacher slogging it out on the ground," Pope said. "If you can always go to the bathroom when you want…

"It's also very good to have non-officers out there to be eyes and ears in the schools, what's playing well and what's not. And you need to have people who will be critical."

"CORE can raise red flags and alarms, have the pulse of the members," Potter added, "be a critical conscience to raise concerns when the union is making bad choices."

So the caucus, including the new top officers, continued to meet. In the early months meetings were less frequent and not so well attended. Missteps in dealing with the legislature in spring 2011 (see Chapter 7) were a wake-up call that convinced everyone CORE needed care and attention.

"There was a period in the first year when those of us on the CORE steering committee were now working at the union," Potter remembered. "The number of challenges and crises was overwhelming. Our ability to manage both organizations simultaneously was limited at best. There were missed opportunities.

"But we still maintained a regular set of meetings and basic communication; we had internal discussions around issues. Those things did not vanish; they were in place. That allowed our next layer of activists to step up into the vacuum and say, 'Hey, this isn't working as well as it needs to.' We came to the conclusion we needed to diversify the steering committee with more rank and file

and less staffers, so work would get done and people would have more leadership opportunities."

The caucus continues to meet once a month, or twice a month when the situation demands, with an annual convention in the fall. Several hundred members pay dues (still $35 a year for teachers, $20 for paraprofessionals), with 30 to 40, and up to 75, attending a typical meeting. Any CTU member, active or retired, may join—and spikes in activity lead to more members wanting to get involved.

"Folks in CORE tend to be more political," said Gutekanst. "Some have been around a while. We see this is a long-term project. CORE has the possibility of providing more institutional memory, and somewhat of a check and balance on leadership." At the same time, CORE includes many of the youngest activists in the union—the mix of generations is one of its defining characteristics.

The continuing existence of CORE shows members that what changed at CTU wasn't just the feistiness of the leaders at the top. New activists can see the role of rank-and-file leaders in determining the union's direction. It's clear that the leaders at the top came out of a much bigger group, and in CORE, new activists meet peers who feel ownership of having moved the union onto its current course

So CORE continues to function as a recruitment and training ground for new activists, and, of course, as an election vehicle (elections to the pension board, as described in Chapter 3, are held every year).

CORE can also take actions that are more appropriate for a caucus than for the union. In the summer of 2011 CORE sponsored a national get-together for teachers who wanted to fight the corporate "education reform" agenda, inviting both local officers and members of opposition caucuses. In summer 2013 a larger conference was held (see Chapter 11).

The delegate trainings, the summer intern program, and the building meetings described here were key to spreading skills and the organizing mindset among a larger subset of the members.

Members could choose from a wide array of ways to be involved.

"Before, people got the newspaper or the information the union sent in the mail, and they would read it and throw it to the side," Sanders said. "Now they are more vocal. It's not like, 'I just pay my dues.' It's more of an inclusion."

But the internal organizing was only a part of how CTU got members to step up. The union simultaneously had to strengthen its relationships with parents (Chapter 6) and carry out a daunting number of campaigns, often simultaneous, against attacks from the legislature, the mayor, and the school board (Chapter 7).

More than anything, it was these experiences—speaking to parents about the board's attacks; the rallies where teachers and parents were arrested together protesting against bankers; seeing a principal back off due to a petition or action at a staff meeting—that built the confidence that allowed members to see organizing as the way to go and a strike as a viable strategy.

Lessons

- ⇨ CTU's new leaders saw their first priority as developing rank-and-file leaders who could get their co-workers involved at the school level, so they created a new structure, the Organizing Department, and hired and trained a crew of organizers with that specific task. These they drew primarily from CTU's own ranks but supplemented with experienced organizers from elsewhere.
- ⇨ CTU was frank about the change in course, recruiting delegates to a new conception of their role rather than the old, minimal one. Not just the tasks but also the thinking behind each task were laid out clearly for all to see.
- ⇨ CTU trained a thick layer of new leaders to think like organizers. Trainings were expanded to bring in the largest number of potential leaders, in order to build teams in each school.
- ⇨ While many citywide campaigns were launched, local initiatives led by members in their schools were encouraged, supported, and highlighted to others.

- CTU made use of its existing structures—ones members were familiar with—even though these had been dysfunctional in the immediate past: the monthly House of Delegates meetings, the district supervisors, the Professional Problems Committees. At the same time, leaders didn't try to fix everything at once; they left the Grievance Department to tackle later.
- CTU developed an intermediate layer of leaders, the district supervisors, who played an essential support and communication role between officers/staff and delegates in the buildings.
- CTU consciously trained a new layer of leaders through the summer intern program, and recruited members of under-represented groups to fill those slots.
- Recognizing the inevitable pressures on officers, CORE members continued to function as a caucus that could help correct course when necessary—and provide a training ground for still more leaders.

6

Community Partners

One of the most remarkable things about CTU's 2012 strike is that these educators won community support in a national political climate that was not simply anti-union but anti-teacher. A poll conducted by We Ask America in the strike's final days found that a majority of Chicagoans—including 63 percent of African Americans, 65 percent of Latinos, and 66 percent of parents of school-age children—were supporting it.

Community support, however, went far beyond mere favorable opinions. Neighborhood organizations throughout the city played a critical role in both drumming up support for the strike and coordinating on-the-ground support. Action Now, the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization (KOCO), the Albany Park Neighborhood Council, and the Logan Square Neighborhood Association pulled members together to canvass their neighbors in the lead-up to the strike. They held town-hall forums, organized day camps for out-of-school children, turned out members en masse to downtown rallies, and organized pro-CTU press

CTU