

Contract Fights, Community Rights

Chicago Teachers and Education Justice

Beth Gutelius

THE CHICAGO TEACHERS UNION strike in 2012, and the intentional community-building that preceded it, present a case study of the kind of social movement unionism that critics of labor have long called for. In contrast to the way many unions have approached these partnerships, the CTU has tried to implement a form of solidarity rooted in the understanding of victory as being “bound up with” that of communities fighting for quality education. The success of the strike, both in terms of the contract teachers won and the way they mobilized broad support for education equality, illustrates the potential power of these community-labor coalitions.

On a cold, dreary day in February 2012, hundreds of teachers and community members marched silently up a residential street on Chicago’s north side. Far from city hall and the corporate headquarters that often serve as targets of protest, this rally was headed to the home of Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Community groups wanted to make personal for the mayor what they saw as a personal attack on the future of their children—education reforms that call for school closures and offer little opportunity for input from those affected.

Some commentators have pointed to this event as one of the more clever actions on the part of the Chicago Teachers Union. The backstory to the march reveals much about the nature of community-labor

partnerships between the union and its allies. When one of these partners, the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization (KOCO), suggested the march on the mayor’s home to protest the lack of accountability by the Board of Education and City Hall, leadership of the CTU was initially hesitant. They did not see it as a strategic target, and worried the action might backfire and sour public opinion in the middle of a contract fight that would increasingly rely on popular sentiment. Although only one of many groups in the coalition, the CTU was the organization with the most resources and largest membership. In coalition meetings, representatives of the union argued against going through with the action, but were outnumbered by the community groups in favor. In the end, the CTU risked the action in support of KOCO and other coalition groups. The march on the mayor’s house has become something of a legend in Chicago—an incredibly powerful experience for participants and a game-changer in the balance of power in the fight over education, in part because the media proved sympathetic to the action.

Why This Approach to Community-labor Coalitions (CLCs)?

In 2008, a group of teachers began to forge a reform caucus within the union membership. Those involved in the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) were dissatisfied with the leadership of the CTU and their response to the extensive education reform program implemented by City Hall. Emanuel’s predecessor, Richard M. Daley, had ushered in Renaissance 2010, a flagship program to restructure Chicago’s public schools, which called for the closing of “failing” schools and a significant expansion of the charter system. The strategy was



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developed and partially funded by the Commercial Club of Chicago, a powerful group of corporate and civic leaders with a long history of shaping city policy. The reforms introduced would reduce the ranks of unionized public school teachers and replace them with non-union charters, while disproportionately affecting low-income students by displacing them from neighborhood institutions. Members of CORE, following the lead of community groups, framed the restructuring of Chicago Public Schools as racist—budget cuts, closings, “turnarounds” and expansion of the charter school system were having a disproportionate impact on families of color living on the south and west sides.

As Renaissance 2010 rolled out and schools were singled out for closure or “turnaround” status (when a school’s staff are fired and replaced), CORE sought ways to support parents as their children’s schools were shuttered. These teachers saw a promising strategy in building a broad base of power in the communities most affected by policy change, in order to combat the powerful interests that had consolidated around education reform in Chicago. Even before CORE was officially running to unseat incumbent union leadership, they held panels with community organizations across the city to strategize about how the union could work with these groups to improve the education system. When CORE stepped into the running for CTU leadership, their slate ran on a progressive platform of democratizing the union and transforming it into an organization that would fight for the broad interests of teachers and their students. To the surprise of even some CORE leaders, the caucus won the election and pivoted the Chicago Teachers Union in a new direction, rooted firmly in relationships built in communities. A symbol of this sea change was the creation of a community advisory board that met with the new CTU leadership monthly, providing feedback on the direction and strategy the union pursued.

On Strike

By the time the vast majority of the union membership—98%—voted to strike as contract negotiations reached an impasse, the union and their allies had already spent years framing the issues. Long-term relationships with grassroots groups had allowed CORE to engage with

communities and develop a shared vision of “world class education” for Chicago’s students, and this became the central organizing principle of the teachers’ demands. Perhaps the most important meme of the strike was that teachers were striking for more than a contract—it was a fight for their students and for the fundamental right to access quality education. This resonated with the public, and particularly with Chicago public school parents. One poll reported that the teachers’ decision to strike garnered the support of 66% of public school parents in the city, despite a media campaign to discredit the union and characterize teachers as selfish and irresponsible. After halting school for seven days, the teachers won considerable concessions from the school district and delegates voted to accept the terms of the contract.

Many commentators credit the commitment to rank-and-file democratic leadership for the success of the teachers’ strike, and rightfully so. CORE leadership changed the formal and substantive mechanisms for member participation in running their union, under the theory that union members make the best leaders and organizers. The role of community-labor coalitions has gotten less attention as a critical foundation and is related to democratizing the union. A commitment to social movement unionism, done carefully, means deep solidarity and symbiotic relationships with partners, something CORE has taken seriously since the group’s formation. As teachers began to take ownership over the direction of their union, they were simultaneously learning to see their fight as enmeshed in the larger struggle around school restructuring, and, perhaps even more importantly, that school restructuring was deeply racialized. Marching in the streets with community groups, talking to parents and students at their schools, and meeting and debating with other teachers helped shift the consciousness of members who were now actively involved in building and guiding the CTU. It was the political development of teachers themselves that encouraged greater risk-taking by the union.

Chicago’s Burgeoning CLC Landscape

Chicago is not known for an overabundance of harmonious relationships between social justice organizations. Yet, in the last decade, we’ve seen the emergence of a number of coalitions that have proven very effec-

Community groups and teachers march silently to Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel's house in February 2012 to protest education reforms.

tive, and perhaps point to a new era of exchange and rapport. Two CLCs played central roles in the strike: StandUp! Chicago and the Grassroots Collaborative.

In recent accounts of the teachers' strike, organizers from the CTU have credited StandUp! Chicago with helping to prepare union members for the strike. StandUp! Chicago is a creature of three large Service Employees International Union (SEIU) locals, CTU and a range of local community groups, a coalition built on the assumption that until there was a wider social movement, organizing workers on a large scale would not be possible. StandUp! Chicago is mostly a performative coalition, staging massive gatherings to "reclaim our jobs, our homes and our schools" at targets like the Mortgage Bankers' Association annual meeting as they drank cocktails atop the Art Institute. StandUp! has drawn on emotional and cultural memes to push the boundaries of public protest. CTU organizers credit these large-scale actions, often focused on linking the financial sector to local funding crises, with helping their members to understand the political landscape and see themselves in relation to a mass movement. StandUp! Chicago represents a fairly rare allocation of resources from some of the more forward-thinking labor groups toward longer-term movement building that may yield few immediate benefits for unions themselves. Yet coalitions like StandUp!, where the commitment on the part of organizations may not be particularly deep or prolonged, prove important to framing the debate, both for participants and the wider public.

The Grassroots Collaborative, of which CTU is a member, has focused on winning local minimum wage increases and reappropriating government funds into social programs at the state and local levels. The Collaborative was originally formed during the Living Wage campaign in 1998, and has shifted form over the years, evolving from a more union-dominated group to a common-cause coalition committed to a range of issues facing low-income communities of color. The Grassroots Collaborative was instrumental in mobilizing the eleven member organizations in support of the teachers, swelling the ranks of allies.



A Year Later

Union membership voted overwhelmingly in May 2013 to re-elect CORE to head the union. The CTU, under CORE's leadership, has re-aligned its interests, putting itself in close relation to a wider social movement in Chicago. Despite this, the Board of Education and Mayor Emanuel continue to close schools and lay off teachers en masse.

An issue that remains difficult for even the most community-minded unions is how much of "communities" are represented by existing organizations, and how involved unions ought to be in helping build wider involvement in a social movement. And while the CTU retains close relationships with community partners, it has remained very focused on education issues, leaving the union somewhat distanced from other local labor struggles.

In some ways, the nature of the profession of teaching is a particular case, lending itself well to a fight like



Photo: Sarah Jane Rhee

this one, where contract demands and school reforms can dovetail. On the other hand, the teachers union had a dual problem to overcome in community-labor partnerships: not only are community groups often wary of labor unions, given the latter's track record of sincere collaboration, but there also can be a distrust of white teachers on the part of African American and Latino parents.

Conclusion

There are three aspects of the Chicago teachers' strike that are particularly relevant for a discussion of contemporary community-labor coalitions. First, the union understood that their success, on contract issues and toward a just education system, depended on the support of a broad group of parents, students, community members and teachers rooted in sincere solidarity. The strike was made possible by a community-labor coalition with a commitment to the needs and visions of different members. This included important bridge-builders with

commitment to issues of racial and social justice and wide social networks from which to draw support.

Second, and related, the union used the strike to raise other, more fundamental issues about the uneven effects of education reform—what they came to call “educational apartheid”—and local funding mechanisms that divert money from social services to private developers and corporate tax breaks. This social movement unionism reflects a commitment to the process of developing a common vision of justice in collaboration with a larger movement.

The CTU and allied organizations were strategic, smart and were playing the long game. All of this said, there was a significant amount of luck that also contributed to their success. The last lesson to draw from the strike is that in order to take advantage of political opportunities, community-labor coalitions like the one CTU built provide the infrastructure to draw together the sometimes disparate threads of a social movement when it matters most.

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