

WINNING EDUCATION JUSTICE IN CHICAGO: THE STRIKE IS JUST THE BEGINNING

THE FIRST CHICAGO TEACHERS STRIKE in 25 years marks a turning point in the battle to defend public education. For years, corporate interests and their allies have pushed for “education reform,” a euphemism for cuts in student services, the erosion of teachers’ rights on the job, and ultimately, the privatization of public schools. Since the economic crisis, school “reformers” point to city and state budget deficits as a rationale for accelerating this process. We are told there is no money for education—yet the city continues to hand out tax exemptions for corporations, and the federal government ramps up military spending while cutting taxes for the rich.

These initiatives have met little resistance from teachers unions across the country—until now. With this strike, nearly 30,000 Chicago teachers are standing up and taking the lead in defending equal access to quality public schools.

This strike is not just a fight over wages and local school conditions. It’s part of a broader struggle that will determine the fate of education not just in Chicago, but across the country. If Rahm and Chicago’s 1% break this strike, their allies will be emboldened to ramp up these attacks on teachers and students in other school districts. But if CTU can stand its ground in Chicago, teachers everywhere will be inspired to fight back in their own communities.

Rank and File Activism in the CTU

Everything that has been won through the strike is a result of not simply a courageous union leadership but of the rank and file members of the union who have been organizing at their schools, in their neighborhoods and across the city to fight back against this assault on public education. The teachers union has been transformed under the leadership of the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), who were elected to lead the CTU in 2010. CORE has worked tirelessly to get members engaged in their union and help build a

movement for education justice—with grassroots community organizations, parents, and students across the city of Chicago. Fighting for teachers and staff in their schools and building relationships with neighborhood allies and communities of color has allowed the CTU to turn a contract fight into a movement for quality public education. They have shown workers across the country how to fight back against the capitalist assault on working class people and our unions, an assault supported by both the Republicans and the Democratic Party.

The Struggle Continues

In organizing this strike as a broader social movement for education justice, the CTU has illuminated a new path of resistance for those who are sick and tired of the attacks on workers under the guise of “reform.” Their focus on having members engaged at all levels of the union and their advocacy for a democratically controlled school system that serves the most disadvantaged and historically marginalized communities has been a major reason why the strike has garnered wide public support. It is also why we need to recognize that this is only one battle in a longer struggle to make Chicago a city for people and not for profit. Everyone who has been walking the picket lines, marching, and rallying in support of this fight needs to continue organizing at their jobs and in their communities. Beating back the assault will require CTU members and their allies to build a stronger and more coherent movement in Chicago that can mobilize and take bold action like those we’ve seen during the strike.

Winning a good agreement with CPS is not the end goal of this movement. We have to look beyond just the next contract and make this strike the spark for a rebirth of the labor movement—a force not just for good contracts, but for social justice for all working people.



A statement by the Chicago branch of Solidarity: a socialist, feminist, anti-racist organization.
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