



Sarah Jane Rhee

Strike rallies brought together teachers, parents, students and community organizations as allies fighting for schools Chicago's children deserve.

Chicago Teachers Strike Back By Rob Bartlett

AFTER TWO YEARS of preparations and skirmishes with two mayors of Chicago and their appointed school boards, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) led a seven-day walkout over economic and social issues that culminated in a significant victory. In the ratification voting held on October 2, the new contract was approved with 79% in favor.

To understand why the strike is justifiably hailed as a victory, it is necessary to place it within the context of the attacks directed against public workers and teachers in particular. *But the biggest victory in this strike was the growth of consciousness among CTU members.*

From isolated teachers separated into hundreds of different schools, each trying to do their best for their students, has come a group that has made the union their own and a potent force advocating for children in Chicago. This strengthened membership will be needed to face continuing challenges that lie immediately ahead.

In a time of crisis and savage givebacks in the private sector, exemplified by concessions extracted by a highly profitable corporation like Caterpillar and a wave of concessions made by public sector unions, the CTU's strike is an invigorating wakeup call to all unionists.

The specific gains in the contract are modest. They include a 3% wage increase in the first year, followed by 2% in each of the following two years with an option for a fourth year

3% raise; removal of a clause in the contract that allowed the board to renege on previously agreed upon wage increases under "economic distress"; a limited right of recall for teachers who are displaced; maintenance of the current "step and lane" pay schedule (based on seniority and education credentials); the right of teachers to use their own lesson plans; no increase in health care costs; textbooks to be present in classrooms from Day 1 of the school year; an evaluation system that follows the minimum state requirements for using student performance on standardized test; and a right of appeal for teacher evaluations.

There are several givebacks that should be acknowledged. These include a shortening of the period of compensation from ten to five months for teachers displaced by school closings, consolidations and lower enrollment; a curtailment of the future sick bank days that can accrued by teacher; and the dropping of all lawsuits that dealt with past dismissals of teachers who lost their jobs through no fault of their own.

Nationally, attacks on public workers are well known, from Wisconsin gutting collective bargaining to Michigan using emergency managers to void union contracts. Teacher unions have signed concessionary contracts in cities like Baltimore and New Haven, often at the behest of national American Federation of Teachers (AFT) leader Randi Weingarten.

National initiatives like Race To The Top (RTTT), boasted as president Obama's "success" and lavishly praised by Mitt Romney, have encouraged states to pass legislation opening the door to further privatization of schools through an expan-

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sion of charter schools. Wealthy individuals and entities like Bill Gates, Eli Broad and the Walton foundation have funded charters and supported such national “education reform” groups as Stand for Children, Democrats for Education Reform, and Michelle Rhee’s Students First. They share common goals of weakening if not outright destroying teacher unions.

The specific attacks in Illinois started in the 1990s when state legislation first gave control of Chicago’s schools directly to the mayor, allowing him to appoint the school board and then to limit Chicago teachers’ bargaining issues to only wages and benefits. These laws, specific to Chicago alone, took away the right of teachers to bargain over issues like class size. Charter school limits were also lifted in Chicago, with the result that today approximately 11% of the students in Chicago attend Charter schools.

In 2011 legislators, at the behest of “Mayor 1%” Rahm Emanuel and with the assistance of Stand For Children, passed Senate Bill 7 giving the mayor power to unilaterally change the length of the school day and year. Secondly, the bill imposed a lengthy arbitration and fact finding process for negotiations in Chicago and also raised the bar to allow a strike — again only in Chicago — to a 75% vote of the entire membership. Jonah Edelman, of Stand for Children, publicly stated that the intention of the legislation was to prevent the CTU from striking.

The law also made the layoff process dependent on teachers’ evaluations, not their experience. Another bill set up a new evaluation process, inspired by RTTT, which mandates basing teacher evaluations on at least a 30% student performance component to be determined by standardized tests. All of these laws were intended to weaken the CTU and push them into only bargaining over economic issues with the effect of isolating them from parents.

After Rahm’s election as mayor in 2011 he began a campaign against the CTU by beating the drums for a longer school day, saying that teachers were “cheating” the students. With the passage of SB 7 Rahm was able to unilaterally lengthen the school day, and announced his intention to do so in 2012. He then upped the ante by pushing for schools to ask for a “waiver” on the existing contract to pilot the longer school day across the system.

Using several small schools as pilots, principals pushed their staffs to approve the waiver, often with no advance notice, with the assistance of a media campaign to try to stampede a growing number of schools to circumvent the union contract. As compensation for a 20% longer day teachers were given the equivalent of a 2% raise and schools were given \$100,000 in discretionary funds under the control of the principal. This came on the heels of abrogating a 4% raise “due to economic reasons.”

The mayor’s goals were clear: impose a 20% longer day, establish a precedent that limited the amount of compensation that teachers could expect, and try to paint the teachers’ union as opponents of a better education in Chicago. At that moment the CTU leadership faced a direct challenge, and how they and their members responded would shape the coming contract fight.

Beginning the Mobilization

The fight against the waiver votes forced the CTU to begin a two-front fight, both to mobilize their members against the waiver votes and to pose an alternative vision for real edu-

cation reform. The waiver votes were mostly focused toward smaller elementary schools where principals attempted to bully their staffs into approving the waivers, often holding meetings where they attempted to prevent representatives from the union from attending.

At one school, when the coordinator of the CTU organizing department, Norine Gutekanst, attempted to enter the building to meet with the staff, the principal called the police and yelled at them to “put her out of here.” The responding officer refused to do so when shown the contract section allowing access by designated union representatives, stating that they had called the wrong person as she was a union delegate. While an amusing anecdote, this shows the pressure that was being exerted on the staff by “bully” principals.

This full-court press by the mayor and the Chicago Public School Board was soon blunted in the buildings and led to a wave of indignation among teachers who had just been denied their raises and were now being pushed to work more for less. A legal challenge by the union to this policy was upheld and this attack was stopped.

In the meantime the CTU research department was producing an important document. “The Schools Chicago’s Children Deserve” presented the case for a rich curriculum including fine arts, world languages, and physical education — not an increase in test prep. It provided the necessary information to counterpose a “better” school day to the mayor’s “longer” school day.

This proved an invaluable tool in addressing what most teachers have experienced in their schools, a shift from a broad curriculum to one increasingly dominated by various tests that eat up more and more time. By early October, elementary schools have lost the equivalent of seven school days to administering various tests like the hated “DIBELS” (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills).

During the rest of that school year, the union engaged in a series of organizing activities that provided tests of the memberships’ readiness to fight, from simple “red Fridays” when teachers were encouraged to wear red CTU t-shirts to school, to mobilizing the staff of schools threatened with closure. By May 2012, the membership showed their readiness by staging a mass rally of over 6,000 members where spontaneous chants of “strike” greeted union president Karen Lewis when she rose to address the rally.

In a precursor to a scene often repeated during the strike, members then marched through downtown Chicago to meet with allies from Stand Up Chicago (a coalition of community and labor organizations and working families “standing up together to demand good jobs and a strong investment in our community’s schools and neighborhoods”) to protest outside the Board of Trade, a show of strength giving members from isolated schools a glimpse of their power.

The next hurdle was to achieve the legally required 75% strike authorization vote. In early June over 90% of all CTU members voted, *with 98% in favor of granting the power to call a strike* — a truly stunning turn of events from eight months earlier when Rahm thought he had the union on the run.

As the summer proceeded, the board waited for the fact finder’s report also mandated by SB 7. The report’s release came as another blow to the plans of Rahm and the board, endorsing a sharp increase in pay for the longer school day

while chiding the board for making such a change without having a plan for how to pay for it. The fact finder called the negotiations “toxic” and also rejected the board’s insistence on instituting a “merit pay” system.

Spokespeople for the school board were practically apoplectic with shock that they weren’t allowed to unilaterally increase the hours teachers would have to work without paying for it. CTU was able to make an interim agreement with the board that gained a clear concession, forcing the board to hire almost 600 teachers in disciplines like fine arts and physical education to cover the additional class time the longer day required without increasing the amount of time in front of classes for teachers in both elementary and high schools. This was a clear win for both the union and the students.

Meanwhile the board was trying to isolate the CTU by signing agreements with the other unions that have support staff in the public schools. Agreements were made with SEIU Local 73 and UNITE-HERE, the key point being a wage increase of 2% per year — what Chicago Public Schools management was offering for the longer school day — and no-strike clauses.

Later in the summer the mayor managed to pressure leaders of AFT Local 1600, which represents teachers in the Chicago City College system, to accept an awful contract nine months early, where they agreed to a “merit pay” system and scrapped their step and lane language — another key demand of CPS (and national “education reformers”) on CTU. These agreements were clearly designed to establish precedents that could be forced on CTU, and to paint the CTU as out of step with “responsible” labor leaders.

Because of two separate school calendars in Chicago, approximately 30% of the schools were in session starting in early August, while the remainder opened after Labor Day. The period before all teachers were back in school was used to begin informational picketing in the Track E (early) schools. This process allowed the union to identify weaker schools and also reach out to parents about the issues in the negotiations, while building the capacity to run a strike across a 600-school system.

At this point power had clearly shifted in favor of the union and the board attempted to make a settlement. They were willing to drop their proposals for “merit pay” and also offered wages increases and maintenance of the step and lane system. On other issues of real importance to teachers, like the new evaluation system, the board remained unwilling to budge. On Saturday and Sunday before the strike, hundreds of union members swarmed the newly opened strike headquarters to pick up picket signs and on Monday, September 8th, to the surprise of Rahm and the board, the strike began.

Consolidating Rank-and-File Power

It is hard to describe how powerful the actual strike was, and the contrast between the response of the public and that of corporate opponents of public education. Picketing began at 6am at all 600+ schools to signs of support like the car honking from passing motorists. The numbers of parents who brought their children to the 144 designated “holding centers” created by the board to warehouse students was very low; in many cases the adults outnumbered the children.

The strike did not stay dispersed at all the separate

schools, but union members were asked to attend a mass rally in downtown Chicago at 3:30 at the board headquarters. Organizers who arrived a half hour before the scheduled time were dwarfed by thousands of members who had already assembled. The crowd quickly grew to a size that was hard to estimate, given that the streets in a four square block area surrounding the board of education were completely filled and it was almost impossible to move through the crowd. Easily 20,000 people were present.

The mood of the crowd was buoyant, with spontaneous chanting of slogans that had been distributed in the strike bulletin. Normally isolated in separate buildings and classrooms, teachers saw for one of the first times the extent of their numbers. The streets were a sea of red-shirted teachers and the entire downtown was affected. Leaving the rally people would spontaneously talk to teachers giving support and expressing their hopes that they would get what they were asking for.

Anyone who wore a red CTU shirt had stories of random people approaching them and talking to them about the strike. A retired teacher, Jim Daniels, told me that he had to stop wearing his red CTU shirt when he went to the grocery store because it took too long to shop due to the discussions that ensued, all supportive.

As the week progressed, picketing was consolidated at the 144 holding centers in the morning while afternoon rallies drew thousands. Targets of the rallies shifted from the board of education to a Hyatt hotel, owned by the Pritzker family, which was represented on the Chicago Board of Ed by Penny Pritzker, a prominent supporter of Barack Obama.

Despite an outcry in the press against the strike, from local Chicago papers to *The New York Times*, support for the strike was strong among the public. A poll showed that not only did a majority of registered voters support the teachers, but 66% of public school parents did so as well. Support for the strike was highest among the African American and Hispanic population. Union mobilizations began to focus on this fact so that on Thursday, instead of a downtown rally, three separate rallies were called at local high schools in the predominantly Black and Brown west and south sides. Thousands of teachers marched through these poor neighborhoods, taking their fight against what the CTU called a system of racial apartheid in Chicago education.

On Friday the union sent pickets back to all the local schools, and after an abbreviated time dispatched members through the neighborhoods to canvass residents for support. This was no isolated or insular strike, but one that clearly linked the demands of the teachers to the needs of the community. The inability of the mayor or any of the astro turf “education reform” groups to mount any show of parent opposition to the strike was notable.

Against this backdrop, a framework of an agreement was announced on Friday the 14th. On Saturday, a mass “Wisconsin style” rally was held that revealed some of the tensions of the movement. On one hand, the announcement of the tentative agreement probably depressed the turnout — a respectable 5,000-6,000 but much smaller than most activists expected. The lack of any deep support for the strike from the established labor movement was also apparent, as no representatives from the Chicago Federation



of Labor spoke and there was no mobilization of teachers from either the Illinois Federation of Teachers or the Illinois Education Association, although individuals did attend.

Further, uneasiness about the terms of the agreement was on the minds of many key activists who felt pressured to suspend the strike. This led to a refusal of the House of Delegates (representatives elected from each school) to vote to suspend the strike until copies of the agreement could be distributed and discussed by the membership.

An extraordinary process took place on Monday and Tuesday, as pickets at individual schools gathered together with copies of the tentative agreement to read and discuss it. This exercise in democracy seemed to make sense to the public, despite the community's natural eagerness to get kids back in school. Finally on Tuesday night the House members, after consulting with their members, overwhelmingly voted to suspend the strike, pending a vote by the entire membership. Two weeks later almost 80% of the teachers voted to accept the agreement.

Lessons from the Strike

First, it should be noted that despite the impressive unity of purpose of the teachers, this strike couldn't have been won on the strength of that alone. The factor that forced the board to capitulate on many of their main demands was the depth of community support for the demands that teachers articulated. While it was prohibited under SB 7 for the CTU to strike over issues like lower class size, a reform that all parents understand, the consistent raising of that demand by teachers on the picket lines and parents, along with other issues having to do with an enriched curriculum, allowed the union to raise those ideas in negotiations and to gain and hold public support.

This was no public relations stunt on CTU's part, but reflected two years of work with community partners that preceded the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) union election victory and another two years of deepening those ties between community organizations and the union.

[The background of the formation of CORE, following the demise of an earlier CTU reform leadership, appears in ATC 160, <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/3664> — ed.]

The second part of this effort was an educational process within the union to educate its members on issues of educational justice that cemented parents' good feelings about the teachers of their children and the union that represents them. A key part of the strategy of the mayor and the board of education counted driving a wedge between teachers and the parents of their students. Despite months of advertisements, first on radio stations in the Black and Brown communities attacking the CTU followed by anti-strike television ads financed by the hedge-funded group Democrats for Education Reform, they achieved no traction in the community. A local TV station was reduced to airing footage of a single family marching with picket signs asking for the strike to end.

Building ties between teacher unions and parents is not optional, but a strategic necessity. It requires patient work and an honest relationship between the groups as allies, not groups that are subordinate to the union. This requires a union leadership that trusts its members' ability both to articulate the needs of their students and to incorporate that into their struggle. The CTU passed this test with flying colors.

A second lesson is that it is possible to fight the corporate reformers, and not necessary to make concessions without a struggle. This calls into question the strategy of most union leaders today. This is one of the reasons why this strike resonated so widely across the country and even internationally, as evidenced by the lengthy list of support resolutions publicized on the CTU website. Teachers in my building, in a suburban district, expressed the view that the CTU was fighting for us. That is not an isolated sentiment.

While many unions will no doubt want to replicate the success of the CTU, how many are willing to do the work necessary to both build rank-and-file power and participation and join that with a fight for social issues that go beyond strictly wage-and-benefits issues? To make such a strategy viable, local unions need a similarly inclined leadership and the will to lay

the ground through patient work to cultivate allies.

Ironically, at the same time that CTU was holding a Labor Day rally of thousands and preparing a mass strike that would shake the city, the unions that make up the Chicago Federation of Labor were providing yard signs for their members that said “Proud Union Home,” but were totally absent from the rally with the exception of a spirited AFSCME contingent.

A third lesson is that these fights are not local and that the issues involved can’t be resolved during just one struggle. The CTU leadership is clear that while they have beaten back an attack, the forces that initiated it still exist and will continue to push for compliance to their agenda. A stark example of the enemies that they face was provided by a wealthy venture capitalist, Bruce Rauner, who published an opinion piece in the *Chicago Tribune* that railed against the CTU for blocking merit pay, maintaining in his words “unaffordable step and lane salary increases,” and “most tragically for taxpayers, the CTU took away CPS’ contractual ability to reject unaffordable salary increases in tough economic times.”

He concludes, “Today, the massive power of the CTU stands in the way of all school reform efforts. As we just witnessed, the fight to take our schools back will not be quick or easy. But we can win if we join together against the common obstacle to reform — the teachers unions.” Rauner is no random Republican, but an ally Rahm appointed to his World Business Chicago committee. The common theme here is that unions are an obstacle to cutting costs in public education.

The fight against these “education reform” advocates is far from over, and their allies in the Republican and Democratic parties are united in pursuing this agenda. Chicago shows that parents can be won to a different narrative about what constitutes a good education, but in the absence of any engagement with parents and the community, fights against top-down education reform will be hard to win.

The Coming Battle: School Closures

As negotiations were coming to a conclusion, the CTU was clear to its membership that the contract struggle had to be viewed as only the opening battle in what Karen Lewis called a fight for “the soul of public education.” Before the contract was even approved a fight loomed over the next round of school closures. One reason why the board put up little resistance to guaranteed wage increases in the contract was their cynical calculation that this would provide a rationale for saving costs to pay for the contract through school closures.

In the past no more than 17 schools have been proposed for closure or “turnaround,” but today reports are that as many as 100 schools may be closed or consolidated. While



After the strike victory, the fight over school closings lies ahead.
Sarah Jane Rhee

the board refuses to announce the possible list of threatened schools until December, the communities that are most threatened are on the predominately Black south and west sides of the city, areas most affected by the foreclosure epidemic.

This will be another difficult fight for the CTU. Teachers are immeasurably stronger as a union as a result of the strike, but they face a board dominated by representatives of the corporate elite of Chicago who are insulated from public opinion by their appointed status. Last year the board refused to back down on any school closings, even where the opposition was both the broadest and best organized. Usually in the past, community pressure was able to prevent some of the closings, but last year it seemed that the board wanted to send a message that they were determined to follow through with their agenda.

Schools that are targeted have suffered falling enrollments due to economic causes like foreclosures or

the drain of students into newly established charter schools. The continued growth of charters is the other corollary to school closures — a strategic goal in the campaign to weaken teacher unions. Therefore the union goal of organizing the charters acquires even more importance.

Charters, along with being non-union and lower wage than traditional public schools, also suffer a much higher rate of turnover due to both the oppressive conditions and lack of protection from arbitrary discipline, and also the relatively high number of Teach for America youth cycling through the schools. This provides a real challenge to establishing union supporters, and gives the charter operators a real incentive to fire anyone they suspect of being a union supporter.

We can expect that Rahm will not underestimate the CTU again, and that the continuing plan to starve neighborhood schools of resources as a prelude to further school closures and expansion of the charter school networks will intensify. The CTU will need to continue to involve its members in the coming school closing fights, while broadening the circle of community allies, which is still too small.

Pressure will have to be put on local aldermen to be advocates for adequate funding for public education, something that CTU members did spontaneously during the strike by showing up *en masse* at various aldermen’s offices. The issue of revenue must talk about where the money is, campaigns that the CTU has engaged in with other community allies. Further, a real grassroots organizing campaign targeted toward the teachers of the charter schools must be established.

If the CTU can now utilize its newly demonstrated strengths, these fights can further inspire teachers and other unionists across the country. §