

All Eyes on Chicago's Teachers

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Region: [USA](#)

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It's impossible to exaggerate the national importance of the teachers' struggle in Chicago. If the Chicago teachers' union — 26,000 members strong — goes on strike, many critical yet ignored political issues will go into the national spotlight, exposing nastiness that many politicians and labor leaders would like ignored until after the presidential elections.

Such a strike would also have the potential to rejuvenate U.S. labor unions by showing them a way out of the never ending wage and benefit concessions demanded by private and public employers. In fact, the Chicago teachers have the potential to become the most important labor struggle in decades, based on the timing, political context, and national relevance of their fight.

U.S. labor unions are in the fight of their lives, especially in the public sector, where their existence literally hangs in the balance. Constant city, state, and federal budget deficits — largely the result of multiple tax breaks for corporations and the rich — have been used as excuses to attack the wages and benefits of public employees, drastically weakening their unions to the point where “ending collective bargaining” is fast becoming a likely outcome.

Teachers are the strongest sector of public employees, based on their numbers, cohesiveness, and ties to the community. Thus, teachers have been directly targeted via budget cuts and Obama's “Race to the Top” Education policy, which blames “bad teachers” (and the unions that protect them) for poorly performing students, while conveniently ignoring the more obvious predictors of poverty and the constant defunding of public education.

The education policies of President Obama and the Democrats will be put on trial if a strike takes place, since the Chicago teachers are fighting against the Democratic Mayor — Obama's former Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel — who is most urgently implementing the Democrat's so-called “Race to the Top” education reforms — an education program that aims to privatize public education while decapitating teachers' unions.

Race to the Top forces money-hungry states to compete for a measly \$4 billion of federal money. The winners are those states that inflict the most self-harm by firing “bad” teachers and closing “failing” schools. Obama is accomplishing more in one campaign than the anti-public education right wing has accomplished in decades.

Race to the Top encourages the closing of neighborhood public schools and opening up across town private charter schools, where the rich will have access to all the amenities offered at public schools while the poor will be warehoused in a drab environment lacking resources — without sports and other extracurricular activities, no art or music, no counseling or psychological services, etc. Obama's Race to the Top envisions education “reform” to mirror free market ideology, where services once deemed essential are now to be sold as commodities to those who can afford them.

The Chicago Teachers Union website discussed the possibility of a strike and explained its national implications. Aside from the many demands on their wages and benefits, “teachers are concerned about the Board’s plan to close over 100 neighborhood schools and create a half public-half charter school district.”

Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis explains:

“Whenever our students perform well on tests, [Chicago Public School] moves the bar higher, tells them they are failures and blames their teachers. Now they want to privatize public education and further disrupt our neighborhoods. We’ve seen public housing shut down, public health clinics, public libraries and now public schools. There is an attack on public institutions, many of which serve low-income and working-class families.”

Lewis has correctly made the link behind the attack on the teachers and the national attack on working people in general a key aspect of the Chicago teachers’ campaign.

Behind the Democrat and Republican war on “bad teachers” is a war on labor unions. It seems that the only solution being offered to the so-called “bad teacher” problem is the complete undermining of unions: the Democrats want to make firing teachers easier and make them work for “merit pay,” two poisons for working people.

Unions are strong because members are united. This is done, in part, by making pay raises equitable, to prevent both discrimination and the employer from dividing the union. Unions believe that all members who are capable of doing the work should get pay raises based on their work experience. Merit pay is a right-wing device aimed at this bedrock principle of unionism, to prevent most teachers from getting any pay raises while dividing the workplace against itself by giving wage hikes to those who are least active in the union and denying them to teachers who are strong union supporters and critical of management.

Behind the Democrat’s urge to “fire bad teachers” is a deeper assault on unions. Labor unions cannot exist as a fighting force to defend the membership without seniority rights, which protect older workers with higher salaries and minorities from being targeted and fired, and similarly protect union activists. If an employer can easily fire a worker, it will always be an older worker or “trouble making” union activist.

Teachers’ unions are aware of these union-specific threats; they’ve been fighting against Republicans for years who have been trying to implement them. But now the Democrats have adopted the Republicans’ anti-union policies, and many teachers’ unions have been paralyzed as a result.

Although the national teacher unions have voiced their support for the Chicago teachers, they are also actively campaigning for President Obama, the architect behind the anti-union crusade that aims to crush the Chicago teachers. This blatant hypocrisy is just one reason why the Chicago teachers will have to shake up the labor movement.

National union leaders have failed to put forth a vision to inspire the labor movement. The decades-long friendship with the Democrats has soured as the Democrats have adopted long-standing Republican attitudes to unions: Democratic governors across the country have attacked public employee unions in tandem with Obama’s anti-union Race to the Top education policy. Because unions are strongest in the public sector, these policies amount to a planned decapitation of the labor movement.

Instead of waging a relentless battle against these Democrat-inspired attacks, most unions have made giant concessions in the form of wages and benefits, thus undermining the confidence their members have in their union. Most union leaders have chosen not even to discuss this deadly assault on unions because it is coming from the Democrats. The Chicago teachers are saying “no more,” and exposing the Democrats in the process.

If the strike occurs and becomes a powerful, city-stopping movement like Wisconsin before it, the November presidential elections will have a new significance. Democrats and Republicans alike will be forced to pick sides: both will choose against the teachers.

It will be made clear to millions of people that the Democrats and Republicans share identical views on public education and labor unions — they both want them destroyed.

Most importantly, the very labor unions who are wasting their members’ dues money by giving it to the Obama campaign will have to choose sides too; hopefully many of them will take a break from phone banking and door knocking for Obama to hold Chicago solidarity rallies in their own cities to give extra energy to the struggle.

Ultimately, the Chicago teachers’ struggle will set a nationally powerful precedent. If the teachers win through militant struggle, unions everywhere will be inspired to copy their tactics and organize their communities and members alike towards common social goals, fighting hand in hand. However, if the union loses, the opposing side will be galvanized at labor’s expense, and the downhill slide for labor will continue, dragging down the wages and benefits of non-union members in the process.

One key lesson from this experience is that labor unions can be transformed relatively quickly. A small group of union activists within the Chicago teachers’ union — the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) — were organized in order to make their union stronger, and were elected by the membership to lead the union. In a few years time CORE has transformed the union into a strong, fighting organization, capable of defending its members’ wages and the community’s schools. The union has reached out to the community and explained the perils of charter schools in order to draw the community into the struggle. This has laid the foundation for encouraging the community to participate in the picket lines and large support rallies so that the teachers are not isolated but have the obvious support of the public. Many in organized labor have watched the transformation take place and are learning from it. The Chicago teachers are educating the whole labor movement on the real meaning of unionism.

We are only days away from the showdown.

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