

## **Getting to the CORE of the Chicago Teachers' Union Transformation**

PETER BROGAN  
York University, Canada

*This article draws on a comparative study of urban change and rank-and-file teacher rebellion in New York City and Chicago, to explore the contemporary dynamics of what Jamie Peck (2013) calls "austerity urbanism" and its relationship to a rebirth of a social justice, grassroots teacher unionism in US urban centres. Tracing the trajectories of one group of rank-and-file teacher dissidents in Chicago, it argues that municipal unions are uniquely situated to lead the fight against austerity urbanism and the crisis tendencies of contemporary capitalism. To do this, however, trade unions will need to be reinvented and a different form of working class politic forged, grounded both in and outside of the trade union movement. Only then may we see organized labour in North America contribute to a movement for radical and systemic change, which is key to building a more socially just urbanism and society more broadly. The case of the Chicago teachers is highly instructive for activists, both inside and outside of the North American labour movement.*

### **Introduction**

Global cities like Chicago are increasingly at the forefront of economic restructuring and political confrontation in an era of capitalist militancy and austerity (Brenner, 2001; Brenner & Keil, 2006; Sassen, 2001). A key component of global city development in the United States and Canada since the Great Recession of 2008 has been to attack public sector workers and their unions in order to de-fund and commodify public services. As argued elsewhere (Brogan, 2013), the dismantling of public education across the globe, while highly uneven and variegated (like neoliberalization), has been essential to restructuring contemporary capitalism and cities over the past two decades. One of the chief goals of education "reform" is to destroy the remaining vestiges of social welfare, thereby expanding capital accumulation and containing largely racialized populations in degraded parts of cities

*Correspondence Address:* Peter Brogan, Department of Geography, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3. Email: pbrogan@yorku.ca

ISSN: 1911-4788

where people languish in poverty with few options for decent employment or improving their chances in life more generally (Lipman 2011; CTU 2013). Against the imperatives of neoliberalism, teachers' unions have been among the most vocal defenders of publicly funded and universal education. Yet, at the same time, many local affiliates, of both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), and the national federations themselves have been either complicit or ineffective in combating the neoliberalization of public schooling (Weiner 2013).

In what follows I explore the experiences of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which has been one of the few local unions, in either the public or private sectors, in the United States to effectively challenge austere economic measures and push back against the neoliberal project in public education. In so doing, I argue, that they have inspired other workers in Chicago and across the US and Canada to build a different kind of social justice, grassroots unionism. Such a unionism is a vital component of developing an alternative working class politics. This case demonstrates that if unions are to regain their once prominent role in the pursuit of social justice and workplace democracy, they will need to take the risks of organizing working class communities and fighting back through the construction of reciprocal labour-community alliances (Tattersall 2010). It also illustrates how the contradictions of global city development may be leveraged in uniquely effective ways by a teachers' union and its allies. In this, we should see the CTU under CORE's (Caucus of Rank and File Educators) leadership as a leading light in the renewal of public sector unions which have only recently become the subject of increased academic enquiry (Ross & Savage 2013, Camfield 2013, 2009; Johnson 1994). In part, this burgeoning literature on public sector unions is a result of the major decline of private sector unionism in both the United States and Canada. But it is just as importantly a recognition by scholars of the special character of the public sector, employment within it and the potential that a reinvigorated municipal trade unionism might have in constructing a broader working class movement for social justice and systemic transformation.

The research for this article is part of a broader, comparative ethnography of the geography of urban change and teacher unionism in New York City and Chicago. It draws on 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with teacher activists, union staff, parents and community organizers between May 2011 and October 2012 in Chicago, where I worked closely with CORE and the Chicago Teachers Solidarity Campaign. In addition, I draw on media coverage in *The Chicago Sun-Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*, policy briefs and union research reports, communications and many informal conversations with teachers and their supporters at meetings and protests.

First, this article unpacks the context and background of the rank-and-file rebellion that has led the CTU on a path of reinvention and revitalization. Second, it discusses the political and economic pressures that preceded the 2012 round of negotiations between the Chicago Board of Education and the CTU. I then explore the 2012 strike and its aftermath, with particular attention given to its implications for broader struggles for social justice in

Chicago and elsewhere. I conclude by elucidating the most essential lessons the case holds for activists and scholars alike.

## **Background and Context**

In the United States the erosion of private sector unionization has been offset by the evolution of public sector unions composed to a significant extent of women and historically racialized groups (Rosenfeld 2013; Lichtenstein, 2012). Since the Great Recession, union density in the private sector has suffered the worst losses, with public sector density remaining steady at approximately 36 percent of the national average compared to 6.7 percent for the private sector in 2012. In this sense, public sector unions should be seen to a certain extent as the last bastions of working class strength in the United States, with the greatest potential capacity to lead an effective opposition to the politics and economics of austerity.

It is this very strength and potential that help explain why public sector workers and their unions have come under such political and economic consternation from across the political spectrum. Moreover, given public sector workers' concentration in urban centres and their strategic location as the providers of a broad range of services, they are in a unique position to build deeply integrated labour-community alliances fighting for the pursuit of social justice and expanded public services.<sup>1</sup> As Hale and Wills (cited in Jordus-Lier, 2012) have argued, workers employed by municipal governments are in a distinctive position to build popular political support, since municipal services are typically provided and consumed in a shared geographic location and are so vital to the production of everyday life.<sup>2</sup> Jordus-Lier (2012, p. 428) usefully contrasts this with textile workers who typically do not have the same geographical proximity and sense of place which bring together public sector workers, service delivery systems, and communities who use diverse public services. Thus, there is a greater potential to build solidarity in the struggle to defend and transform the provision and governance of public services because they appeal more directly to people's everyday lives.

In contrast to the stereotype of the union member as a white male, most US union members today are African-Americans, Latinos and women, especially in large metropolitan areas. They are also better educated than they were 30 years ago (Rosenfeld, 2013). In the US as a whole, 13 percent of union members are Black, 10 percent are Latino and 33 percent are women. But these percentages are much greater in places like New York City and Chicago, and much higher in the public sector (Milkman & Luce, 2013). As in Canada, women and racialized groups generally in the US have made both the most gains in public sector employment as well as internally in trade union structures (Lane, 2000; Lichtenstein, 2012).

Turning to education policy in the United States today while critics on the Left and the Right alike begin from the premise that urban education is in crisis, with African-Americans and Latinos suffering the brunt of negative

impacts, analyses of the cause of the crisis and possible solutions are miles apart. The US public school system is constituted as a network that includes traditional public neighbourhood schools, charter schools, and schools run under public-private partnerships. The neoliberal education reform project that has dominated education policy for the past 20 years is committed to dismantling public school systems and privatizing them through an expansion of charter schools and vouchers, a focus on standardized testing, the construction of scripted curriculum, a reorganization of school governance along corporate models (Saltman, 2010), and the institution of draconian disciplinary policies aimed largely at working class African-American and Latino students. The replacement of democratically elected school boards with mayoral-appointed bodies, demands for union and worker “flexibility,” and the introduction of merit pay schemes and new evaluation systems for teachers based overwhelmingly on standardized tests have similarly been essential to this program of restructuring.

These new teacher evaluation systems have been used to undermine seniority rights and make it easier to fire teachers (Saltman, 2012). While implemented in local districts, these new evaluations systems are in most cases enshrined to one degree or another in state law, giving unions little or no room to reject them outright in local negotiations. These trends have disproportionately targeted veteran teachers, not because they are inferior or under-educated, but because they are more experienced, often more educated, and subsequently better paid. Along with mayoral control, first implemented in Chicago in 1995, there has been an increase in the appointment of corporate CEOs—with little or no background in education—to administer these school districts. There has also been an increase in the direct involvement of corporate actors and philanthropists dictating school district policies (Caref et. al., 2012; Saltman, 2012; Lipman, 2011).

The federal law driving the neoliberalization of schools in the US is the Obama administration’s *Race to the Top* (RTTP) program, which is an integrated and expanded version of Bush’s *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). These policies are based largely on earlier reforms developed chiefly by the Gates Foundation and the Civic Committee of Chicago (CCC) and implemented in Chicago during the 1990s. The trajectory of these policies has led to an injection of competition for funds between traditional neighbourhood schools and privately run charters. These reforms have not led to any significant improvements in test scores or graduation rates in Chicago (Lipman, 2011; Brogan, 2013).

Inspired by the NCLB and RTTP programs, the Civic Committee of Chicago’s 2009 report on student performance titled *Still Left Behind* became the blueprint for city policy. The report advocates “tough-minded” teacher evaluations and “broad outsourcing of the management of failing schools to independent organizations” (Civic Committee, 2009, p. 4). Although teachers have been organized into unions or professional associations since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the CTU being founded as Local 1 of the national AFT, it was only in the 1960s and early 1970s that teachers won the legal right to

collective bargaining in cities and states across the U.S. These newfound legal and juridical protections came about as a result of sustained organizing and collective action, in particular strikes deemed illegal (Murphy, 1992). Despite this earlier period of militancy, however, a gradual ethos of accommodation and conservative politics has weakened radical forces within a good many teachers' unions (Weiner, 2012) and in the labour movement more generally (Moody, 2010, Fletcher & Gapsin, 2008). Yet as weak as, and often complicit with, the corporate reform agenda as many of these unions have become, teachers' unions remain the largest roadblock to "reforming" public education out of existence (Brogan, 2013; Weiner, 2013; Weiner and Compton, 2008).

Like the AFT more generally, the CTU has been at an impasse since the 1990s, having failed to mobilize or politically engage its membership. Although the CTU was once a progressive force in Chicago's labour movement and municipal politics (Lyons, 2008), by 2008 the union had atrophied, becoming one of the most conformist unions in the city to the finance and real estate-led model of economic development and education. Despite a slate of layoffs resulting from budgetary cuts and school closings in predominantly racialized communities, by the early 2000s the CTU, under the leadership of Marilyn Stewart and the United Progressive Caucus (UPC), did little beyond telling its members to "get their resumes ready" (Interview with author, January 2012).

Since the 1960s the UPC, which is affiliated with the New York- based Progressive Caucus (PC), has dominated the leadership of the CTU. With fairly progressive origins in the organizing of African-American teachers in the 1960s, the UPC led the Chicago teachers out on a series of eight strikes from 1969 through 1987. It was only after the 1987 strike that the relationship between the CTU and the city grew more routinized. In this sense, the UPC transformed the union into a more compliant partner with the city, even as it confronted an escalating erosion of teachers' rights in Chicago public schools—with state legislation enacted in 1995 that unilaterally targeted Chicago teachers by severely restricting what the CTU could legally negotiate with regard to wages and benefits, and eliminating system-wide seniority. This meant that all matters relating to class size, pedagogy, and other areas that clearly affect the working conditions of Chicago teachers (students and parents) could only be negotiated if both sides agreed to do so.

It is in this context that a small group of teachers and paraprofessionals who called themselves the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) came together to organize for change in their union and against neoliberal school reform. In particular, they chose to organize against public school closures, "turnarounds," and "co-locations," all of which sought to expand charter schools. The actions organized against these changes have become an annual routine since 2004 and the unfurling of Renaissance 2010 by the City of Chicago.

Membership in CORE ran the gamut from those who were relatively new to activism or involvement in the union, including some who never saw themselves as "political," to others who were members of socialist groups

like Solidarity, the International Socialist Organization (ISO), unaffiliated radicals of different stripes, as well as those teachers interested in progressive/alternative pedagogy, many of whom were members of a smaller social justice organization of educators called Teachers for Social Justice (TSJ). Thus, CORE developed from its initial formation as a multi-racial and multi-generational group.

One of the first things this group of union reformers did after their initial meeting was to search for a better grasp of what was driving neoliberal school reform and the attack on teachers. In doing so, members combined a macro-criticism of global capitalism developed in reading groups with what they were experiencing in the Chicago public school system. From its earliest days, CORE has thus been studying and debating an array of vital political and strategic questions ranging from an examination of the spatial organization of racism and its relationship to education restructuring and urban development in Chicago to what kind of teacher union and public education activists should be seeking to create.

When CORE was first founded it was with an explicit recognition that it needed to be different than existing caucuses within the union and within the labour movement more broadly. This meant not being overly focused on economic issues or too inwardly oriented. Members raised concerns about the limitations of top-down leadership without an engaged rank-and-file. They critiqued a narrow organizing strategy that sought to lobby elected officials (usually Democrats) for changes instead of mobilizing the membership. Only a small leadership team ever knew what was happening in contract negotiations, leaving general members with little idea of what the union was fighting to win. This is why, when they were elected in 2010, only two short years after forming<sup>3</sup>, CORE assembled a much larger bargaining committee, one comprised of over 60 members, for the 2012 round of negotiations. Additionally, information about what was happening throughout negotiations constantly flowed to members through email, picket captains, social media, and regular bargaining bulletins. Central to this strategy of “collectivizing” bargaining, CORE also built alliances with community groups like Action Now, the Pilsen Alliance, Blocks Together, and the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization (KOCO) in order to work together to fight school closures and privatization.

Not long after their initial collaboration in 2008, these groups formed the Grassroots Education Movement (GEM) to help broaden and facilitate this organizing. GEM organized rallies and marches to the offices of both the Board and to those of the leading proponents of corporate reform. When a school was targeted for closure, CORE and GEM members would go there and meet with the teachers and parents who wanted to fight the closure. In doing so, they made it clear that they were there to help build resistance in that community.

Thus, instead of restricting their opposition to critiquing the incumbent union leadership and focusing solely on workplace problems, from the beginning CORE members sought to politicize workplace issues by connecting them to

the broader struggles encountered by the community. This activity resulted in the establishment of highly durable relationships of solidarity between CORE members and social justice groups working in neighbourhoods throughout Chicago. In forging a community or social justice unionism, CORE members pushed beyond narrow economic issues—while not entirely neglecting important issues like wage increases and the protection of benefits either—and articulated all of their 2012 contract demands with broader social issues affecting the communities they served. Such a social justice framing and political practice must be central to any project of rebuilding the power of public sector unions (Ross, 2013, Moody, 2007). Yet not all issues and tactics were given equal priority; difficult decisions were made on what particular campaigns or actions to prioritize based in part on what would most develop the respective collective capacities of the different organizations, both unions and community groups, working together in order to advance the broader struggle for social justice in Chicago (Luskin, 2013).

Advocates of neoliberal education restructuring, including Stand for Children and Mayor Rahm Emanuel, reacted to the CTU's radicalism by getting the state legislature to pass a new law, Illinois Senate Bill 7 (SB 7), that has made it easier to unilaterally fire teachers as well as lengthen both the school day and school year. It specifically targeted the CTU by requiring that any teachers' union in a district in Illinois with a population greater than five hundred thousand (only Chicago) submit to arbitration before they can legally strike. In order to legally strike, the union would now need to secure 75 percent of the entire membership's vote (with all those who did not vote being counted as no votes) and go through a drawn-out mediation process.

### **Building a Strong Foundation: Power in the Workplace and in the Community**

While CORE members have put an emphasis on building strong alliances with parents, students and community organizations, they have continued to prioritize building rank-and-file power in the workplace. Indeed, one of the reasons CORE is unique amongst past union reformers because it does not see these two elements of struggle as separate; rather, they recognize that a well-organized neighbourhood and workplace are the strongest bases from which to engage parents and communities, and to wage an effective struggle across geographical scales. This orientation is easily understandable—and develops more organically than it would in other forms of employment—because of the unique nature of a workplace that is a neighbourhood school. Teachers are, to a greater extent than many other public sector workers, in constant contact with the parents of their students. This typically makes the task of community outreach and relationship building easier. A key strategy of CTU organizers in their neighbourhood and workplace organizing is to carefully situate what is happening in any given place as connected to a wider geographical struggle against a neoliberal agenda for school reform and

urban development. This type of social justice-oriented union reform caucus is being emulated in a number of other US cities, such as Portland, Newark, New York City, and Los Angeles.

The organizing that the CORE-led CTU has conducted, especially in the electrifying seven-day strike of September 2012, has demonstrated just how powerful and emancipatory a politics *in place* can be. Mobilizing the attachments people have to place, both within neighbourhoods and at a city-wide scale, remains vital for social justice struggles today. At the same time, a key strategy of CORE and CTU organizers in their neighbourhood and workplace organizing is to carefully situate what happens in any given place as connected to extra-local struggles against a neoliberal agenda for school reform and neoliberal urban development that puts profits ahead of people. CTU activists and members have increasingly come to understand the policies they are contesting through the Occupy framework of the 1 percent growing richer at the expense of the 99 percent. And in this way the CTU has helped its members and the communities they have been organizing to gain a deeper understanding of what Doreen Massey (1991) understands as the political and economic forces that produce or lie behind the formation of places.

### **How Rahm “Mayor 1 Percent” Emanuel Helped Organize Parents**

Prior to the 2012 strike, the supposed fiscal crisis at the state level in Illinois gave CPS a rationale for implementing broad cuts to music and arts as well as for increasing class sizes, both of which impacted not only racialized and impoverished neighbourhoods but also traditionally more affluent “White” neighborhoods in Chicago. In conjunction with Mayor Emanuel, the CEO of the schools, Jean Claude Brizzard, decided to impose a longer school day and school year on Chicago schools. This provided an opening for new alliances between more privileged parents, CTU members, and those who had been suffering the brunt of cuts for years, the poor, largely Black and Latino populations of Chicago. Middle-income earning parents were upset by these cuts and the imposition of a longer day, which many parents saw as disruptive to their lives and the lives of their children, many of whom were in the privileged position to participate in sports and other extracurricular activities after school. This was especially important because Chicago mayors had previously worked to attract these mostly White, middle-income families to public schools in order to gentrify particular neighborhoods in Chicago. Yet, once Emanuel became mayor in 2010, he turned his eye to education immediately by demanding that the school day for Chicago public schools be extended, with no additional compensation for school employees or any clear pedagogical rationale for the change. So, while Black and Brown parents had become accustomed to being marginalized and ignored by politicians and policy makers in Chicago, these more privileged parents who saw a longer day as having adverse effects on their children were now experiencing the same feelings. This led quite a few of these parents to organize and to

protest against these cuts and the longer day. By doing so, they then came into contact with Black and Latino parents as well as teachers and the union (Interview with author, January 2012).

These newly active parents and community members would go on to form a new coalition in 2012 to fight for a democratically elected school board. This fight was deeply connected with organizing for education justice more broadly. In fact, it grew directly out of the CTU Community Board which was set up soon after CORE was elected to leadership of the union as a way to institutionalize and facilitate the union's organizing with grassroots groups in Chicago. This organizing resulted in a non-binding referendum for an elected board winning 87 percent of the vote in a sampling of 13 percent of the city's approximately 2,500 electoral, which "spanned Chicago—economically, racially, and geographically" (Lipman & Gutstein, 2013, p.8).

Thus, Mayor Emanuel's attempt to impose a longer school day helped galvanize parent opposition to his education policy agenda. The longer school day proved to be a critical organizing opportunity because it was a genuine workplace issue that affected both teachers and other workers in the schools and allowed the CTU to more effectively dialogue with a broader spectrum of people in the city. As one CORE member reflected, "The longer school-day piece got organizers in the schools and [CTU members] to understand more what the organizers do. I think that was an important thing. In a way, we had organizers going out to schools, but if you have no idea how a union structure works and you have this person coming in saying, 'I'm not filing your grievances but I'm here for you,' it is difficult to understand what else they would do" (Interview with author, May 2011).

In particular, the attempted imposition of the longer school day helped CTU organize in elementary schools. As one CORE member explained, "I actually think we can thank Rahm for the longer school day stuff and trying to force it down our throats through these waiver votes in elementary schools. It forced us to get out to a ton of elementary schools and have discussions about why the union is important and why waiving your union rights is a bad idea" (Interview with author, February 2012). Not only did the longer school day issue help the union connect with a wider and more racially (and geographically) diverse population of parents and communities across Chicago, it further helped the CTU to mobilize elementary teachers, who have historically been a greater challenge in Chicago and elsewhere. This would become a major contributing factor to why the Chicago teachers were able to wage an effective strike in September 2012.

### **Striking for the Schools Chicago Students Deserve**

CTU members would utilize and expand upon the strong workplace organizations they had built up over the past two years to secure a near 90 percent "yes" vote to authorize a strike, which was the strongest message they could send to the Board of Education and Mayor Emanuel that the union

did not have any intention of backing down without a fight. Of those CTU members who cast a ballot, 98 percent voted yes. Only 482 teachers, or 1.82 percent of the membership, voted against a strike authorization. As a result of SB 7, those union members who did not cast ballots were counted as having voted against a strike. Thus, of the 26,502 members eligible to vote, 23,780 voted to strike.

This vote, which took place on June 4, 2012, came on the heels of the largest march of teachers and their allies in Chicago's history, a march that itself spilled over from a massive CTU meeting where over 4,000 CTU members had packed a downtown auditorium for one of the largest union meetings in recent history, organized to discuss negotiations. "It was excellent, very inspiring," Mayra Almaraz, a history teacher at Taft High School on the city's North Side, said of the rally. "Sometimes it's really hard to continue when, in the media, you hear that we're aggressive, we're this, we're that, we're not in it for the right reasons—when in reality, we are. It was great to see we are supported by other people, by parents." Asked if teachers at Taft were prepared to walk a picket line if necessary, she replied, "Absolutely. We're ready" (Sustar, 2012, n.p.).

Prior to the CTU's strike authorization vote, CPS officials were so firm in their belief that the union would never be able to strike that they agreed to the negotiations' timeline proposed by the teachers union which would allow a strike to occur in September. CPS's smugness, Sustar explains, flowed from their mistaken belief that the new CTU leadership would not have the capacity to unite the union's membership behind their program of transformation. A little over a month after the CTU's exceptionally strong strike authorization vote, the appointed arbitrator (another new necessary step of the bargaining process that was added courtesy of SB 7) issued his report. This report would prove to be a big problem for CPS and Mayor Emanuel's austerity demands as it recommended wage increases of 35.74 percent over four years. Needless to say, the city rejected this recommendation, as did the union. It is important to understand here that the CTU rejected these recommendations because the report did not speak to any of the broader demands and issues that the union had raised to improve the school system, a fact which would go a long way towards bolstering public support and serving as evidence that, despite CPS and Emanuel's claims, the teachers and their union were not concerned with their own narrow economic interests. No amount of slick union advertisements could have achieved what this move did.

Seeing these immediate proposals as part of the wider assault on public education and teachers' unions, the CTU would break with the accommodationist approach adopted by both national teachers' unions, the AFT, and the NEA as well as with the previous leadership of the CTU. The CORE-led union went on strike from September 10 to September 18, 2012. This was the first strike launched by the CTU in 25 years. And while the economic gains were marginal, the broader improvements to schools that the union made its centerpiece (i.e. smaller class sizes, air conditioning, more social workers and services for students) effectively allowed them to hold the

line on many of the worst concessionary demands, including preventing the adoption of merit pay and a teacher evaluation system based on standardized test scores beyond the 25 percent mandated by state law. Thus, because the CTU successfully pushed back against the worst of these concessionary demands—and because of the manner in which they organized to do so—they have reignited the democratic imagination for unionists and activist across the nation. The CTU secured a number of important improvements, including: a principal anti-bullying clause, greater freedom for teachers to develop lesson plans, the hiring of art, music, and physical education teachers to create a “better school day” for students as the school year grew longer, a cost-of-living increase, and short-term disability leave for pregnant teachers.

Rob Bartlett (2013, p. 12) perceptively notes that “CORE and the CTU’s success was not due to replacing a weak leadership with a militant one willing to strike, but rather the creation of a layer of union members in the CTU who saw the struggle as one for what CTU president Karen Lewis calls ‘the soul of public education.’” This constituted a dramatic shift in the culture of the union which would have been impossible had the CORE leadership of the union and its activist base not built an organizing culture school-by-school in the preceding four years, which was accomplished by getting members to take on workplace and community issues collectively. Thus, rather than simply seeing the union as a service provider that exists to solve workplace problems, members began to slowly see themselves as the union, and thus as capable of tackling issues through organizing and action. Equally as important was the development of a critical understanding of the new geography of what the CTU termed “education apartheid” and how union members, parents, and community allies had strong attachments to the places where they lived and worked which could be mobilized for the construction of a citywide and national fight for education justice.

While state law in Illinois technically prohibits the CTU from striking over issues other than wages and benefits, every member of the union I spoke to during the strike was clear that they were fighting not for any narrow economic improvements for themselves but for smaller class sizes, a rich curriculum, and wrap-around services like counseling for every student. Many members suggested that fighting to improve the quality of life for their students was not simply a moral good or a cynical public relations tactic to garner public support, but would also create jobs for many experienced teachers who are currently out of work while at the same time building a high-quality, accessible public school system.

Indeed, these ideas were systematically developed in a unique and well researched document published by the CTU, entitled *The Schools Chicago Students Deserve* (2012), which was simultaneously the basis of a number of bargaining proposals and an organizing tool for union members, parents, and community allies. This document would also prove invaluable in helping the union and its members to fundamentally reframe the debate in the corporate media and public discourse more generally, which partially explains the widespread support that CTU enjoyed during the strike. Not only did this

report, and the way in which the union and its allies used it to organize across the city, put forward a critique of the racist nature of how Chicago public schools are organized—and the ways the racist organization of schools has been a central facet of neoliberal urban development in the United States—but it put forward a more class-oriented transformative program for fixing the school system, including a more progressive system of taxation for funding schools and other municipal services.

*The Schools Chicago Students Deserve* is an excellent illustration of how a union can put forward, and effectively organize around, an alternative urban policy that puts the values of social justice, equity and democracy at the center of its proposals. In this sense, it offers an alternative to the neoliberal policy framework of austerity, competitiveness, and market solutions to the real *and* imagined failings of the public sector. Similar reports have been produced by teachers' unions in Los Angeles and St. Paul, Minnesota where they have been utilized in successful ways to flip the script in the public discourse about education reform.

While CTU organizers and leaders proved quite adept at using their research and the research conducted by sympathetic academics to reframe the often one-sided reportage in the local media, one of the most significant ways in which the CTU addressed this propaganda campaign was through tireless neighborhood and workplace organizing which allowed the unions members, parents, and community members across Chicago to develop a deeper grasp of the issues Chicago teachers were fighting for. These efforts included well-attended and vibrant public forums organized by the CTU which took place across the city preceding the strike. These meetings revealed that many parents and community members were worried about the prospect of a strike and were not afraid to voice their fears, concerns, and questions to the leaders of the CTU that attended. While these forums themselves were not deliberative spaces and did not shape bargaining demands directly, they did go a long way in opening up the process of negotiation to the public and providing a space where those interested could turn for further information about both the issues and the process of negotiation.

An equally important component of the CTU's strategy before and during the strike involved targeting corporations like Bank of America, Hyatt Hotels, and the Chicago Board of Trade, all of which have benefited handsomely from the Tax Incremental Financing (TIF) scheme. TIFs have functioned to siphon money from resource-starved, poor neighborhoods and the public institutions that serve them to be used as a slush fund in/for the Mayor's Office (Jorvasky, 2009). While these corporate institutions and the particular model of urban economic development embraced by the City of Chicago were targeted by the CTU prior to the commencement of the strike with direct actions that saw a number of CTU leaders arrested, the union continued to place the taxing of corporations, especially financial institutions operating in Chicago, as the key mechanism for funding their proposals for improving public education. This attention to how governing officials (from Mayor Richard M. Daley to Mayor Rahm Emanuel) have aligned themselves with

corporations based in Chicago in order to remake particular neighborhoods, so as to build Chicago as a “world class” or “global” city, at the expense of institutions like public schools, mental health clinics and libraries that serve marginalized working class communities is further evidence of how vital a critical political economy and geographical analysis has been to the CTU under CORE’s direction. It shows how the socio-spatial contradictions of global city development can be leveraged by unions and movements for social justice.

From the first day of the strike in 2012 picket lines were strong, lasting from 6:00 am until 10:30 pm. The vibrant picket lines functioned as organizing spaces within which CTU members could build relationships with each other as well as connect with neighbourhood residents. Everyone on the lines wore what would become over the next seven days their iconic CTU red shirts. Many Chicagoans awoke to car horns blasting in solidarity with the teachers. And wherever you traveled during this period of the strike, if you were wearing a red t-shirt, you would be greeted with those same horns of solidarity and warm greetings of support from people of all walks of life in the city. The level of creativity and sheer joy that was expressed on the picket lines and throughout the city over the course of the strike were fantastic and would not have been possible had the CTU leadership not allowed members the autonomy and support to make the strike their own. Regardless of outcome, this mode of joyful and creative political practice—where participants leave an action or meeting feeling happy and empowered, rather than frustrated and dejected—is worthy of emulation in all movement organizing.

During the first three days of the strike, the CTU held massive rallies downtown, attended by an average of 30,000 people, including many children. Mid-week of the strike, the CTU decided to move beyond the downtown core and hold their afternoon actions as marches through the west and south sides of the city, around the schools and neighborhoods that have suffered the most from economic neglect and marginalization. Doing so represented a clear understanding on the part of the union’s organizers and leadership that it was vital for them to target not simply the center of power in global Chicago but also to highlight the devastation that has been wrought by the uneven political and economic restructuring that has accompanied a global city development strategy. This turn to the marginalized neighborhoods was a further extension of solidarity with, and a way to deepen the unions’ support of, segments of the racialized working class who have been ignored and neglected by the ruling classes of Chicago and the nation. This was the best possible way to counter the corporate education, anti-union propaganda that was being broadcast on African-American and Latino radio stations. These marches and the neighborhood organizing that took place throughout the strike, some directed by the CTU leadership, some that happened more organically in different schools and neighborhoods, is evidence of the continued importance of place for movement building and urban politics more generally.

While consolidating and expanding parent support were crucial for the Chicago teachers, building labour solidarity during the strike was similarly

important, both at the local and national levels. Yet doing so proved complicated. As Alter (2013, p. 22) observes, with 2012 being an election year, and the majority of the union movement having long abandoned an emphasis on organizing and action in favour of electoral politics, unions put the bulk of their energy into getting President Obama elected to a second term. So for example, the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) had not organized a Labour Day rally since 1998. Thus again, in 2012, instead of trying to reignite a fire under the Chicago labour movement, the leadership of the CFL opted to go to the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina. Subsequently, the CTU decided to organize a rally themselves, which proved to be a wise tactical move. It attracted between 10,000-20,000 participants. It served as an energizing activity for the union and added to its momentum, increasing its base of support just prior to the start of the new school year and the proposed strike. On August 29<sup>th</sup>, only a few days prior to the Labour Day rally, the CTU filed the mandatory ten-day strike notice. The stage was set for the first teachers' strike since 1987 and neither side in negotiations gave any indication that a settlement would be reached to prevent it.

Yet, while the two other unions with contracts with CPS, UNITE HERE Local 1 and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73, have been supportive of the CTU, by the time the teachers went out on strike both unions had already settled their contracts. Why they did so rather than bargain in parallel with the CTU is not an easy question to answer. Indeed, their failure to do so surprised many labour activists in Chicago because of the progressive reputation of these unions as well as their extensive support and collaboration with the CTU. Karen Lewis and a number of CTU members had turned out to each union's respective rallies at CPS when they were in negotiations, and had supported UNITE HERE workers while they were on strike at the city's Hyatt Hotels in 2012. One possible explanation as to why both UNITE-HERE and SEIU did not coordinate their bargaining with the CTU may be because of the power that CPS has to contract out the work of their members, which in turn gives these workers and their unions significantly less leverage. As a result, members of these unions, including food service workers, custodians and school aides would have been contractually obligated to cross CTU picket lines in the event of a strike.

Although labour support for the CTU prior to, during, and since the strike has not been as strong as CTU leadership and CORE members would like, support among Chicago residents more generally remains strong. And while the city's official union leadership may not have actively supported the CTU, there were signs of support from rank-and-file unionists throughout the city.

Although Lewis had given indications to the press on Friday, September 14 that they were close to a deal and would likely end the strike so that school could resume on Monday, union delegates voted at the Saturday Delegates' Assembly meeting to reject the offer until all of their members had a chance to read and discuss the employer's proposal. So that Monday, instead of calling off the strike, members went back to the picket lines and took the time to do just this, displaying an incredible new internal life of membership

engagement, whether that meant being active in their local chapter where they worked or on any number of the union's committees that were created or given new life under CORE's direction. The proposal showed significant gains, including: the creation of over six hundred new positions in art, music, and physical education; a freeze on healthcare payments; a seven percent wage increase over three years; a new teacher evaluation system (which was not so much an improvement as a mitigated concession); an important anti-bullying provision that would protect teachers from abusive principals; language to promote racial diversity in hiring; and an annual supply reimbursement increase from \$100 to \$250.

In addition to the gains made by the CTU in this round of bargaining, Lewis observed that, "We gained the ability to finally have due process in all discipline issues and the right to appeal evaluations. We also won a real right for teachers to follow students when schools close –which proved significant when CPS closed 50 schools in a single year." Of course, this is only if students move to another public school, not a charter. Reflecting upon the strike a year later, Lewis also observed that:

This Union had survived an all-out attack on our very existence and our ability to advocate for our members, our students and their communities from a well-funded, well-orchestrated group of extremely wealthy people who saw themselves as the authorities on education. ...We were vilified in the press and on paid radio ads, which attempted to paint us as greedy and unknowledgeable. Our contractually agreed to raises were stolen to goad us into acting rashly. Our members have been laid off, terminated and publicly humiliated all in attempt to turn public school educators and the public against us. None of it worked.

### **Post-2012 Strike: Moving Toward an Alternative Politics?**

Only a few months after the strike, the CTU had an election in which president Lewis and other CORE elected leaders were re-elected by a margin of 4 to 1, with 79 percent of the membership voting them in. But, much like their initial election in 2012, CORE members did not have much time to breathe, much less celebrate their victory, because they needed to organize against the most recent and potentially largest round of school closures.

This has provided CORE with the ability to continue to deepen the transformation of its union while at the same time building a stronger movement to push back against a city government that continues to advance savage cuts and austerity measures. CORE's model of building a caucus that organizes both within and outside of the union has spread to other U.S. cities, most prominently New York City, Newark (where reformers almost won leadership over the Newark Teachers' Union in 2013), and Los Angeles (where a progressive reform slate has won the recent executive election in the United Teachers of Los Angeles).

As the labour journalist David Bacon (2013) recounts, in opposition to

the most recent closure, “Thousands rallied and marched on March 27 in opposition, organized by the CTU, UNITE HERE Local 1, SEIU Local 1 and [GEM]. They demanded that the district stop the closures and slow the expansion of charter schools and focus instead on investment in public schools in working-class neighborhoods.” And “on May 18, 2013 Chicago students, parents, and teachers organized a three-day March for Educational Justice. Following the march, the CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, Barbara Byrd-Bennett, took four schools off the list, including Marcus Garvey Elementary, Asean Johnson’s school.”

Beyond this organizing, the CTU collaborated with a number of their parent and community allies to launch lawsuits against the closures in June 2013. The suits argued that the Board violated its own guidelines by disregarding the recommendations of independent hearing officers on more than one occasion; that the schools targeted for closure were highly concentrated in largely African-American and Latino neighborhoods; and that the city’s plan utterly disregarded the needs of special education students. There have also been a number of different protests at the affected schools, as well as direct actions (e.g. sit-ins at the Mayor’s Office), which had been a major objective of the summer, trainings organized by the CTU, and the newly reinvigorated Grassroots Education Movement.

Yet, despite all of this mobilizing and action, all 50 school closures were rubber stamped by the Mayoral-appointed Chicago Board of Education in, as the *Chicago Sun-Times* observed, “less time than it takes to boil an egg.” Karen Lewis called it “a day of mourning for the children of Chicago.” She continued by saying that “their [students’] education has been hijacked by an unrepresentative, unelected corporate school board, acting at the behest of a mayor who has no vision for improving the education of our children,” and that “closing schools is not an education plan. It is a scorched earth policy.”

## **Conclusion**

While the assaults have continued since the CTU strike concluded, this action should still be understood as a flourishing moment in the contestation of neoliberal education and austerity urbanism. This is not because the strike itself secured major concessions from the city, or simply because it was a militant act of defiance, but because it was a public sector strike done differently, with huge amounts of creativity, member engagement, joyous, creative action, public support, and participation. This mode of union praxis built at multiple scales—but rooted most strongly in the workplace—has been a deeply transformative experience for CTU members and working-class Chicagoans more generally. It has resulted in a deepening of collective capacities that are vital to ongoing struggle. The bulk of the union’s 26,000 members are now reinvigorated and proud to be part of a fighting union that is run by its membership. In other words, rather than simply engaging in militant job action without a political program, the CTU strike expanded the

democratic imagination and political capacities of its members and other workers in the city. It is this that is necessary for constructing a different kind of urban working-class politics.

While I am in no sense claiming that the CORE-led CTU has all the answers for how public sector workers and their allies can push back against urban neoliberalism, the movement they catalyzed in Chicago embodies a number of important lessons for how to transform and more effectively use the seemingly moribund organizations that most US and Canadian unions have become over the past 30 or 40 years (reflected not only in a decline in union membership and density, but more generally in a lack of influence in society). And unlike many union reformers of the past, a key difference of these efforts in Chicago is that they recognize<sup>4</sup>—to a greater extent every day—the need to push beyond the legal and institutional boundaries of the trade union form to advance a progressive agenda of systemic, transformative change in a deeply fragmented, exploited, and relatively demobilized global city (interview with author, August 2013).

The four most important conclusions to be drawn from the case of the Chicago teachers include, first, the need for unions to prioritize the development of strategic objectives at multiple scales *with* a broader working-class public and to democratize internal union structures and build a more activist culture inside the union in which members can take part. Second, there is a huge amount of power that can be leveraged by taking struggles to the streets. The massive rallies that the CTU held downtown and in the neighborhoods of the south and west sides of Chicago which have been largely left to rot if not gentrified, reflected not just the popularity of the strike, but an important embodiment of the union's urban, place-based strategy that is not afraid to experiment and take risks. Third, in order to challenge austerity urbanism and the devastating impacts it is having across North American cities, it is necessary to develop a class-oriented, social justice framework rooted in female, racialized and working poor workers that connects issues across workplaces and communities.

In order to realize their contentious and transformative potential, however, rank-and-file workers will need to organize both inside and outside of their unions, and, in the process, completely reinvent them. It is only through such a process of reinvention that union members will be successful in pushing beyond the sectionalist, narrow limitations of the trade union form, which is crucial if they are to turn back the assault against what remains of the welfare state in both countries in North America.

If unions are to be more effective vehicles of the working class and progressive actors in promoting social justice, the broader Left will need to be revived so that unions can more easily adopt a class-struggle approach that pushes beyond the legal and institutional limitations inherent in the trade union form. And, it is imperative that, in forging this alternative politics, unions formulate a similarly different vision of public services and of society more broadly *with* the public, especially those sections of the working class that have been most marginalized and disorganized by neoliberalism.

In advocating for such an alternative working class politics, municipal unions have the potential to not only protect and enhance existing public services but advocate for improved jobs across the city, which requires democratic control over economic investment and new industrial policies. Metropolitan areas will be more likely to thrive if there is greater equality among individuals and among communities, certainly, but also if workers have a stronger voice in how such services are produced, accessed, and governed. Municipal unions in global cities are in a unique position to contribute to anti-systemic struggles to remake the capitalist city into something more humane: a metropolis where working people not only have more access to collective consumption but are key players in urban governance and decision-making in the form of a *different* kind of city.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Amanda Tattersall's (2010) book, *Power In Coalitions*, for a critical examination of different experiences of community-labour coalitions and the problems/limitations of shallow and instrumental formations created by unions which allow little room for community allies to influence the direction of struggle and receive limited support for their own particular needs.
- <sup>2</sup> In many cases these workers provide services to others in the city, but are often also the users of those services.
- <sup>3</sup> While there was a constellation of forces that allowed CORE to win the executive election in such a short period of time since its foundation in 2008, the two biggest factors that explain its success is the membership's loss of faith in the old guard UPC leadership who had utterly failed to mobilize against neoliberal restructuring. And the second was the new movement-oriented, savvy and incredibly hard-working activists of CORE, who, with fewer than 200 people, managed to get out to all 600 schools in Chicago to speak to teachers and convince them of the need for a change of leadership and a change of unionism.
- <sup>4</sup> While recent interviews conducted with CTU staff members and CORE activists support this claim, it should be made clear that while CORE members and CTU leadership might recognize these institutional and political limitations as they continue to face ongoing attacks and school closings, they have yet to figure out how to move beyond them. Their inability to scale up their struggle more effectively or to develop a different, more radical tactical approach to electoral politics and state policy must be confronted and overcome.

### References

- Alter, T. (2013). "It felt like community": Social movement unionism and the Chicago Teachers' Union strike of 2012. *Labor*, 10(3), 11-25.
- Barlett, R. (2013). Creating a new model of a social union: CORE and the Chicago Teachers Union. *Monthly Review*, Volume 65, Issue 2 (June).
- Beacham, J. (2012). Labor Day rally of 20,000 supports Chicago teachers videos: Teachers speak out for justice, in *Liberation*. Retrieved from <http://www.pslweb.org/>
- Brenner, N. (2001). Global cities, glocal states: Global city formation and state territorial restructuring in contemporary Europe. *Review of International Political Economy*, 5(1), 1. doi:10.1080/096922998347633.
- Brenner, N., & Keil, R. (2006). Introduction: Global cities theory in retrospect and prospect. In N. Brenner & R. Keil (Eds.) *The Global Cities Reader*. Urban Reader Series. New York:

- Routledge.
- Brenner, N. & Theodore, N., (Eds.) (2002). *Spaces of neoliberalism: Urban restructuring in North America and Western Europe*. Malden Mass; Oxford: Blackwell.
- Camfield, D. (2009). Sympathy for the teacher: Labour law and transgressive workers' collective action in British Columbia, 2005. *Capital & Class*, 33, 3.
- Camfield, D. (2007) Renewal in Canadian public sector unions: Neoliberalism and union praxis. *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*, 62, 2.
- Caref, C., Hains, S., Hilgendorf, K., Jankov, P., & Russell, K. (2012). *The black and white of education in Chicago's public schools*. Retrieved from <http://www.ctunet.com/>
- Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago (2009). *Still left behind: Student learning in Chicago public schools*. Retrieved from <http://www.civiccommittee.org/>
- Compton, M. & Weiner, L. (2008). *The global assault on teaching, teachers, and their unions*. New York: Palgrave.
- FitzPatrick, L. (2012, May). CPS makes history, closing scores of schools in less time than it takes to boil an egg. *The Chicago Sun-Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.suntimes.com/>
- Fletcher, B., Jr. & Gapasin, F. (2008). *Solidarity divided: The crisis in organized labor and a new path towards social justice*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Gutstein, E. & Lipman, P. (2013). The rebirth of the Chicago Teachers Union and possibilities for a counter-hegemonic education movement. *Monthly Review*, 65(2). Retrieved from <http://monthlyreview.org>
- Gutstein, E. & Lipman, P. (2011). Should Chicago have an elected representative school board? A look at the evidence, University of Illinois at Chicago. Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education. Retrieved from <http://www.uic.edu/>
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2010). *The enigma of capital and the crisis of capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Joravsky, B. (2009, March). TIFs: Hidden in plain view. Chicago Reader. Retrieved from <http://www.chicagoreader.com/>
- Jordus-Lier, D. (2012). Public sector labour geographies and the contradictions of state employment. *Geography Compass* 6/7
- Li, T. M. (2010). To make live or let die? Rural dispossession and the protection of surplus populations. *Antipode*, 41. 66–93.
- Lipman, P. (2011). *The new political economy of urban education: Neoliberalism, race, and the right to the city*. New York: Routledge.
- Lipman, P. (2009). Making sense of renaissance 2010 school policy in Chicago: race, class, and the cultural politics of neoliberal urban restructuring. The Great Cities Institute. Retrieved from [http://www.uic.edu/cuppa/gci/publications/workingpaperseries/pdfs/GCP-09-02\\_Lipman.pdf](http://www.uic.edu/cuppa/gci/publications/workingpaperseries/pdfs/GCP-09-02_Lipman.pdf).
- Johnson, P. (1994). *Success while others fail: social movement unionism and the public workplace*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.
- Luskin, M. (2013, November). Speech at Making Waves Assembly. Retrieved from website: [http://www.startmakingwaves.org/windsor\\_pilot](http://www.startmakingwaves.org/windsor_pilot)
- Lyons, J. (2008). *Teachers and reform: Chicago public education 1929-1970*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Macdonald, I. (2011). *Labour and the city: Trade union strategy and the reproduction of neoliberal urbanism in Toronto and New York*. York University (Canada), ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 2011. NR88687.
- Massey, D. (1991). A global sense of place, *Marxism Today* (June) 24-29.
- McIntyre, M. & Nast, H. J. (2011). Bio(necro)polis: Marx, Surplus Populations, and the Spatial Dialectics of Reproduction and "Race". *Antipode*, 43, 1465–1488.
- Moody, K. (2007). *US labor in trouble and transition: The failure of reform from above, the promise of revival from below*. London & New York: Verso
- Murphy, M. (1992). *Blackboard unions*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Ross, S. (2012). Business unionism and social unionism in theory and practice. In S. Ross & L. Savage (Eds.), *Rethinking the politics of labour in Canada* (pp. 33-46). Halifax: Fernwood.
- Saltman, K. (2010). *The gift of education: Public education and venture philanthropy*. New York: Palgrave
- Saltman, K. (2012). *The failure of corporate school reform*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.

- Sassen, S. (2001). *The global city: New York, London, Tokyo*. 2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sustar, L. (2012, September). What the Chicago Teachers Union Accomplished. *Socialist Worker*. Retrieved from <http://socialistworker.org/>
- Tattersall, A. (2010). *Power in coalition: Strategies for strong unions and social change*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- The Revolutionary Picnic Collective (2013). Gleaning the Current Conjuncture: Notes from the 3rd *Antipode* Institute for the Geographies of Justice. *Antipode*, 45, 779–784.
- Vivelo Hoy (2012, September 3). Chicago teachers strike: Labor Day solidarity rally [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVRI-SstaF8>
- Wills, J. (2013). Place and Politics. In D. Featherstone & J. Painter (Eds.), *Spatial politics: Essays for Doreen Massey* (pp. 133-145). Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Weiner, L. (2013). *The future of our schools: Teachers unions and social justice*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.