

Introduction

For seven school days in September 2012, approximately twenty-six thousand members of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) walked picket lines in front of 580 schools. The Chicago school strike was the first the city had seen in a quarter century.

This book offers an analysis of what happened during the strike and why it is important for public education and the common good. We aim to tell two interwoven stories.

First, we provide a rare look deep inside the contract bargaining process, based on extensive interviews with both management and union bargainers. For roughly ten months leading up to the strike, union and management teams enveloped themselves in the minutiae of more than one thousand contract proposals. A labyrinth of procedures governed the bargaining activity, and two major state education laws needed to be incorporated into the contract. Bargaining continued throughout the strike, and the parties eventually produced a labor agreement whose proteacher substance few had predicted possible.

Second, we seek to tell, through the teachers' and staff's voices, the story of how the CTU was transformed from a top-down, bureaucratic organization into one of the most member-driven unions in the United States. In this process, a labor conflict focused solely on compensation at the start developed into a challenge to a national education reform movement that, teachers charged, was systematically destroying public education and using Chicago as its test case. Unlike

in past strikes, tens of thousands of teachers, clinicians, and paraprofessionals

marched repeatedly in Chicago's neighborhoods and downtown. Thousands of community members and parents joined the demonstrations. Crowds swelled, shutting down streets in the city's Loop district. Instead of accepting the loss of classroom control and corporate style-management of schools, which teachers had been told for decades was "inevitable," the CTU reinvigorated a national teachers movement by fighting back. The ripple effects of the 2012 strike are being felt in school districts and union halls across the country.

The strike occurred in the context of a decades-long political and economic struggle where probusiness forces maneuvered against teachers unions, often with bipartisan support from Democrats and Republicans, for control of the country's public education system. Public schools have always been the subject of intense scrutiny, but, beginning in the 1980s, they became the institutions over which the continued prosperity of the United States was bitterly fought. Education was the democratic means for allowing any citizen, rich or poor, to live a prosperous life.

For many years prior to the events in Chicago, Illinois politicians and business leaders had pushed education reforms that blamed teachers for all the problems in Chicago's schools, sought to break the ability of teachers unions to negotiate over classroom issues, and prioritized the systematic closing of public schools and their replacement with privately run but publicly funded and often for-profit charter schools.

By the time unionized teachers and staff in Chicago walked picket lines instead of hallways, a deep economic recession had normalized the idea that school districts should function with steadily less taxpayer support. At the same time, a corporate ethos had eclipsed the democratic ideal of public education. Central to the effort to remake schools in the image of the free market was the need to break the power of teachers unions. As contract talks in Chicago approached, the nation's political and education policy landscape had provided encouragement and funding to forces coalescing under the deceptive banner of "reform." With few exceptions, the burgeoning education reform groups had two things in common: they embraced market solutions to school improvement and viewed teachers unions as the major barrier to change.

Following a pattern that had been unfolding in other large urban school districts, in 2012 in Chicago multiple groups contested for the right to shape what kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) education would look like. On one side was a seemingly invincible coalition made up of Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, the Chicago Public School (CPS) system administration, the Chicago Board of Edu-

cation, several well-funded anti-teachers union organizations, charter school entrepreneurs, and national foundations such as those run by billionaires Bill Gates (founder of Microsoft), the Walton family (owners of Walmart), and Eli Broad

(a construction and insurance magnate). Also aiding their cause was the president of the United States and his education chief. In 2011, Rahm Emanuel was elected mayor on a platform that included a strongly stated commitment to improve the education of school children. To his allies the mayor was a pragmatist ready to invest in any form of school that produced results. But to his detractors Emanuel was an ideologue prepared to abandon neighborhood schools and privatize public education. Unlike previous Chicago mayors, he relished using blunt political force to get what he wanted.

On the other side of the conflict stood the CTU. To the CTU's cause came a large number of neighborhood and community groups, parents and parents' organizations, some supportive unions, high school students, and a grassroots teacher support network. First elected in 2010, the CTU union leadership was principled, democratically oriented, unconventional, innovative, and militant. The Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), born and developed as a study group within the CTU, was an extraordinarily progressive type of union body. Nothing about it was routine. Before and after being elected to office, CORE leaders were class-conscious proponents of social-movement unionism. They held that teachers, as professional workers, were part of a US working class whose interests aligned with their students' economically marginalized families. CORE leaders believed that preserving public education and promoting social justice would require uniting with other private- and public-sector workers struggling against the interests of the country's economic and political elite. Where past union leaders had largely ignored the CPS administration's and the mayor's trampling on teacher professionalism, and union leaders had disavowed membership mobilization to counter corporate reform measures, the CORE activists seemed fearless in their willingness to educate, organize, and mobilize CTU members and their allies to resist.

A CORE-led teachers union deeply worried the mayor. Only one year into his term as chief executive, Emanuel did not relish the idea of a strike and school system shutdown on his watch. There would never be a good time for a school strike, but the fall of 2012 would be the worst possible moment. The Democratic Party Convention would be renominating Barack Obama for president. Obama and Emanuel were members of Chicago's political class, and the city was a Democratic and union stronghold. So the mayor aggressively took steps to prevent what he most feared. Ironically, his every step, enabled by the CTU's enemies, made a historic strike more likely. In the end, a combination of the perceived danger of a CORE-led CTU and a failure to realize that the new union leaders

were not like their predecessors seduced management down a fateful rabbit hole. The mayor, school board, and school administration badly mischaracterized the people now leading the union.

A confrontation between Chicago's mayor and a school district representing nearly four hundred thousand children, on the one hand, and the nation's third largest teachers union, on the other, was in itself high drama. But on this occasion, external self-styled education reform organizations, well funded by the business elite, would both push and negotiate their way into the fight for public education. They would overtly align with the school district and the mayor and pursue an uncompromising political path to dictating education policy. Unlike in past school labor-relations struggles, in this instance the CTU would be supported by thousands of parents and neighborhood school-based community groups.

One other thing was different. Chicago school-reform efforts had been imposed on school employees for nearly a quarter century. During that time, with rare exception, the union membership was mostly passive. But in 2012 CTU leaders developed and executed a multidimensional, electrifying contract campaign to engage its members in a fight "for the soul of public education." The objective was ostensibly to negotiate a new labor agreement, but the bargaining was as much a platform for educational justice as it was a process for reaching a contract. Teachers unions have been buffeted by powerful national reform headwinds for decades. Both Republican and Democratic officials have largely adopted a narrative that public schools, and particularly public school teachers unions, are the source of the educational and economic malaise in the United States. While standardized testing has dictated classroom activities and school districts have required lesson plans that were more scripted to accommodate the country's assessment mania—a typical student takes 112 mandated standardized tests between pre-kindergarten and the 12th grade—teachers unions have made compromises with the prevailing wisdom. They have done so with reservation and they have expressed opposition, but in the face of the bipartisan demonization

of schoolteachers and their unions, some believed tactical retreat was prudent.

While the claims of negative educational impacts associated with teachers unions have been misguided, they most often take the form of polemics that characterize collective bargaining as the principal agent of an alleged public school crisis. Aided and abetted by nearly three decades of corporate financing, a cacophony of strident anti-teachers union voices have influenced national education policy. Their message has been simple: public school children will never get the education they deserve as long as teachers unions, like the CTU, continue to operate. Against the rising political tide clamoring for reform, some teach-

ers unions repeatedly asked that their members have a say in how schools were reorganized. In cities like Chicago and most everywhere else, their requests to be part of the change process were rebuffed. Denied a partnership in educational decision-making and fatefully concluding that resistance was futile, teachers

unions reluctantly accommodated to changes they knew were wrong. Surrendering to reforms that were ill designed, badly theorized, and unsupported by data was an enormous psychological blow to teachers. But, under attack from both political parties, teachers unions most often tried to move delicately between accommodating some modest level of forced change (e.g., reduced bargaining rights) and outright capitulation (e.g., the loss of tenure, the guarantee that after a lengthy period of employment a teacher cannot be fired without strong just cause). The strategy was at best a rearguard action that did not prevent defeats from piling up or deter additional assaults and setbacks.

The nonpartisan disregard and defunding of public schools has largely happened without teachers strikes, but not in Chicago in 2012. The CTU case is an anomaly. The union's membership mobilization also addresses a question raised in the national fight between the political and corporate class and teachers unions: What should be the role of teachers unions in education? For an answer we turn to one of the founding mothers of teachers unions. Not by chance, she is a legendary Chicago heroine. In 1897, Margaret Haley was a Chicago school teacher and an organizer for the Chicago Federation of Teachers (CFT, which later became the CTU). Haley was the nation's leading proponent of teacher unionism, and her tireless activism made the CFT the country's strongest and most militant teachers union. In 1904, she traveled to Saint Louis to be a keynote speaker at the National Education Association's (NEA's) annual convention. Haley titled her brief talk "Why Teachers Should Organize"; it delivered a powerful manifesto for teachers unionism that embodied the values, ideals, and goals that the CTU exemplified in 2012.

Haley began by arguing forcefully that teachers must "assume the role of educating citizens about their political responsibilities." To her, public schools were beacons of democratic potential, and, critically, unionized teachers were in the best position to prepare students for democratic citizenship because "organization is itself educative." The CFT had "given to the teachers a practical knowledge of civic conditions and civic needs," and, in fighting for better working conditions, it had contributed to democratic engagement. Haley insisted that only with thorough unionization would teachers be independent and capable enough to "democratize the schools," thereby enabling the "schools to democratize society." Teachers had no less an existential burden than securing democratic practice within civil society.

Haley went on to argue that there was no discernable difference between what was good pedagogy for students and what was good for teachers. In her words,

there was a correspondence between “the principles underlying a rational system of teaching and those underlying the movement for freer expression and better conditions among teachers.” Teachers were professionals and, as such, needed

to focus on classroom instruction. But professionalism was impossible if administrative, political, or corporate influence threatened teachers' professional autonomy. "To know the better way and be unable to follow it is unfavorable to a healthy development." Professionalism and teachers unions were perfectly compatible. "The success of one is dependent on the success of the other."

Finally, the CFT organizer situated teachers unions at the intersection of two worldviews competing for dominance at the turn of the twentieth century. One she called the "industrial ideal," which prioritized commercial activity and culminated in the supremacy of the private market. The other was the "democratic ideal," which placed humanity above profit and demanded that all human activity be the expression of a meaningful life. For Haley, public schools should advance the latter ideal, and there was no one better equipped to do the job than unionized public school teachers.

If there is one institution on which the responsibility to perform this service rests more heavily, it is the public schools. If there is one body of public servants of whom the public has a right to expect the mental and moral equipment to face the labor question, and other issues vitally affecting the welfare of society and urgently pressing for a rational and scientific solution, it is the public school teachers, whose especial contribution to society is their own power to think, the moral courage to follow their convictions, and the training of citizens to think and to express thought in free and intelligent action.

Haley also fought and preached for thirty years against the "factoryization" of the schools and the increasing constraints placed on teachers by rigid school and political bureaucracies. A teacher, she insisted, needed to be in a union in order to be treated as an educator and not as a "factory hand." For thousands of teachers across the United States, in both 1904 and 2012, she could not have been more prescient. Consider the four areas of labor relations that Haley identified as most in need of improvement more than a century ago: "(1) making wages correspond to the cost of living and the educational requirements for teaching positions; (2) improving job security and pensions; (3) reducing class size; (4) making the teacher a participant in school decision-making." Haley vociferously argued the point made by other NEA members that strong teachers unions were needed in order "for the teacher to call her soul her own."

More than a hundred years after Haley's address, in 2012, individual teacher's

souls coalesced in a battle cry echoing out of Chicago. Now it was public education's own soul that needed saving, and where more appropriate than Chicago for a labor confrontation with national implications for teacher dignity, the welfare

of children, and educational policy? This book explains how efforts to diminish the value of the classroom teacher and professional staff inspired the fight whose climax was a community-wide school strike.

The Chicago story illustrates from multiple vantage points how the CTU attempted to harness and unify different forms of power in a rapidly deteriorating political environment. The 2010 midterm elections had brought a historic number of Republican governors and state representatives into office, and public sector unions had come under unrelenting assault. Aware of the contemporary realities of labor organizations, CTU set out to redefine itself as an institution committed not only to protecting teachers but also to advancing the public good.

To move from a strictly workplace-based organization to a champion of public good required that CTU adopt a social justice orientation. It also demanded that the union develop relations with community allies and use different modes of mobilization to collectively contest forces that had seemingly greater capability to assert their will. Articulating an idea of collective bargaining power, which embedded the teachers' interests within community concerns about educational justice, the union became the fulcrum of an emergent social movement around public schools. Advocating for ways to improve schools, CTU drew the backing of crucial stakeholders such as parents, students, and the many community groups that focused on quality neighborhood schools. By aligning their bargaining interests with the common good, CTU generated significant public support for their goals and were able to assert an analysis of why Chicago schools were under duress that effectively contradicted the reform narrative.

In addition, while restrained by oppositional political actors in the state capital and Chicago, the union and its allies framed the contract fight so as to legitimize to the voters of Chicago the possibility of a more progressive policy environment once the strike was over. CTU built upon its heightened workplace and community power to advance more socially egalitarian political goals. The street-level power the union displayed during the strike was translated into bargaining power that energized a greater defense of neighborhood schools and fueled an electoral organizing campaign. How CTU positioned itself within a restrictive legal framework to use bargaining, coalitional, and political power is a critical element not only of this story and for public-sector collective bargaining, but also for the future of the labor movement.

Once again, the timelessness of Haley's manifesto is illustrative. When she spoke to NEA meeting delegates shortly after the commencement of the twentieth century, the CFT leader articulated a synergy between teachers, their unions,

and organized labor. These three forces shared three common struggles. One was the fight for “greater political and social emancipation waged by citizens.” A second struggle was to improve the material and operational “conditions of public

schools.” And the third was to advance the “economic and social well-being of working people.” In retrospect, little separates these early goals from the CTU’s 2012 objectives of delivering publicly valuable goods. Likewise, just as Haley warned against an alternative siren song leading schools toward commercialism and influence by corrupt “good business men,” the CTU leadership campaigned against the commercialization of public education.

In assessing the overall threat to education, CORE concluded that the democratic promise of the United States was being undermined. Public education was the country’s most secure promotion of citizenship, and for generations it had greased the wheels of social mobility. It was more national myth than reality that anyone with an education could grow up to be whatever he or she wanted to be, but it was true that an education could lift a person’s fortunes beyond his or her station at birth. But now the public schools’ ability to function as a national corrective to racism, poverty, and political self-interest was at risk. Schools, as championed by the CORE-inspired CTU, were bulwarks of healthy neighborhoods, which were the building blocks of citizenship. In this way collective bargaining intersected with community mobilization and public policy. CTU was not just representing its members but fulfilling public education’s promise of recreating the democratic polis for every generation.

During her union career, Haley felt similarly about public education; she closed her NEA speech with a call to arms. “Today, teachers of America, we stand at the parting of the ways. Democracy is not on trial, but America is.” The battle, she explained, would have no middle ground. Teachers would have to choose between a narrow vocational curriculum serving the profit motive and a humanistic education enriching democracy. When advocating for educational justice, the CTU also presented teachers with a choice. One option was to accept the movement to align public education with what Haley objected to as the “industrial ideal,” and what in the twenty-first century would be called the neoliberal school project. (Neoliberalism is a set of political behaviors that translate human interactions into market transactions.) There was no better place to investigate the penetration of market dynamics into public schools than in Chicago. The alternative to the neoliberal option that CTU offered in 2012 was an overwhelming embrace of Haley’s democratic ideal. Educated by its CORE leadership, rank and filers had a sophisticated appreciation of the relationship between the possibilities of collective bargaining and the need to rein in neoliberal practices. By choosing to defend their schools instead of surrendering to a corporate-style transformation of public education, CTU members committed the ultimate act

of resistance, demonstrating an alternative vision of education that could inspire teachers everywhere.

In choosing to fight, the union also activated public consciousness and offered community advocates a voice at the bargaining table. Haley would have certainly approved. What happened in Chicago in 2012 may not have been literally inspired by Haley's vision, but the CTU's strategy was powerfully animated by her organizing principle. The concept of a democratic teachers union fighting for the common good is the unifying theme for the story that we tell in these pages.