

Karen Lewis, former president of the Chicago Teachers Union, dies at 67

Alexander Fangmann
14 February 2021

On February 7, Karen Lewis, the former president of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), died at the age of 67. Lewis, who retained the title of CTU president emerita, had been diagnosed in October 2014 with glioblastoma, a type of aggressive brain cancer. She officially stepped down from her union role in 2018, turning the office over to CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey, who had been named acting president after Lewis' diagnosis.

Lewis' death prompted an outpouring of sympathy and warm recollections from the corporate media, fellow union officials and others. Stacy Davis Gates, the current CTU vice president, referred to her as "the most transformative leader that the city has seen in this century." *Jacobin*, the semi-official publication of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), has posted no less than four articles on Lewis as of this writing, while failing to post a single article on last week's agreement by the CTU to send teachers and students back into dangerous classrooms.

Among the mourners there may be educators and other workers who mistakenly thought Lewis was simply a long-time rank-and-file teacher who became disgusted by the attacks on teachers and public education by Democratic mayors like Richard M. Daley and Rahm Emanuel. But this was only a carefully cultivated myth, the product of a sustained effort by the media, sections of academia and pseudo-left organizations.

Any objective appraisal of Lewis' role as CTU president and the record of the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), the union faction with which she was closely identified, demonstrates the utter failure of the perspective promoted by the DSA and other pseudo-left organizations that the unions can be reformed or pressured into mounting any kind of defense against the financial aristocracy's assault on jobs, wages, public education and democratic rights.

The CTU's role in negotiating and then ramming through the recent agreement with the current administration of Lori Lightfoot to reopen schools for in-person learning in the middle of a pandemic is the latest development in the decades-long degeneration of the unions as a whole and their transformation into tools of corporate management and the government. If Lewis remained healthy and was still in the leadership of the union, there is no question the CTU would have cut the same deal.

Starting with the election that brought CORE to power in 2010, the mythologizing around Lewis, CORE and the CTU has had the political aim of obscuring the role of the union in collaborating closely with the Democratic Party in carrying out the attacks on public education and teachers. The need for such a "left" cover stems from the role Chicago has played as a central, if not the primary, testing ground for pro-corporate education and social policies led by the Democrats.

In this context, from the perspective of the ruling class, it has been better to have the unions serve as a "loyal opposition" which can be depended upon to sell every betrayal as a win, even at the cost of the occasional rhetorical criticism or a limited strike, than to risk that educators and other workers abandon the unions entirely and to build far more radical organizations independent of the Democratic Party.

CORE was able to win the 2010 union election largely due to the anger of rank-and-file educators against the flagrant betrayals of teachers and public education carried out by the incumbent United Progressive Caucus (UPC), which controlled the CTU for 37 out of the previous 40 years. Its leadership, especially President Marilyn Stewart, had completely discredited itself during the negotiation of the 2007 CPS contract, a five-year deal which featured attacks on healthcare and allowed the Daley administration to continue with its right-wing Renaissance 2010 program.

Begin under then-Chicago Public Schools (CPS) CEO Arne Duncan, Renaissance 2010 saw the expansion of charter schools in Chicago and the employment of the widely hated school "turnaround" strategy, where schools with low test scores would have their entire workforces fired, and operation of the school turned over to private operators. Over a decade, CPS closed more than 70 schools and 6,000 teachers lost their jobs. Duncan would later serve as Secretary of Education in the Obama administration, where he used the lessons learned in Chicago to push attacks on public education at the national level, especially through the Race to the Top program.

Stewart notably rammed the 2007 contract through the union's House of Delegates, insisting that a clear majority of those in attendance were in favor of approving the agreement after she called for the "Yes" vote, and refusing calls from delegates to count the "No" votes or for a roll-call to get an exact count or establish whether all those present were in fact real delegates. Instead, Stewart rushed outside to brief reporters, while angry delegates were denouncing the sellout.

The actions of the CTU under the UPC leadership were the culmination of a long period in which the unions had been completely transformed into agents of management, acting to suppress teacher strikes and worker militancy. Despite all the attacks carried out during the Daley administration, the CTU had not gone on strike since 1987, a 19-day walkout that stands as the city's longest. This was a remarkable transformation for a union that before that point, had gone on strike in 1969 (the first official strike called by the union after it was recognized by the city in 1966), 1971, 1973, 1975, 1980, 1983, 1984 and 1985.

The CORE faction began to coalesce soon after the 2007 contract, comprising a coalition of various pseudo-left groups and elements linked to various "union reform" movements, including the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU). Among its major early leaders were Jesse Sharkey, a member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), and Jackson Potter, whose mother, Robin Potter, is a lawyer with longstanding ties to the CTU and other unions. Potter's stepfather was Pete Camarata, one of the founders of the TDU.

After Lewis joined CORE, Potter and Lewis became the first co-chairs of the faction. Recruiting Lewis, a black teacher and CPS veteran, was crucial to their prospects. As Potter said in a recent piece in *Jacobin*, Lewis "added the gravitas of a Chicago Public Schools (CPS) veteran to team CORE. She graduated from Kenwood Academy High School, a famous CPS school, grew up in the black middle class on the South Side,

daughter of two CPS teachers."

Lewis' own strengths and qualities no doubt played a role in her selection as head of CORE's slate, and in her ability to serve as the union's main public face and spokesperson. A 1974 graduate of Dartmouth College, Lewis was known for her wide intellectual interests. After deciding not to pursue medical studies, she moved back to Chicago to become a chemistry teacher, officially joining the CTU in 1988. Several years later, in 1993, she earned a graduate degree in inner city studies from Northeastern Illinois University. Possessed with a great deal of energy, among her many hobbies was an interest in stand-up comedy, which no doubt contributed to her skills in addressing large meetings of teachers.

Lewis was not a neophyte when it came to CTU union factions, having served on the executive board of the CTU as a member of the ProActive Chicago Teachers (PACT) caucus. Under the leadership of Debby Lynch, who ran on an anti-corruption platform, PACT won the 2001 union leadership election, but served only one term after Lynch negotiated a contract in 2003 that sold out teachers' health care benefits and the length of the school day in exchange for raises that failed to make up the ground lost in previous contracts. Many PACT activists aside from Lewis would eventually find their way into CORE.

Through its promotion of "social justice unionism," the CTU sponsored and worked closely with various community groups aimed at pushing aldermen and local politicians to support the union at the same time that it promoted racial politics and sought to conceal the class character of the Democrats' attacks on workers.

Despite running on a platform opposing the previous leadership's anti-democratic tendencies, less than a year after being elected Lewis was personally involved in negotiating behind the backs of teachers and endorsing a controversial state law then known as Senate Bill 7 (SB7). Looking back, this incident set the tone for every subsequent betrayal the union has carried out under the CORE leadership. It proved the union could not be salvaged through a reshuffling of its leading personnel who all shared the same fundamental positions of politically subordinating the working class to the Democratic Party and the capitalist profit system.

Even though SB7 attacked tenure rights and seniority, allowed the mayor to set the length of the school day and year and raised the bar needed to authorize a strike to 75 percent of its total CTU membership, Lewis, Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) President Dan Montgomery and the Illinois Education Association's (IEA) Ken Swanson all backed the bill.

Although CTU delegates would soon reject the CTU's support for the bill, CTU leaders defended Lewis. Claiming Lewis had simply not had time to read the fine print, Sharkey said, "The CTU said we would not go for an attack on our collective bargaining rights, but on closer examination we see that's exactly what it is." Although he admitted she made a "mistake" in endorsing the bill, Sharkey nevertheless urged delegates not to "scapegoat Karen."

The union's own statement claimed:

"While the bill is far from perfect, it is far superior to the initial proposal that came out on December 3, 2010 that attempted to outlaw using seniority as a factor in staffing decisions, make tenure nearly impossible to attain and more improbable to keep, eliminate the right to strike statewide, and, for Chicago only, prohibit permissive bargaining issues."

This claim, that the outcome for educators would have been worse without the union's involvement, is not original. Under CORE's leadership, however, the CTU has raised what amounts to a "good cop/bad cop" routine to an art form. Indeed, this logic is at the heart of the CTU's present claims that the recently concluded bargain with death was the result of its "hard work" at the bargaining table.

In 2012, following the aggressive moves of Mayor Rahm Emanuel to rescind teachers raises, continue layoffs and turnarounds and make it

easier to fire teachers and close schools, CTU leaders were compelled to call a strike for the first time in 25 years. Despite being on strike for nine days, the CTU did all it could to prevent the struggle from turning into an open political confrontation with Emanuel and the Obama administration right before the 2012 presidential election.

During the strike, Lewis expressed the central concern of CTU leaders then and since, that no matter what sordid deal is put before teachers, the main objective is to maintain the union's "seat at the table." Speaking on Emanuel's planned school closures, Lewis said, "We understand that whole movement of closing schools and doing it aggressively. The problem is—I guess that's why we're all here—we either do this together in some reasonable way or we will always be fighting, and I think the key is that the people that are making these decisions want to make them unilaterally." In other words, the CTU bureaucracy expected something in return for selling out the teachers.

Notably, the CTU leadership's first attempt to get delegates to approve an agreement to end the strike was defeated, largely due to the intervention of the Socialist Equality Party, which called for delegates to reject an end to the strike and demanded that teachers have a right to read the full agreement before voting.

The outcome of the CTU's betrayal under the CORE leadership, which even Lewis admitted at the time was "an austerity contract" was the largest mass school closure in US history, as the Emanuel administration moved ahead to shutter 49 schools and lay off thousands of teachers. Nearly all of Emanuel's attacks on teachers were enshrined in the contract, including the lengthening of the school day and year, the further erosion of tenure and job security and the expansion of standardized testing.

But the CTU did get something in return. In exchange for accepting the closure of public schools, the city and charter operators agreed to increasingly drop their opposition to unionization drives by the Chicago Alliance of Charter Teachers and Schools, which would eventually merge with the CTU in 2018. After the strike, the CTU largely abandoned the pretense of fighting to halt the expansion of charter schools and other privatization schemes. This was in line with its parent organization, the national American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which by 2010 was taking money and working closely with the Gates Foundation on teacher evaluations and other school "reform" schemes pushed by the Obama administration.

After the 2012 strike, Lewis' previously acrimonious relationship with Emanuel turned into personal friendship, with the two going to the ballet together and sharing Jewish prayers. Although Lewis had originally planned to run against Emanuel in the 2015 mayoral election, she withdrew from the race due to her illness. Nevertheless, following long, drawn out negotiations, Lewis helped reach a final agreement with Emanuel in 2016 on a concessions contract, which held salaries nearly flat, allowed health care costs to rise and involved the creation of a two-tier pension system, with new hires forced pay 7 percent of their salaries toward their pensions.

After this period, Lewis' health began to decline. Suffering a stroke in late 2017, she officially retired in June 2018.

In bringing this review of Lewis' life as a CTU leader to close, it is important to emphasize that her actions were the product not of personal failings but political ones. In the end, like her predecessors in the CTU bureaucracy, she completely accepted the capitalist system, opposed the struggle for socialism, and was entirely oriented to the Democratic Party, which has controlled Chicago politics since the 1930s. Above all, the chief responsibility for betrayal of Chicago teachers lies with the pseudo-left organizations like the defunct ISO and the DSA, which are endlessly in search of "union reformers" while preaching the lie that workers can somehow advance their interests through adapting to the anti-communist AFL-CIO and its political subordination of the working class to the

Democrats and needs of American capitalism.

Chicago teachers today are at a crossroads. Following the abject capitulation of the CTU on the reopening of schools for in-person learning in February 2021, lessons must be drawn from the long struggle of educators and other workers to defend public education, as well as democratic rights and against the danger of fascism. New organizations of struggle, which are independent of the unions, must be formed, like the Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. Above all, teachers need to break with pseudo-left politics and develop a genuine socialist orientation aimed at the revolutionary transformation of society and its reconstitution on the basis of social needs, not private profit.

We urge teachers to study the history and record of the Socialist Equality Party and make the decision to join.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact