

10 years since the Chicago school closings: The legacy of the CTU's CORE faction

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The fifteenth anniversary of the founding of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), which has controlled the CTU leadership for more than a decade, has been accompanied by self-congratulatory statements. It has coincided with absurd claims that CORE's leadership has increased political power for teachers and other workers, including through the election of former CTU staffer Brandon Johnson as mayor of Chicago.

In fact, the real legacy of CORE is the continued collaboration of the CTU bureaucracy in the decimation of public education, highlighted by the closure of 50 schools following the defeat of the 2012 teachers strike. This June marks the 10-year anniversary of the mass school closures.

While Johnson has stated his opposition to closing schools, the district faces an enormous \$628 million budget shortfall next year, with a number of schools seeing low enrollment and crumbling infrastructure. The state moratorium on Chicago school closures expires in January 2025. Despite his occasional left-sounding rhetoric, Johnson is a tool of the same corporate and financial aristocracy that runs the city and will continue the school closures began under previous Democratic Party administrations.

CORE's legacy also includes the continued erosion of wages and living standards for teachers and other education workers and the betrayal of the struggles in 2021 and 2022 by Chicago teachers to keep schools closed and protect the lives of educators, students and their families from the pandemic.

As for Johnson, he has already disenchanted even his close supporters with the speed at which he has abandoned his campaign promises and accommodated himself to the city's corporate and political interests. Johnson and his backers in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pseudo-left supporters of the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy will betray the expectations of his supporters. Like Syriza in Greece, this will strengthen the political right. At the same time, it will provoke workers and youth to seek far more radical, i.e., genuine socialist, solutions.

Much like the 1997 UPS strike, which was similarly presented as a win by the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and other sections of the pseudo-left, the 2012 teachers strike has been heavily mythologized by CORE and other "reform" elements in the union bureaucracy. From the minute the strike was shut down and the sellout deal was pushed through by CORE leadership, the ostensibly "left" and corporate media outlets covered up the real defeat imposed on teachers and the entire working class by Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel and CTU leaders.

CORE co-founder and current CTU vice president Jackson Potter continues this tradition with a particularly self-serving recent article in *In These Times*. Potter credits CORE and the 2012 teachers strike with popularizing the "Bargaining for the Common Good" (BCG) approach to contract negotiations and galvanizing teachers unions across the country. Potter even claims, "The last decade represents the most successful organizing project that the labor movement has experienced in a generation."

Potter continues, claiming against all evidence, that the wave of teachers strikes beginning in 2012 dealt a serious blow to the ruling class's attacks on education:

"Community and union forces banded together and raised issues about inequitable funding, passed initiatives for progressive revenue that turned back decades of austerity that took the form of cuts to educational spending, and in some cases exposed educational apartheid in their advocacy and demands. The movement permanently disrupted the bipartisan neoliberal privatization agenda that produced record school closures, budget cuts, and the expansion of non-union charter schools."

This is a fraud. CORE utilized its false claims about fighting for "social justice," to prevent a rebellion by teachers against the CTU bureaucracy and the Democratic Party, which used Chicago as ground zero for its nationwide attack on public education during the two terms of the Obama administration, including the diversion of vast public resources to privately run charter schools. By 2018, an educators' rebellion erupted across the country anyway, with rank-and-file teachers organizing wildcat strikes in defiance of the unions, which led to statewide struggles in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona.

The role of the DSA and other promoters of "social justice unionism" was to corral this incipient revolt, reinforce the authority of the American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association and state Democrats, and strangle and defeat the strikes. This only led to an acceleration of the attacks on educators and public education, including in the 2019 Los Angeles strike, which was betrayed by the union's own CORE-like caucus.

What really happened after the 2012 Chicago teachers strike

The 2012 contract accepted by the CTU, included key demands by Emanuel to lengthen both the school day and school year, largely wiping out the contract's pay increases when considered on an hourly basis. Other provisions included the use of student standardized test scores to fire teachers, as well as accepting that only 50 percent of new hires would have to be former laid-off teachers, when it was well known that mass school closures were on the horizon.

Karen Lewis, former CTU president from 2010-2014, who had earlier collaborated with other union leaders and state lawmakers in crafting and endorsing Senate Bill 7, a law aimed at kneecapping teachers strikes, cynically told the CTU's House of Delegates, "we couldn't solve all the problems of the world with one contract, and that it was time to suspend the strike."

On the morning of the day the strike was suspended, Lewis appeared on WBEZ, saying, "People will never get exactly what they want in a contract," and added, "This is an austerity contract."

Potter naturally says not a word about the historic 2013 shuttering of 50 schools, the largest mass school closure in American history. The Emanuel administration's agenda to close schools was well known before and during the strike and was widely opposed by teachers and the working class as a whole.

Despite being the supposed testing ground of the Bargaining for the Common Good strategy, the CTU leadership did not raise opposition to school closures as a demand during the strike, because they were committed to working with the Emanuel administration in carrying them out. In fact, the CTU moved aggressively to shut down the strike before it could become a catalyst for a broader political mobilization of the working class against the Obama administration and the Democratic Party's campaign of austerity and attacks on public education.

The Socialist Equality Party's (SEP) 2012 presidential candidate Jerry White, who visited Chicago to mobilize striking workers against a CTU sellout, issued a statement exposing the collaboration of the CTU with the district and urged teachers to reject the sellout and suppression of the strike at the hands of the CTU leadership.

Presenting a way forward for teachers he said "I urge teachers to reject this sellout. The teachers have remained solid since the strike began and won powerful support from parents, students and workers throughout the city and across the country. Now is the time to broaden the struggle and stand fast against the phony "reform" agenda of Emanuel, Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Obama, and the entire political establishment."

During the strike former CTU president Karen Lewis even told the *Chicago Tribune* that the union officials "understand the whole movement of closing schools and doing it aggressively." She urged school leaders to include the union leadership in these discussions, saying, "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."

Following the strike, CORE leaders stated in interviews that they did not oppose the closing of schools, but merely the manner in which it was carried out.

In a March 2013 interview with WBEZ, Lewis dismissed the idea that "no schools should be closed," but merely objected to the large number of schools being closed at once as well as the high-handed manner in which it was carried out, without the involvement of union leaders to help manage the process and manage social opposition.

In response to WBEZ host Tony Sarabia's prompt, "So you contend that no schools should be closed in the city of Chicago," Lewis said, "You know what, that is not even a real argument. The issue that we need to talk about is this outrageous number of schools and the fact that nothing has been done to prepare people appropriately for anything of this measure."

Former CTU vice president Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), which in 2018 liquidated itself in order to more openly integrate itself into the Democratic Party, spoke in a segment on school closings broadcast on WTTW in November 2012. There Sharkey told the interviewer, "No one in the union thinks you should keep an empty school building open. That doesn't make any sense."

In the first place, the decline in neighborhood population that drove the decline in enrollment at many schools is intimately connected to the mass closure of factories from the 1970s through the 1990s. In 1960, one-third of Chicago workers were employed in manufacturing, which was heavily concentrated on the South and West Sides of the city. Hasbro, Schwinn, Zenith, US Steel, Oscar Mayer, Brock, Electro-Motive and scores of other closed factories employed hundreds of thousands of workers.

By 2017, less than 9 percent of Chicagoans were employed in manufacturing, and in many of the neighborhoods where those factories were once located, jobs simply disappeared without being replaced, leading to mass unemployment and all the attendant social devastation. As social conditions in the neighborhoods worsened, many of those workers with the means to do so moved away.

An analysis of the effects of the school closures ten years on carried out by WBEZ and the *Chicago Sun-Times* found that all of the claims made by the Emanuel administration and accepted by CTU leaders, that the

closures would allow resources to be more effectively allocated to remaining schools, and that student learning would be improved, have turned out to be complete lies.

In fact, the closure of schools has continued to feed the negative spiral of the predominantly minority working-class neighborhoods which bore the brunt of the assault of deindustrialization. Census tracts with a majority black population which suffered school closures in 2013 saw their population decline precipitously, losing 9.2 percent of residents from 2012 to 2018, compared with tracts that did not have a closed school, which lost only 3.2 percent.

Far from being repurposed to useful ends for residents, 26 of the 46 shuttered school buildings have remained vacant and dilapidated. Thirteen were bought by private entities, including seven that become either expensive private schools or luxury housing, with homes on one demolished school site selling for \$600,000 or more. Another seven are being used by government bodies, including offices for CPS and one which has been reopened recently as a temporary shelter for migrants.

Nor did the 13,646 students displaced by the school closings see any academic improvement from the school closures, as the Emanuel administration and CPS officials claimed at the time. SAT scores for these students averaged under 800 (out of 1600), in 14th percent nationally, and only 62 percent graduated from an Illinois public school, a lower rate than those in schools selected for comparison by WBEZ and the *Sun-Times*. Another 14 percent were considered to have dropped out, 66 died and the remaining 24 percent are completely unaccounted for by CPS officials.

The 49 so-called "welcoming schools" which took in displaced students received around \$155 million in resources, including equipment like iPads, expanded programming and facilities, as well as necessary repairs to existing buildings. Since then, the extra funding has all but dried up, accelerated by the district's transition to school-based budgeting, where schools are allocated funds according to their student population, forcing schools with declining enrollment to carry out severe cuts.

According to the WBEZ and *Sun-Times* analysis, the welcoming schools have suffered enrollment declines outpacing the district as a whole, losing 38 percent of their population since they took in the displaced students, compared to the district's overall decline of 20 percent. Only three of the schools are currently considered to be "efficient" in their use of space, with all the rest at risk of being targeted in future rounds of school closures.

Far from carrying out a class-based struggle against this assault on public education, which has its source in the capitalist system and the relentless diversion of public resources to bail out the wealthy and fund war, the CTU did everything it could to divert opposition to school closures and "turnarounds" into the narrow channel of racial politics.

It is noteworthy that the mass firings of educators was a central component of the anti-public education "Race to the Top" scheme of America's first black president. In 2010, President Obama hailed the firing of 74 teachers and 19 other school employees after they rejected a "turnaround" plan—authored by his education secretary and former Chicago Public Schools CEO Arne Duncan—which would have torn up their contract and forced them to work longer hours without additional pay.

Nevertheless, Potter's own mother, Robin Potter, was hired by the union as an attorney to sue the school district, claiming its school turnarounds (where the staff of an entire school is fired and replaced supposedly to improve performance), disproportionately affected black teachers and staff and were therefore racist.

The lawsuits, filed in 2012 and 2015, were finally settled in September of last year, with 414 black educators set to receive a paltry \$12,000 each after having been laid off. Potter and attorney Patrick J. Cowlin, of Fish Potter Bolaños, were awarded \$4 million in attorney's fees out of the total \$9.25 million settlement.

Despite all of Potter's and the CTU's pretensions about the union's effectiveness, conditions in Chicago schools remain awful for the vast majority of students and educators outside of a handful of well-resourced selective enrollment schools.

The 2019 contract, which touted its BCG "wins," particularly nursing positions for every school, has remained a dead letter. According to a report in the *Chicago Reader*, there are still only 508 nurses for over 600 schools, with the union acknowledging there will not be a nurse for every school until 2024, when the contract expires. A mere 90 CPS schools have full-time librarians.

Buildings also remain unsafe for students and teachers, with many schools having dangerous levels of lead detected in their drinking water and in the form of peeling paint. This is to say nothing of the still existing danger of COVID-19, with previous attempts at mitigation now completely abandoned following the Biden administration's declaration of the end to the pandemic with not even a statement of protest by the CTU.

Finally, the claim that the election of Johnson will bring some kind of "new era of investment and support" for schools that will "foster equity over competition," is belied by Johnson's own statements during the election campaign. Johnson clearly presented himself as a responsible candidate for the ruling class saying, "There will be some tough decisions to be made when I am mayor of the city of Chicago. And there might be a point within negotiations that the Chicago Teachers Union quest and fight for more resources—we might not be able to do it. Who is better able to deliver bad news to a friend than a friend?"

Indeed, the CPS budget for next year is essentially flat, meaning that schools will suffer real cuts when inflation is taken into account. A *Chalkbeat* analysis indicates that around 39 schools, or 8 percent, will see budget cuts, predominantly in working-class areas. Furthermore, there is a looming \$628 million budget deficit for the following year, when all of the district's federal COVID-relief funds are totally spent.

For that matter, since his inauguration, Johnson has largely kept on many of Lightfoot's appointees and other city hall insiders, including the widely-hated Allison Arwady, the commissioner of the Chicago Department of Public Health, who played a key role in reopening schools by minimizing the dangers of COVID-19 and presenting poor-quality data that purported to show in-person schooling was safe.

Cristina Pacione-Zayas, a former Illinois state senator and Johnson's deputy chief of staff, indicated in an interview that many of his supporters might be disappointed, saying of his agenda, "We know that we can't do that alone. And we know that he is not a dictator and not gonna impose without actually having a very spirited and engaged process with Chicago, because this is all of our responsibility to be able to carry this forward."

Pacione-Zayas emphasized that workers would need to continue pushing the Johnson administration, or it would be their fault if he did not succeed, saying, "It would definitely be a concern if the movement that we come from stopped pushing and organizing to make sure that we deliver on the promise of our movement."

For all of the cheerleading of CORE by Potter and others, CORE won its last union election with the support of only 38 percent of the union's total active membership. The REAL faction did not offer a new way forward, "opposing" the record of CORE in the same way that CORE "opposed" previous ruling factions of the CTU, employing radical and populist demagoguery in order to defend the same basic program and orientation of its predecessors. However, it showed there was a significant layer of teachers who opposed CORE after the years of betrayals.

Rank-and-file opposition to the hated union bureaucracies which have smothered the class struggle for decades is continuing to grow. The only way forward for Chicago teachers and educators to carry out this struggle is through the building of rank-and-file committees to take leadership of the movement against future attacks on public education. This must be

bound up with a political struggle against all factions of the Democratic Party, along with the Republicans, and the building up of a political counter-offensive by the working class to end the diversion of resources to the corporate and financial elite and the Pentagon, and a radical redistribution of wealth based on a socialist program, that is social equality.



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