

Teachable moment: CTU strike inspires unionists nationwide

Chicago teachers deliver a blow to a corporate agenda for schools

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

Any doubts that the seven-day Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) strike could have an impact thousands of miles away were dispelled Sept. 20 in the basement of the Portland teachers union office. There, about 100 union activists gathered the day after the strike ended — to celebrate, and to discuss what it meant.

The walkout by 26,000 teachers in the nation's third largest school district wasn't principally about pay, benefits, or perks. It was a strike for basics, like air conditioning in classrooms, getting more school nurses and counselors, and restoring art, music, physical education classes. And it was a strike against corporate-style education reforms that subject students to heavy testing and blame teachers when students score poorly.

"Education workers," said American Federation of Teachers-Oregon Executive Director Richard Schwarz, "have been the pincushion for sticking every new idea that some grandstanding business or political leader, talk show host, or newspaper editorial writer dreams up about what to do with children."

[CTU is an affiliate of American Federation of Teachers.]

With the Chicago school board proposing that student test scores account for 45 percent of teacher evaluations, and demanding that teachers accept a longer school day with no commensurate increase in pay, Chicago teachers voted 98 percent to authorize a strike. The strike began Sept. 10, and drew support statements and solidarity fund donations from labor organizations around the country.

"It was going to be a make-or-break moment for public sector unions and the labor movement in general," said retired letter carrier Jamie Partridge, who helped organize the Sept. 20 solidarity meeting in Portland. "A win for the teachers and the people of Chicago would push back the privatization agenda."

"We knew that we had to stand up to a big bully," said CTU member Kirstin Roberts, referring to Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel. Roberts, a member of the strike committee at her Northwest Chicago public preschool, joined the Portland forum via Skype. Emanuel — dubbed "Mayor 1%" by striking teachers — is associated with the corporate wing of the Democratic Party. Long before the one-time investment banker became Obama's chief of staff, Emanuel twisted arms to win Congressional passage of NAFTA, as President Bill Clinton's political director.

"We didn't know if we could win

against him," said Roberts. "But teachers around Chicago were sure that if we didn't stand up and fight, we were going to lose everything. So we took that risk, and if you look at our contract, you can see things that we won, you can see things that we lost. We stood up, and we are stronger today than when this struggle started."

In the tentative agreement, subject to teacher approval in an Oct. 2 vote (after this issue went to press), the Chicago Board of Education backed off demands for a merit pay system, for major increases in worker contributions to health insurance, and for student test scores to make up 45 percent of how teachers are evaluated. Chicago teachers will still be subject to the state requirement that the test scores make up 30 percent of teacher evaluations, but that will be treated as a trial run in the first year, and teachers will have the right to appeal bad ratings to a neutral board. The Board also, in the agreement:

- Agrees to hire 512 art, music, physical education and language teachers
- Guarantees that students will have their textbooks when classes begin
- Gives laid off teachers 10 months of "recall rights" for the first time, provided they had good evaluations
- Commits to fill at least half of all new openings with laid-off teachers
- Provides annual raises of 3, 2, and 2 percent

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Yes Man

Yes Men co-founder Mike Bonanno (in front of a light at the end of a tunnel) closes a daylong conference of Young Emerging Labor Leaders Sept. 30. YELL is a constituency group of the Oregon AFL-CIO with a mission of increasing the participation of young people in the labor movement. Bonanno is the alias of activist Igor Vamos when he works with the Yes Men — a group that uses publicity stunts and media hoaxes to expose corporate wrongdoing and undemocratic trade negotiations. The Yes Men are being sued by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce for violating trademark law, for using the Chamber's name and logo to draw reporters to a fake news conference at the National Press Club. That stunt and others are documented in two movies, *The Yes Men (2003)* and *The Yes Men Fix the World (2009)*. Bonanno — asked about the risks of his style of activism — said he's only been arrested once. It's much more risky, he said, to stand by and do nothing. Forty members from 15 unions attended YELL's third annual conference, and elected a new chair, union stagehand Leah Okin of International Association of Theatrical and Stage Employees Local 28.

Pro-labor insurer pledges to national labor college

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI) — The pro-labor American Income Life Insurance Company is pledging \$600,000 yearly to the financially troubled National Labor College. AIL President Roger Smith said the grant "will support the college's education and outreach programs." Smith called the funds "an important commitment for us in labor because we recognize higher education will be increasingly vital to workers in the 21st century."

The 43-year-old college is the only U.S. higher education accredited institution specifically geared to serving educational needs of union members. But it has had financial trouble for years and its Silver Spring, Md., campus is up for sale.

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