

## REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

# Education Deform and Social Justice Unionism

**Peter Brogan**

Isabel Nuñez, Gregory Michie, and Pamela Konkol, *Worth Striking For: Why Education Policy is Every Teacher's Concern (Lessons from Chicago)* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2015)

Alexandra Bradbury, Mark Brenner, Jenny Brown, Jane Slaughter, and Samantha Winslow. *How to Jump-Start Your Union: Lessons from the Chicago Teachers* (Detroit: Labor Notes, 2014)

Micah Uetricht, *Strike for America: Chicago Teachers Against Austerity* (London and New York: Verso, 2014)

“TO WIN RUDIMENTARY JUSTICE, women had to battle with brain, with wit, and sometimes even with force,” observes Margaret Haley, the pioneer of teacher unionism in Chicago and the United States. “If you happened to be born,” Haley continues, “wanting freedom for yourself, for your group, for people at large, you had to fight for it – and you had to fight hard.”<sup>1</sup> Haley captures here the fighting spirit of working-class struggle that has come to define the revitalized Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) under direction of the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), which won power in the union in 2010. And as can be seen in the week-long teachers’ strike in Seattle last September and the amazing work done in winning a new contract through grassroots organizing by education workers in Los Angeles, this mode of social justice union praxis – combining a radical vision with mass action – is radiating out to other cities across the nation.

Teachers in Chicago and elsewhere in urban America are on the frontlines of a war over the future of public education. On one side, we have the corporate-sponsored neoliberal education “reform” movement that attributes all of the

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1. Quoted in Dana Goldstein, *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession* (New York: Doubleday, 2014).

nation's failings – poverty, inequality, and a decline in economic competitiveness in the world economy – to a crisis in public education, a crisis most acute in US cities. On the other side, we have those whom the reformers view as the main culprits for this crisis, allegedly bad teachers and the unions that protect them.

In September 2012, for the first time since 1987, Chicago teachers hit the streets against neoliberal reforms and austerity, going on strike for seven days. In terms of its mass character across the city, the popular support the union enjoyed, and the extent to which it resonated with workers in and beyond Chicago, it is no exaggeration to say that this is the most important strike to occur in the United States of the 21st century. This strike was the culmination of years of struggle by ordinary public school teachers and community organizations across Chicago, who have, since the mid-2000s, been fighting against the corporate-backed program whose aim is to dismantle the public school system and replace it with a largely privatized system governed according to a corporate model. The remaking of public schooling in this manner is a central component of neoliberal urban development.

The movement behind this corporate takeover of education, often misidentified in the media as an “education reform movement,” is about expanding capitalist profit by turning what were once universal public institutions, historically tasked with the responsibility for producing a nation's citizenry and its labour force, over to corporate profiteers of a new booming industry. This movement is more aptly described by teacher activists as “corporate deform.” The deformers typically deploy a discourse of choice or civil rights as a way to capture a piece of the more than \$500 billion that the federal government spends on the K–12 education sector in the United States. This corporate-backed agenda is a core component of the neoliberal restructuring of political, economic, and social life more generally that has been driven by an amalgam of right-wing and neoliberal think tanks, both major political parties in the United States, private charter school operators, and education management organizations, as well as global economic governance institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The 2012 strike, which has rightly been held up in the three books under review as a successful model of the kind of action unions need to take to beat back corporate power and austerity policies, would have been impossible if not for the efforts of a relatively small group of union dissidents who, in 2008, built a new oppositional group called CORE. Operating with one foot inside the union and one outside of it, CORE has become a beacon of hope for rank-and-file union activists in both the United States and Canada.

## **Understanding the Neoliberal Assault on Public Education**

ACCORDING TO THE CORPORATE REFORMERS, teachers' unions are only concerned with pursuing the narrow economic interests of their members at the cost of the children entrusted to their care and the taxpayers who fund public

schools. The billionaire-backed reform movement has been on the rise since the 1983 publication of a report called *A Nation at Risk*. In this narrative, teacher unions are posited as the most powerful political force obstructing a supposedly grassroots, parent-led movement for school choice and accountability.<sup>2</sup> And while what is happening in the United States is extreme in many respects, the fight over the future of public education is connected to a global struggle over what education should look like in the 21st century. As education scholar Pedro Noguera puts it in his foreword to *Worth Striking For*, “The ultimate goal of the current reform efforts around education policy appears to be the end to our public system of schooling, whether motivated by true faith in the market or by desire for new profit-making opportunities.”<sup>3</sup>

Although I agree with this contention, I would add that such efforts are part of the wider process of neoliberalism and the proliferation of neoliberal policies, of “high stakes testing” and “accountability” that we have witnessed in recent decades, and are deeply related to the reality that many poor, working class, and people of colour have been historically underserved by America’s public schools. Thus, while poor communities are desperate for change in the education their children receive, this has prompted a sense of urgency among policy makers – which corporate deformers have taken advantage of – to experiment with policies in education such as shifting from democratically elected school boards to mayoral control, and to an expansion of “innovative” charter schools, which receive public monies but are generally not subject to any kind of democratic oversight. Unfortunately, instead of leading to better educational outcomes for those students who need the most improvement, these policies have resulted in increased chaos in schools for students and teachers alike. We have also witnessed a reversal of the desegregation that had taken place as a result of the landmark Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, which put an end to *de jure* segregation based on race.

Indeed, shutting down neighbourhood schools has been an essential component of the corporate deform agenda in education, which has resulted in an expansion of privatization *vis-à-vis* their replacement with charter schools alongside a vast expansion of standardized testing, which has resulted in a windfall of profits for companies like Pearson and McGraw-Hill. School

2. A number of books have been published in recent years that make this argument, including Steven Brill’s *Class Warfare: Inside the Fight to Fix America’s School* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011). These views can also be seen in the widely acclaimed documentary *Waiting for Superman* (2010) and the more recent Hollywood dramatization starring Viola Davis and Maggie Gyllenhaal, *Won’t Back Down* (2012). *Newsweek* published a cover story in 2010 entitled, “The Key to Saving American Education,” which depicted a blackboard, with a single phrase chalked over and over, “We must fire bad teachers.”

3. Isabel Nuñez, Gregory Michie, and Pamela Konkol, *Worth Striking For: Why Education Policy is Every Teacher’s Concern (Lessons from Chicago)* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2015), xv.

closures and turnarounds have had a disastrous impact on already devastated African American and Latino poor and working-class neighbourhoods. These policies are part of the wider neoliberal project, which is not simply about expanding capitalist accumulation and dismantling teacher unions, but is also a racial containment strategy, the objective of which is to control what is viewed by political and economic elites as a disposable surplus population.

Thus, instead of a democratic public school system, where students from different backgrounds come together, we have not only more unequal schooling, but also a dangerous setup that is authoritarian and dehumanizing to non-white children and their teachers who are then subject to surveillance and discipline. For many students, these educational environments often lead to less safe conditions.

In this context, corporate reformers contend that what is needed to address the failings of public schooling today is more discipline and punitive measures for students who do not perform well and more standardized curriculum with “objective” instruments to measure student learning – and teacher performance – in order to develop the best practices to improve schools. Teachers and youth, corporate reformers tell us, need to be held accountable for their own failure to perform according to increasingly narrow metrics of success. When a student scores poorly on state mandated tests it is supposedly because of some kind of behavioural, cognitive, cultural, and/or linguistic deficit.<sup>4</sup> Students, and by extension their parents, their communities, and their teachers, must be missing the appropriate skills or knowledge. Following this logic, good teachers are those who use best practices to effectively fix the deficit by providing the correct mix of knowledge and skills and thereby improving test scores which are posited as *the* metric of success. Even the use of terms like “best practice” indicates the extent to which neoclassical economic thinking has become dominant within education policy discourse.

Thankfully, the three books under review here thoroughly and powerfully dismantle the reigning dogma that is corporate education reform, which is the status quo in school districts across the United States. Drawing on a mountain of high quality research in education policy and practice, which corporate reformers persistently ignore, the authors demonstrate, for instance, how ineffective the much ballyhooed “value added” metrics tied to annual improvements on state administered standardized tests are in evaluating (read disciplining) teachers or in evaluating students improvement. These books narrate the ways in which Chicago teachers conducted and drew on the best research in education to completely and dramatically reframe the public discussion on what is wrong with public education, but also providing some well-researched ideas for alternative reforms of the school system. Indeed, this is why, when asked

4. Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children* (New York: New Press, 1995).

who they trust more, Chicagoans were three times more likely to trust and support Chicago teachers than the Rahm Emanuel administration<sup>5</sup>.

While they tread much of the same ground, each book contributes a different piece of the puzzle to how teachers might become a more empowered group of workers so that they no longer feel helpless in the face of the corporate onslaught against their profession and against public education. These books go a long way in helping us understand how and why Chicago teachers, along with their mayor and district leaders, now understand what the union can accomplish in terms of leading a city-wide resistance for education justice, a struggle which has come to be widely supported by the public. And as a result, teachers – along with many others both in and outside of Chicago – have rediscovered the power of a social justice or social movement unionism that builds power across the working class through organizing in workplaces and communities. Indeed, one would have a difficult time finding an article or book published in recent years about the plight of organized labour or the possibilities of a revitalized left in Canada or the US that does not mention the shining example of the Chicago teachers.

Like the practices of some of the country's major teacher union locals in the US, scholarship on teacher unionism has also been undergoing a renaissance in recent years, with historians moving beyond the examination of why and how teachers formed unions or professional association, to include the rivalry and parallel historical development of the nation's two national teachers' organization, the National Education Association (NEA) and the AFT.

While contemporary historical scholarship on US teachers' unions has remained focused on the large urban teachers unions in New York City, Newark, and Chicago, it has also plunged the depths of the archives and life history interviews with teacher union activists to uncover the complicated relationships between teachers and African American and Latino communities; between teachers' power and civil rights.<sup>6</sup> In many ways these works can be seen as interrogating issues raised in Marjorie Murphy's agenda setting work, *BlackBoard Unions*, such as the dual professional-worker identity of teachers and how it can both hinder and facilitate their activism, or the racial divide between teachers and parents.<sup>7</sup>

Many of these recent studies focus on the relationship between Black power, civil rights, and teachers' power in different urban locales, providing us with a great deal of insight for thinking about possible ways to both study the history of teachers and their unions, as well as with profound lessons to contemporary

5. Bill Ruthhart and Juan Perez Jr., "Teacher Union has Triple the Public Support of Emanuel," *Chicago Tribune*, 4 February 2016.

6. Jonna Perrillo, *Uncivil Rights: Teachers, Unions, and Race in the Battle for School Equity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

7. Marjorie Murphy, *BlackBoard Unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900–1989* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

teacher unionists. For example, Steve Golin's exploration of the Newark teachers' strikes of 1970 and 1971 offers valuable insights into transformations of political subjectivities and difference that gender can make for teachers who go to jail for engaging in collective action.<sup>8</sup> Clarence Taylor's *Reds at the Blackboard* provides a refreshing and rich examination of the Communist-led New York Teachers Union's deferred dream of establishing social justice teacher unionism in the largest and most influential school district in the country. Both books provide new ways of thinking about the complicated and evolving historical relationship between teachers as professionals, race and racism in US cities, and the dramatic shifts in what W.E.B. Debois called the colour line within and between public schools. Whether it was questions of mass action (often in defiance of the law), the dual nature of a teacher's identity of professional and worker, or the need for a more radical class *and* anti-racist teacher unionism, these works of historical scholarship speak to many of the most crucial issues that teacher unionists need to address today.

Thus, it is useful to view the three books being reviewed here as part of this emerging body of scholarship on teacher unions and the struggle for a new kind of social justice or social movement unionism. This work has emerged at a time when, as Bradbury, et al., observe in *How to Jump-Start Your Union*, we are witnessing, "the most far-reaching changes to teachers' working conditions and public standing" in the previous three decades. These changes include: the elimination or weakening of job security ("tenure"); "tying teachers' evaluations to student performance on standardized tests; and instituting merit pay, also often linked to standardized tests scores."<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, when we turn to more recent decades of education reform and what Dana Goldstein aptly calls "teacher wars,"<sup>10</sup> it is clear that, contrary to the claims of corporate reformers, the voices of teachers have been missing from the debates on what direction reforms should take for public schooling in the 21st century. As Noguera wisely observes, this is "not because teachers don't have opinions on these issues but simply because they typically don't have access to the megaphone, platform, or airwaves to be heard."<sup>11</sup> While teachers' unions do have these resources they have not been effectively using them, with local exceptions like the CTU or United Teachers of Los Angeles.

Without frontline educators working with critical researchers to articulate well-developed arguments and ideas for a more bottom up, humane reform, we have been left to suffer with education policy being dictated from on high

8. Steve Golin, *The Newark Teachers Strike: Hopes on the Line* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

9. Alexandra Bradbury, Mark Brenner, Jenny Brown, Jane Slaughter, and Samantha Winslow, *How to Jump-Start Your Union: Lessons from the Chicago Teachers* (Detroit: Labor Notes, 2014), 9.

10. Goldstein, *The Teacher Wars*.

11. Pedro Noguera, foreword to Nuñez, Michie, and Konkol, *Worth Striking For*, xiii.

by people, like Bill Gates and the Walton Foundation, who know nothing about how to educate children. And that is kind of the point. For if teachers are the problem, and business is the creative innovator that has done so many great things in other realms of society, then business is where the solutions for how to “fix” schools will be, not with teachers, who supposedly only care about their own interests and not that of their students. As Noguera rightly contends, “In the United States today, those who know the least about education have the most to say, and those who know the most have almost nothing to say at all.”<sup>12</sup> And although corporate deformers are so dominant because of their seemingly unlimited funds and access to media, a serious progressive opposition movement made up of teachers and parents has emerged to challenge this dominant deform agenda in public education, in large part due to the activism of rank-and-file educators fighting to completely transform their unions and associations.

All of this is to say that education is different from other areas of work in important ways; teachers are well placed to both reproduce structures of oppression and exploitation and to disrupt them. While teachers are certainly workers and professionals (an identity that has served historically to both constrain and enable militancy and collective action) it is vital to acknowledge that they play a special function within our contemporary capitalist world because their job is the development of young people.

These three books all examine the Chicago teachers’ experience of struggling against the corporate education deform agenda through their union, the CTU. While there is a good deal of overlap in the narratives of union transformation of the CTU, each book has unique, yet complementary objectives and emphasizes different parts of the story. Academics who study labour, and activists looking to build a revitalized working-class movement to fight for education justice and broader issues of social justice, would benefit from reading these insightful works on the Chicago experience. Each effectively elucidates some of the key lessons from the CTU, particularly as CORE has transformed it since 2010. Beyond simply taking over the union so as to better protect the union’s members, the Chicago teachers’ experience demonstrates the necessity of building a movement inside and outside of your union.

While the books all deconstruct the neoliberal war on education and how it has affected teachers in Chicago, they offer lessons not only for teachers and other education workers looking to fight back, but also provide valuable insights on how to organize in your workplace and other community institutions. Put another way, all three books, but especially *How To Jump-Start Your Union*, offer guidance on how Chicago teachers went about constructing what Alan Sears calls an “infrastructure of dissent,”<sup>13</sup> which is a network of

12. Pedro Noguera, foreword to Nuñez, Michie, and Konkol, *Worth Striking For*, xiii.

13. Alan Sears, *The Next New Left: A History of the Future* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2014).



community and workplace institutions (from union halls to bookshops, bars, and churches) that workers use to develop the culture and spaces necessary to fight for improvements in their schools, cities, and world.

Each book, in its own style, shows us how, through grassroots organizing in schools, workplace, and across different neighbourhoods, the CTU was able to become the leading institution in Chicago fighting for education justice. In the process, Chicago teachers have provided workers in and beyond Chicago a lesson in the power of collective action along with building working-class capacities across the city for further struggles. As Chicago history teacher and union activist Jen Johnson insists, the 2012 strike effectively woke up the city and the nation to the plight of poor, working-class students of colour and their teachers. Since the Chicago strike there has been a wave of other teacher actions across the country, including a proliferation of rank-and-file dissident caucuses, from Los Angeles to Philadelphia.

The first book to share these valuable experiences was *Striking for America* by Micah Uetracht. In this pithy and accessible book the author provides a passionate, well-researched, and highly engaging account of the 2012 Chicago teachers strike – a strike that has since become a central point of inspiration and hope for workers across the United States and Canada, akin to what the uprising in Madison, Wisconsin and Occupy Wall Street had been before it. Indeed, as Uetracht reveals, many of the activists that would later become leaders in the CTU had been inspired, if not directly involved, in one of these movements. Drawing on a wide range of primary and secondary sources, from interviews with teachers and parents and the author's own interactions with Chicagoans during the strike to media reports and scholarship on education policy and urban neoliberalism, *Striking for America* provides us with the backstory of how a small group of union dissidents successfully organized to transform their union and build a vibrant movement against corporate education reform. Uetracht chronicles the twists and turns taking place within the CTU, keenly dissecting the micropolitics among different groups within the union in Chicago and in its parent union, the AFT led currently by Randi Weingarten. Uetracht correctly sees the national union as a representative of the predominant and, unfortunately, less militant, democratic teacher unionism – one that is more collaborationist than confrontational in the face of the corporate assault on teachers, their unions, and public education more generally.

*Striking for America* is organized in three parts, with an introductory chapter that situates the strike and its aftermath in its historical and geographical context of Chicago, providing a useful overview, and searing indictment, of the policies and the actors that constitute the corporate education policy agenda as well as the weak, often complicit, response offered by the two national teachers' federations, AFT and the NEA. This sets the stage with a stark contrast between the CORE and the CTU's head, Karen Lewis and Weingarten's cooperative.



In the second part of the book Uetricht proceeds to navigate the circumstances that led a small group of dissident Chicago teachers and paraprofessionals to get together to create a group – the forerunner of CORE – to challenge the once feisty, militant, and influential CTU. It emerged at first simply to try and do the organizing that their union leadership refused to do, in the hopes that this would provoke them into action. That is, CORE members wanted to see their union get into the fight against school closures and take a stand against the education policies that were making life miserable for teachers, students and parents in Chicago.

Of the three books, *Strike for America* and *How to Jump-Start Your Union* provide the most probing account of how CORE went from a small opposition caucus in 2008, working with mostly African American and Latino community groups to stop school closures to eventually winning the elected leadership of the 26,000 member CTU in 2010. While a majority of CTU members would have likely been fine with electing a more competent new leadership to take over and do a better job in defending their interests, CORE members (both in and out of elected leadership and staff) pushed forward with a program of total union transformation – a transformation that placed membership control, union democracy, and a broader vision of social justice at the centre of the union's mission. These books chronicle the radical changes to union praxis that have been made by CORE since 2010, which made it possible for the CTU to go on to wage its first strike in over 25 years, and in the process, garner huge public support and win the first major victory for organized labour in quite some time. The authors of *How to Jump Start Your Union* and *Strike for America* likewise demonstrate how CORE would have not been able to effect this transformation without the aid of a number of critical allies among African American and Latino neighbourhood-based organizations. Together they have been able to create one of the most vibrant urban movements for education justice to emerge in over 50 years.

In narrating the battle over Chicago schools and the attempt of the small, but ever expanding contingent of its teachers and community allies to transform their union from top to bottom, these books deliver engaged, well-researched, and wide-ranging accounts of more than just a localized fight against what activists describe as education deform in one city. They elucidate the national and global dimensions and import of the fight for education justice in Chicago. These books persuasively argue that the CTU under CORE's leadership is just as important of a struggle over a different kind of trade unionism, both for teachers and all other workers. Whether it is described as social justice or social movement unionism, at the heart of this alternative model is the conviction that any strategy for labour's revitalization needs to be deeply democratic, membership-driven, and one that engages in a mix of old and new tactics in a form of creative militancy that is not afraid of taking risks or challenging its traditional allies in the Democratic Party.

As someone who shared many of the same experiences that Uetricht chronicles, including the joyous culture of solidarity that electrified Chicago, at least for a brief time during the strike, I can say with confidence that in *Striking For America* Uetricht effectively captures what it felt like to be in the fight for education justice and in solidarity with the Chicago teachers. His vivid description of the lively, loud, and liberating picket lines that ran from 6:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. each day of the week, followed by a massive afternoon rally or march by all of the union's members and their supporters masterfully illustrates the power a well-organized strike of public employees can have in today's United States. The author perceptively contrasts this with those academics and union leaders who no longer view the strike as an effective weapon in the arsenal of organized labour. The whole book could be read as a sharp rebuttal to these perspectives.

Throughout his tale of rank-and-file rebellion Uetricht illustrates how Chicago teachers have been in sharp defiance of labour's traditional political ally, the Democratic Party, which essentially runs the city of Chicago as a one-party show. And to some extent this is no doubt correct. After all, to challenge school closures and the autocratic system of mayoral control of the Chicago Public Schools meant to challenge Democratic mayor of Chicago, Rahm Emanuel, and his longtime predecessor (until 2010), Richard M. Daley. As *Strike for America* and the other books under review demonstrate, there is a firm bipartisan consensus on expanding neoliberal education reform and Mayor Emanuel has been a key player in an expansive network of corporate education deformers. Indeed, while Uetricht persuasively argues that unions need to continue to challenge the Democratic Party, which he rightly notes has not in practice been a champion for organized labour or working people in many decades, despite the extensive and ongoing support the Democrats continue to receive from union officials, the major weakness of his book is his overstatement of just how much the CTU and CORE has forged an electoral strategy independent of the Democratic Party, either with their 2012 strike or their subsequent organizing for a more socially just school system and city, which included a failed attempt to unseat Emanuel in the 2015 mayoral election.

Although Uetricht takes note of the many challenges and limitations facing the CTU and organized labour more broadly, including the lack of an effective independent political strategy, neither he nor the CTU under CORE's direction point to any such alternative, although their work in building a new organization called the United Working Families is a clearly an expressed attempt to move towards some kind of alternative political strategy independent of the Democratic Party. While this inability to develop an independent or alternative strategy to electoral politics has been a classic, and perhaps most important problem for organized labour in the United States and many other countries, overstating just how much the CTU has broken with the failed strategy of unions hitching their fates to the Democrats, does not push the

discussion forward. In fact, it gives us a false sense that the leadership of the CTU and its members are more fully aware of the failing of this strategy than I believe they actually are. While I found myself wishing that the author was correct on this point, my own research and experience on these matters tells me something different.

Before labour might develop this needed alternative working class political strategy we need a more accurate gauge of what unions – both leaders and members – believe and do politically. This criticism is offered in a comradely spirit and should not detract from what is otherwise a sober and politically astute analysis of what the CTU has done since being taken over by CORE in 2010, which Uetricht explores in the final two chapters of *Striking for America*.

Like *Strike For America*, *How to Jump-Start Your Union* contends that the 2012 strike once again showed us that the strike remains labour's most powerful weapon in the fight against exploitation and oppression, but to be effective in the present political and economic conjuncture, especially for public sector workers, old-fashioned strikes that aim to simply shut down production are inadequate. Indeed, as Joe Burns has compellingly argued in both of his books on reviving the strike, with the latest focused on the uniquely important dynamics of the public sector, only a different kind of union can create a different kind of strike.<sup>14</sup>

*How to Jump-Start Your Union* goes beyond a simple narrative account of the 2012 strike, or an explication of the issues at the centre of the strike, although it does provide both of these things. This book sets itself the task of functioning as a nuts-and-bolts manual for how to create a rank-and-file rebellion in one's local, similar to the famous *Troublemaker's Handbook*.<sup>15</sup> This book is thus a response to all of those teacher and union activists I have met who, upon listening to me talk about CORE and the CTU, inevitably ask for a playbook that they can use to transform their own unions.

What is striking about *How to Jump-Start Your Union* is that it draws out and highlights the radical nature of CORE's critique of the racism of education reform and the spatial organization of public schools in Chicago, which the CTU bravely called "educational apartheid" in their landmark report, "The Schools Chicago Students Deserve: Research-based Proposals to Strengthen Elementary and Secondary Education in the Chicago Public Schools" (2012). The authors recognize and praise how this departs from more traditional, bread-and-butter focused union reform efforts, which often collapse once they win an election. For instance, the fact that CORE has maintained itself as an organization with relative independence from the CTU, with one foot inside

14. Joe Burns, *Reviving the Strike* (Brooklyn: IG Publishing, 2011), and *Strike Back: Using the Militant Tactics of Labor's Past to Reignite Public Sector Unionism Today* (Brooklyn: IG Publishing, 2014).

15. Dan LaBotz, *A Troublemaker's Handbook: How to Fight Back Where You Work –and Win!* (Detroit: Labor Notes, 1991).

and one outside of the union, is both novel and essential for those would-be reformers looking to emulate CORE's successes in their own union. *How to Jump-Start Your Union* follows a similar style and format as the *Troublemaker's Handbook* so that it might serve as a resource for activism. In this it differs dramatically from the other two books, even though these other works were also clearly meant to shed light on the activist practice of Chicago teachers so as to offer insight for those looking to emulate the Chicago case of union transformation. As the authors explain it they "spell out CTU's organizing model, on tasks ranging from talking to your co-workers to building lasting community alliances to carrying out a strike vote.... Those who want to run a caucus or a contract campaign will find out how here."<sup>16</sup>

Usefully, each chapter of *How to Jump-Start your Union* concludes with lessons in point form. They stress organizing with like-minded teachers through action and building alliances with community groups by treating them as equals, rather than simply asking for help or coming to them with predetermined goals. While the lessons are too many to summarize here, I cite Chapter 3's lessons, which include: making activism more enjoyable, welcoming for new people, and making it a place and an activity where teachers with no experience can learn how to organize.

It is important to note here that the books under review are not simply triumphalist chronicles of the CTU under the leadership of CORE; none of them should simply be read as a manifesto of hope for union dissidents, nor a naïve ode to the power of social movement unionism as embodied by the CTU. Each book provides a sober assessment of the limitations of change in any one local union as well as the political and economic challenges that US teachers confront in the present period and each book is careful to offer a balanced assessment of what CORE and their community allies have been able to do through the union. In particular, these books offer a critical evaluation of what was won and not won as a result of the strike, as well as the fairly dismal events that have transpired since the strike's conclusion. Among the tally here we have to include the largest shutdown of public schools in the history of the United States, with 50 schools being shuttered in 2013, predominantly, and predictably, in African American and Latino working-class communities across the west and south sides of Chicago. As such, readers are left inspired but also keenly aware of just how much work we still need to do in order to transform our unions and build the kind of working-class political movement that is necessary to not simply defend public education but to transform US society. That being said, while all three books leave us with this conclusion, none really puts it this starkly nor offers much in the way of how teachers and other workers might move beyond rank-and-file rebellion and militancy to a different kind of political movement and project for the working class.

16. Bradbury, et al., *How to Jump-Start Your Union*, 6.

All three books rightfully stress just how vital it was for the CTU's success to frame these policies as constituting a form of educational apartheid. "The teacher activists and the community activists agreed that racism and gentrification were behind the closings. The teachers 'were willing to partner with neighborhood folks because that's who they had the most in common with,' said education organizer Jitu Brown of the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, an early ally in these fights."<sup>17</sup>

As I write this review a key community activist and ally of CORE, Jitu Brown, along with parents and other activists from the Bronzeville neighbourhood in Chicago's South Side, have just ended a hunger strike after 33 days. The strike was carried out to demand the reopening of Dyett High School, the one neighbourhood high school in their community. The Dyett hunger strikers have enjoyed strong support from across the city, including from Chicago teachers. This fight is a key anti-racist and economic battle for a new school to be opened, based on a highly detailed plan that was developed by those same community members that are putting their bodies on the line right now.

In one of many informative boxes that provide succinct descriptions about either the CTU, education policy, or Chicago, *How to Jump-Start Your Union* provides an excellent discussion of Bronzeville on the south shore of Lake Michigan, where it "was once known as 'Black Metropolis' and a national hub of African American culture."<sup>18</sup> Now it has become one of the most gentrified "communities in Chicago." As Brown observes, this section of the city was subjected to the "Mid-South Plan," which was a "calculated attempt to destabilize the neighborhood's working class black population and replace local black schools – despite their more than adequate performance – with selective charters that would cater to the young professionals, many also African American, who were moving into the neighborhood."<sup>19</sup>

Similarly to the other two books discussed, *Worth Striking For: Why Education Policy is Every Teacher's Concern (Lessons from Chicago)* recounts the rise of CORE and the transformation of the CTU (in much less detail than the other two books). In addition, this book offers something quite a bit different from the other two under review: Nuñez, Michie, and Konkol deftly use the 2012 strike as a frame through which to analyze the educational policy and practice issues at the heart of the strike – those issues that the CTU elaborated in their magnificent 2012 manifesto, *The Schools Chicago Students Deserve* (which members could breakdown for you on any given picket line as the reason why they were on strike). Because it was written by former and current teachers-turned-education-scholars, *Worth Striking For* does the best job of dismantling the rationale of "standards-based accountability" (high stakes testing) and other market-based policies that constitute corporate-backed

17. Bradbury, et al., *How to Jump-Start Your Union*, 13.

18. Bradbury, et al., *How to Jump-Start Your Union*, 14.

19. Bradbury, et al., *How to Jump-Start Your Union*, 14.

education deform. They draw on the latest research to show the bankrupt nature of the educational outcomes of these policies.

Although the other two books here do provide important discussion of education policy, especially with respect to an analysis of the corporate or market-oriented reforms, *Worth Striking For* makes the more explicit and direct case that teachers need to “make time and space for policy.”<sup>20</sup> While all three authors have been classroom teachers, either in Chicago or Los Angeles, they each found their way to the Center for Policy Studies and Social Justice at Concordia University in Chicago.

The central issues at the heart of the 2012 strike are nicely summarized: smaller classes; a better day for students, rather than simply a longer one; fair compensation; and job security, but in *Worth Striking For*, Nuñez et al., probe the depths of the ideas underlying each of these demands, drawing on a range of education scholarship to relate not only to the day-to-day working life of a teacher, but also how they affect students’ learning. Each of these demands is put in conversation with the broader transformations in education discussed above, and related to a discussion of how they articulate to different, often conflicting, ideas about the purpose of schooling. The authors concentrate their analysis on what they perceive to be the most vital shifts to occur in education in the past decade. But in connecting these policy shifts to how they are lived and experienced by real classroom educators, including themselves, Nuñez et al., masterfully show how the issues at stake in the 2012 strike affect students and expand a richer, more socially just vision for public education.

While the first chapter of *Worth Striking For* discusses in brief the history of the Chicago teachers’ strike, they quickly move on to interrogate the multiple ways that education has been understood in the United States. In each of the subsequent chapters, the authors grapple with a demand of Chicago teachers, exploring its relation to education policy and philosophy. In doing so this book provides a rich, rigorous, and wide-ranging analysis of what is at stake in the war over public education as it relates to the search for a democratic, egalitarian, and socially just society. The chapters also include individually authored vignettes which allow the authors to explore how the policy and philosophy of education discussed in the chapter has personally touched their lives as teachers. And, for the reader who wants more, they end each chapter with a list of suggested titles for further reading.

In these later chapters the authors make important points about how recent reforms have not only hurt African American and low-income students in a disproportionate manner but also how these policies have adversely affected culturally and linguistically diverse learners, where “schools have moved away from nurturing the differences that make for a vibrant democracy.”<sup>21</sup> Importantly, the authors relate this analysis to a deeper discussion of the

20. Nuñez, Michie, and Konkol, *Worth Striking For*, 2.

21. Nuñez, Michie, and Konkol, *Worth Striking For*, 5.



disturbing demographic shifts in the teaching workforce, with many of the recent policies resulting in a far more white and middle class teaching force than we have seen in decades. Non-white teachers, it is not said enough, have been prime targets of corporate deform, with non-white students suffering as a result.

### **Conclusion: Lessons for a Different Kind of Labour Movement**

IN TELLING THE ORIGIN STORY of CORE and how they not only pushed the union in a more militant and progressive direction, these books show the detailed ways of doing so, which include making sure parent, student, and community voices are centred alongside teachers and other school workers. There has been a major emphasis in Chicago on building school by school, community by community, or organizing and capacity building to fight locally. In this CORE has used the resources of the CTU to show people how to do campaigns, write press releases, and confront the school board at their own meetings: “strategies for building your movement within a school.” “They stood behind people, not in front of them,” one long time Chicago teacher observes.<sup>22</sup>

While documenting some of the important contractual wins by the CTU in 2012, *Strike for America* and the other two books all narrow in on the same theme: it was the capacity building within the union and among its grassroots allies throughout the city and across the nation that was perhaps the most important victory of the 2012 strike. As the Seattle Teachers have just illustrated in their week-long strike in 2015, which was successful in winning many key issues beyond mere wage and benefit gains, the transformation of the CTU by CORE has served as an important model for other union dissidents across the United States who have likewise been striving to make their unions into democratic, militant working-class vehicles of struggle and social justice. By not simply providing examples of rank-and-file reform efforts that have taken off since the 2012 strike, Uetricht usefully contrasts the experience of the CTU strike with that of school bus drivers in New York City, who themselves went on a more traditional strike later in 2012. This strike, sadly, did not seek to organize public support or to put forward a positive vision of transforming the services they provided, as was done in the 2012 report, “The School Chicago Students Deserve.” This strike failed to win a decent contract or fight off concessions, nor did it serve to ignite the membership of the union or the wider public.

One of the most powerful lessons illuminated in all three books is the necessity of unions, and social movements more generally, for creating spaces of mass collective action that can be militant and confrontational on the one hand, and family friendly, creative, and fun on the other. In so doing, we can

22. Bradbury, et al., *How to Jump-Start Your Union*, 25.



organize our resistance in a way that leaves participants not exhausted, or dejected and demoralized, but rather energized and ready to fight. As all of the books demonstrate, the key to making such organizational and cultural changes that allow for the development of such a movement is a combination of effective change from above (taking over the union's executive, creating a new organizing and research department, for instance) with the cultivation of a vibrant workplace and citywide organization of rank-and-file leadership that has power over the kinds of creative actions they want to organize, including a march on the Mayor's home during the strike. Equally pivotal to the CTU's revitalization has been the development of their own research-based critique of existing schooling in Chicago and an alternative vision for creating a better system for school children and those whose job it is to make sure they receive a good education.

As Nuñez et al., write: "If teachers do not have a voice in U.S. education policy, there may no longer be a vocation of teaching."<sup>23</sup> All three books make a powerful case that the United States needs a more politically engaged teaching force. Nuñez et al., rightly insist, "When teachers are informed about how education policy intersects with local community issues, and they are vocal in advocating the policies that best serve families, students, and schools, they can build the kind of momentum that made Chicago into, as a CTU report describes, 'a sea of red.'"<sup>24</sup> But, as all three books make clear, rather than relenting in their attack on teachers and public schools in Chicago, the corporate forces arrayed against teachers have only intensified since the 2012 strike. Carlo Fanelli and I have argued elsewhere that this is indicative of the limitations or inadequacies of militancy alone.<sup>25</sup>

While the CTU has been an incredible inspiration to many teachers and union dissidents in Chicago and elsewhere, as discussed above, they remain isolated within a fairly conservative labour movement in Chicago and as a result have failed to develop a more effective, different, alternative working class politics in the city.

We need to ask some more probing questions of the Chicago experience than those raised in these books. If we fail to pose such challenging questions of our movements, both successes and failures, I think we do a disservice to the struggles of movement participants who are fighting for education justice, as well as to the deeper question of what it will take to build the kind of radical, transformative unions and movements needed today not only to stand up and

23. Nuñez, Michie, and Konkol, *Worth Striking For*, 2.

24. Nuñez, Michie, and Konkol, *Worth Striking For*, 9. See also Sean Noonan, Stephanie Farmer, Fran Huckaby, and Chris Poulos, "A Sea of Red: Chicago Teacher Union Members Reflect on How the Social Organizing Model of Unionism Helped Win the Union's 2012 Contract Campaign" (Chicago: Chicago Teachers Union, 2014).

25. Carlo Fanelli and Peter Brogan, "Austerity, Labour and Social Mobilizations: Rebuilding Trade Union and Working Class Politics," *Studies in Social Justice* 8, 2 (2014): 113–117.

fight back but to push beyond the authoritarian neoliberal capitalism that workers in the United States and across the world are confronting.

While we draw hope, inspiration, and lessons from the brave organizing in Chicago among teachers, parents, and community members, like the Dyett Hunger Strikers, scholars and activists need to seriously think through why we keep losing in spite of doing such amazing organizing and taking direct action to create a more egalitarian and just world. How, for example, should we understand the plight of the revitalized Chicago Teachers Union in the context of a city and state that has not seen any similar transformation across other unions? Because without wider radical transformations occurring in other unions and without the construction of a politically independent left organizing across the city of Chicago and beyond its borders, Chicago teachers and others fighting for education justice continue to fight a protracted defensive battle, with too few allies and too many enemies. We need to acknowledge that, as we hold up the Chicago teachers as a ray of hopeful sunshine and seek to emulate their successful transformation and organization of their union, leaders inside the CTU are themselves looking around for ideas of what to do now. They are faced with these difficult questions day in and day out, running up against the very real limitations of the uniqueness of their union as they continue to fight in a harsh, authoritarian political and economic context.

More than books about one union's transformation and its fights against the corporate assault on teachers, their unions, and public education, *Worth Striking For*, *How to Jump-Start Your Union*, and *Strike for America* offer many lessons for activists and scholars who have documented, lamented, and resisted the continued drift of most American and Canadian unions away from their historical mission to militantly fight for public education and a society where working people can live a decent and dignified existence. These books are beautifully written, rigorously researched and will prove useful to those looking for a hopeful yet critical assessment of what the CTU has achieved in a short span of seven years.

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