**DRAFT! - Please do not forward!**

**Note of Camaraderie to our Sisters and Brothers in Struggle**

The Chicago Teacher’s strike of 2012 was an important moment for the struggleagainst neoliberal “reforms” to public education, as well as for the trade union and working class movement as a whole. As teachers in Oakland, California involved in efforts at building organization and struggle of parents, teachers, and students, we have been inspired and challenged by the solidarity that was demonstrated on the streets of Chicago during the strike, and we deeply respect the years of strategic work that went into organizing a base of teachers that was able to carry out such a strike. The experiences of Chicago have provided us with an example of a higher level of militancy and struggle than we have seen in decades.

CORE and the CTU deserve the most recognition for this. As part of this recognition, we wish to deeply engage and scrutinize the strategies that were used to carry out the preparation, execution, and follow up from the strike. Our engagement and scrutiny of these strategies comes from a place of wanting to carry forward at the highest level the struggle against neoliberal capitalist reforms from our location in Oakland; at times this will mean pointing out aspects of the strategy used in Chicago that we are critical of, while at other times it will mean putting forward some initial thoughts on alternatives grounded in our experiences in Oakland. We come from a humble place of respect and camaraderie with our sisters and brothers in Chicago, and we hope that our engagement and scrutiny is taken as a sign of respect for the hard work put into the 2012 strike.

**Introduction**

Throughout the country we have seen repeated attacks on teacher unions; these attacks are occurring in the context of an all out assault on unions and working class people as a whole. From Madison to Chicago to Oakland and beyond we have see Democrats and Republicans carrying out legislation that seeks to undermine the gains that workers struggles and trade unions have won for their members; we refer here to seniority, health care, wage increases, and positive developments in working conditions. These gains have been achieved by the movement of working people getting organized formally and informally, in unions and without them at times. All of these forms of movement, organization and struggle are part of what we refer to as class struggle.

We see the movement of teachers, school workers, students, and parents as part of the class struggle of workers against bosses in the capitalist system; while teachers are unionized for the most part, and parents and students are not, we still see them all as working class people brought into relation to one another through the school as an institution. We will expand below on the implications of seeing all these sections of working people in relation to one another, and how these relationships have manifested in struggle in Chicago and Oakland.

Recently there have been many different reflections on the Chicago teacher strike of 2012 and its implications for organizing in labor unions, in community, and more broadly the class struggle. This focus is well-deserved, for the strike—in both its leadup and aftermath--have pointed out many potentially powerful developments and lessons for the working class. We hope to build off the best of these analyses, propose some ideas that have been overlooked, and consider how these lessons can shape the upcoming struggles that we as education workers, community members, activists and anti-capitalist revolutionaries may very well be engaging in soon. We hope CORE and other education activists will correct us if any of our information about the character of the strike is factually incorrect and will challenge us where our analysis and proposals are divergent. We look forward to a broader and deeper engagement of left rank and file teachers across the country in learning from, analyzing and sharing perspectives on how we can all strengthen the struggle.

**Chicago Teacher’s Strike: New Strategy for Class Struggle or Same Old Trade-Unionism?**

One set of debates around the CTU strike centers on the following question: to what extent was the strike a reflection of a new form of class struggle, breaking down barriers between teachers, parents, and students to engage in a mutual and militant struggle, and to what extent was it a reflection of traditional trade unionism?

Some analysts have claimed that at best the CTU strike was quality trade unionism, and at worst a continuation of the opportunist legacy of teacher unionism that dates back at least to the late 1960's and the racialized tensions between a majority Jewish teaching population polarized against the black community in the Ocean Hill Brownsville strike[[1]](#footnote-0). (A simplistic explanation of that struggle is that Black parents wanted more control over their schools and mostly white teachers were trying to keep their threatened jobs.) These critics cite the incorporation of parents and students in support of the strike as tokenistic, and critique the CTU's demands and program for education for not acknowledging the ways in which schools have reproduced white supremacy and class divisions among majority black and brown working class schools. While it's certainly important for teacher and education centered struggles to strategically target educational practices and institutions that reproduce race and class relations, analysts who critique the CTU strike on these grounds miss the forest for the trees. The amount of parent support that the strike received is a positive contrast to the racial tensions between teachers and community that has indeed existed prior to and post Ocean Hill Brownsville. One commentator (Jack Gerson - unpublished manuscript) has cited the CTU strike as an awakening from the hangover of Ocean Hill Brownsville. We agree that the solidarity demonstrated between black and brown parents and students with teachers of various racial identities is a concrete step in a positive direction. We also acknowledge the need to build from this and not be content with the limitations of this solidarity. The classwide (meaning across the working class, including parents, teachers, school workers and students of varying racial backgrounds) connections, discussions, and emerging solidarity that came out of the process of building for the strike needs to be deepened and developed, but in order to do so we must first recognize it for what it is rather than be dismissive of it as Garvey and others are.

On the other hand there are the cheerleaders of the strike which laud the ostensible parent, teacher, and student solidarity (what we have heard is unclear as to other school workers’ involvement) as indicative of a new threshold of class struggle crossed by the CTU, with CORE as its leadership[[2]](#footnote-1). Indeed, there was significant parent support--surveys say 66%--of teachers during the strike. The potential of this mutual support is not negligible and represents what we believe to be just the starting point to how relationships between parents, school workers, teachers, and students can further develop. However, what these analysts miss is the fact that the orientation of mutual struggle was all but dropped as soon as the strike was started. This orientation had been exemplified by the broad based anti-school closure struggles that were key in building CORE's connection with parents, students, and organizations representing these groups, as well as other non-profit community organizations. While the vestigial force of these past struggles was key in galvanizing the base that supported the CTU in the strike, traditional, legalistic contractual trade-unionism asserted itself as the dominant framework of the strike.

In a similar vein with these understandings has emerged a 3rd take on the strike[[3]](#footnote-2). This position most often cheers the historical nature of the strike in terms of resisting neoliberal attacks on public education but then goes on to critique the political demands and program of CTU as too limited and teacher-focused--and even not fully supporting teachers’ needs. These critiques also challenge the leadership for not being tenacious enough during the strike and, more importantly, for not having enough foresight to prepare the membership for a longer, possibly illegal strike. Due to the lack of preparation, the thinking goes, the balance of forces was against CTU to continue in a longer strike for wider demands, like lower class sizes, that almost certainly would have been ruled illegal by the courts. Since the strike did not address these other demands, the problems in Chicago have worsened in the strike’s aftermath. As David Kaplan writes: “In particular, [the strike] was unable to: significantly slow the mayor’s crusade to close scores of schools; halt district funding for mostly non-union, privately run charter schools; stop the lengthening of the school day and year without adequate employee compensation; or prevent the establishment of a teacher evaluation system based to an important degree on unreliable student scores on standardized tests.” This is bittersweet situation we have to deal with. We agree with these critiques since they neither whole-heartedly accept nor reject the strike but instead take it as a very important starting point from which we can accelerate the struggle to defend and transform public education in the US. It is with this in mind that we wish to further develop this third line of thinking.

We start with the question of inadequate preparation. Really, however, this is not a question of doing more of what CTU was already doing but engaging in a different strategy of organizing school bases altogether. The organizers in Chicago did not push as far as we will need to do in the future to break down existing conceptions of struggle--dominated by, at best, militant trade union organizing and work with community partners on a coalitional basis--to imagine the possibilities of new forms of working class combativity and organization that could have been nurtured before the strike and tempered in the heat of struggle. For instance, based on conversations with various CORE members and supporters our understanding is that the organizational expression of parent solidarity that the strike invoked was through the mediums of parent organizations and other non-profit organizations.

Contrast this to the lead up to the strike that involved a heavy campaign to ensure each school in Chicago had a CTU representative. This is a useful framework for organizing teachers because rather than assume that teachers are inherently connected to the union, CORE pushed to materialize the existing connections at the school site level. Rather than replicate this strategy in relationship to parents and students, as far as we know, on an organizational level CORE relied on forming coalitions with existing non-profit parent and student organizations rather than organizing committees of parents and students at each individual school. The problem here is that non-profit groups are almost never organizations built around independent and militant class struggle politics - that is, they are not necessarily organizations that are developing the mass leadership of parents and students at the school site level - and often are guilty of very paternalistic and liberal political tendencies, including having financial ties to capitalist foundationsand political ties to the democratic party.

In our experience in Oakland, having a coalitional strategy with nonprofit organizations does little to carry out the difficult task of organizing parents and students in an analogous way as CORE organized teachers; while teachers are unionized as waged workers, parents and students are usually organized as if they were simply consumers of education. Parents and students being identified as consumers leads to some important implications, most importantly in altering how the struggle for social change operates. As consumers, the main overriding desire is for greater and better services as delivered by whoever is the service provider. In most districts this is the district management and school board, with influence from higher levels of government. Critically, when organized as consumers, students and parents relate to another agent as the bearer of power, making this relationship essentially mediated, i.e. students and parents’ power is not directly expressed but dependent on the governing bodies’ decision making power—which in the end only really exists as far as we, the education workers and community members, allow it to. Often, this leads to a lobbyist mindset of petitioning for changes, a relationship usually further mediated through non-profits. Powerfully in Chicago--and not to be underappreciated--parents began relating to teachers as their representative in improving schools. Parents were in support of teachers. Parents wore red and walked picket lines for teachers. Parents across the city were 66% in favor of teachers. All of this is important and while we should not underestimate the change this represents, especially after decades of disunity and defeats, we should also not, again because of decades of disunity and defeats, assume this represents the pinnacle of what we must strive for. Crucially, in Chicago, the parent and student support was fundamentally passive. Parents were in support of teachers, who were the active agent of social change, but parents themselves didn’t identify themselves as on an “attendance strike” and parents weren’t active decision-makers in the strategy and outcome of the strike. Let us explain more.

We must strategize and enact a distinct approach that situates parents and students as unwaged workers involved not only in wage labor at their own workplaces (outside the school) but in unwaged labor as participants in the development of the student as a future (or present) worker. Parents and students both contribute to the academic, social, and emotional development of students just as much as the teacher, though in distinct ways of course. Because of this reality parents and students should be organized as unwaged workers rather than have their interests mediated through school districts as service providers, through non-profit and staffers as consumer advocates, or even simply through teachers as explained above. This latter relationship fundamentally rests on the self-interest of capitalist institutions to provide services and on teachers to represent the full interests of the working class that works in around schools in the reproduction of our children. Instead, we should see parents and students as workers involved in institutions that, depending on the balance of forces, benefit more either the capitalists or the producers (i.e., parents, students, teachers, and other education workers).

Further we should see parents and students as having power directly in their unwaged worksite—i.e. the school—versus in the halls of school boards and district management. Consider, concretely, school-site committees composed of all sections of waged school workers, parents, and students who could analyze the conditions of their individual schools, the district as a whole, and formulate demands that would connect their individual schools to the broader school system in their city. This type of formation would need to be built much like the network of CTU reps was built in the lead up to CORE taking over official CTU leadership and eventually building for the 2012 strike: consistent work on the ground among the ranks of the school community. A network of school based committees would have the power to reach broad ranks of the school community in order to develop the leadership, political education, and strategic orientation of all workers (or future workers) in relation to schools. Organizationally, this workers’ power should take the form common to all workers fighting for their self-interest in a particular sector, that of union-like organizations. And like any other union, the workers’ power would be fundamentally based in the ability to either start, stop, or otherwise impose control on the work process through direct action.

This is counterposed to many non-profit and education worker unions’ current approach to negotiations which is fundamentally based on being good partners with school districts. School districts in many ways are under control of capitalist interests. They can have school board members who are pro-corporate reform, even to the point of being funded by our corporate “philanthropists.” Increasingly, many administrative members are trained and sometimes even paid by these philanthropists, notably through Eli Broad’s Superintendent Academy. And on a more general level capitalism inflicts control through the means of budget cuts—which should always be understood as politically negotiable depending on the balance of forces and never economically “inevitable.” Beyond budget cuts we have the corporate policies of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top to deal with. For all these reasons current education policies and their local executors—school districts—can in no way be seen as partners in education. All attempts to negotiate with these politics expecting good will or collaboration only leads to confusion and demoralization amongst all education workers.

Thus, while the form of school based committees is important to understand, another key aspect of school site committees are the politics of the committees. We must be vigilant in our caucuses not becoming new but not really improved "from the ranks" versions of the existing bureaucratized non-profit and union organizations, that strive for nothing more than “union democracy,” regardless of the union’s relationship to other school workers, parents and students. To avoid this, the political content of school committees should be based on at least the following three central points. 1) They must commit to being anti-austerity (against all cutbacks, closures, and downgrades of existing educational institutions; for fully funded education but only through funds derived from capitalist profits), 2) anti-collaborationist (against negotiating with the district and the bosses on their terms and in their institutions and against reliance on the corporate political parties—Democrats and Republicans—to the exclusion of independent, mass, direct action orientations) and 3) anti-repression (against the criminalization of students and the repression of education workers’ protests, such as the occupation of Oakland’s Lakeview Elementary in June 2012 or Seattle’s recent testing boycott). An important expression of these politics in today’s context would mean not capitulating to labor laws which keep teachers and other unionized workers from striking for broad campaigns such as those against school closures, wasteful testing, and punitive policies against students including rampant police presence on school campuses. Such a focus can broadly unite many sections of school communities around a specific set of politics: anti-capitalism, anti-repression, and anti-collaborationism grounded in the concrete expressions of these forms of exploitation, oppression and social control.

A final key element in establishing school site committees is recognizing that such committees require another independent organization to start them and hold them through the choppy waters at the beginning. This organization should have a clear understanding of the strategy we’re putting forward, should be committed to the politics we have charted out above, and be prepared to move patiently but also decisively in the correct moments. It is not a union caucus or a union-caucus-in-development. It must maintain its independence from all mainstream institutions even when it helps start union caucuses, school site committees, or other organizations. It will likely not become a mass organization and its parameters are better defined by maintaining clear and radical politics. The reason why this type of organization is important is because it can support the development of independent politics that are not subsumed into the structures of trade union legalism, nor beholden to the dictates of school district officials or local administrators; rather, the political framework of such organizations can be determined independently by the school workers, students, and parents directly involved in building the organization. Additionally, these spaces can be organized so that activists from many different political backgrounds can come together and have comradely debate and discussion over the types of interventions and strategies that they seek to implement in campaigns, actions, and participation in union and school site spaces. To be clear, this is our strategic intention behind what we are building with ClassRoom Struggle. We hope that what we have developed in ClassRoom Struggle represents this type of organization in development and will be able to in the future.

**Oakland’s Case Study: 2013 Fight Against Destruction of Adult Education in OUSD**

To point out more concretely what we are talking about we want to share our experience of organizing against the destruction of Adult Education programs in Oakland. This example is by no means a full blown expression of our ideas, and is a micro example in comparison to the CTU strike, but we think it is useful to point to one of our experiences in order to concretely illustrate what we believe we must see more of. This struggle took place in the spring of 2013 and its goal was to halt a death blow to Adult Education programs by organizing with parent-students (they were both parents of children in K-12 schools and the students in the Adult Ed classes) and teachers (who in the Adult Education program were sparsely unionized, precarious education workers.) This struggle could not have happened without the intervention of certain non-Adult Ed teachers who are members of ClassRoom Struggle nor could have it happened without the reciprocal leadership of parents and Adult Ed teachers.

The organizing was strongest on the school site level where relationships already existed from daily school life but it was key that we built up organization on a district-wide level. To this end, Adult Ed teachers tended to be the ones who organized the most across school sites since they already had working relationships, and thus, organization across school sites.

Parents, however, crucially stepped up the level of organization by going directly to other school sites to build support for the struggle amongst other parent-students, and doing so by organizing out of the centers of the schools themselves; at times, these meetings were organized during school hours since the parents knew that that was the hour at which they could all meet to discuss their campaign. Some teachers took bold moves to facilitate these meetings while on-the-clock, which brought down heat from their administrators, with some teachers threatened with being fired if they continued to “allow” the parents to autonomously direct the use of their class time. This type of intimidation by management lead some teachers to lose hope or pursue “safer” more lobbyist type strategies. However, the parents continued to push for city-wide meetings during the hours of the school day and networking across school sites to make their plans for direct action against the school board continue. While the teachers were apprehensive about this, the parents’ work eventually carried the teachers more into direct participation in struggle.

Over the course of the struggle the parents had various manners of relating to the district. Early on they organized over 50 parent-students from different schools and some teachers to deliver a demand letter (accompanied by speeches and chants) directly to the district headquarters and school board offices. Out of that they forced 3 school board members to meet them at a neighborhood school site during class time—a time when many more parent-students were able to attend versus evening board meetings; this meeting became a general assembly of over 125 parents, school workers and even high school students who proceeded to critique the district officials directly and make clear that they were not taking their empty promises to heart. This show of force by the ranks of the parents ended up carrying the apprehensive teachers into more confident, direct participation in struggle. The culmination of a series of city wide organizing meetings was a mass mobilization to the May 22nd school board meeting where the final vote was being made. Over 100 Adult Ed teachers, students, and supporters showed up in addition to about 250 K-12 teachers out as part of their contract struggle; the main concrete demand that all of the hundreds of school workers, parents and community members shared was to reverse the cut to Adult Education, and this was called for in a disruptive manner during the regular board proceedings. This board meeting resulted in the halt of the cuts to the AE program and we hope to be in a position this coming school year to start reversing some of the previous cuts.

To us this struggle shows the potential for both teachers and parents to connect up across school sites and amplify struggle. It also shows how fundamental school-site relationships and organization are, since they were the base from which we organized other schools and came out to actions. These are also the relationships where we can best continue to work together, strategizing and organizing. Further, in no way was this ever a teacher labor union based struggle. Instead, all the participants, parent-students and teachers, clearly self-identified this as a joint struggle. The demand to save Adult Ed classes simultaneously benefitted parent-students and saved the precariously employed teachers’ jobs. This is counter to CTU’s strike which became dominated by negotiations around wages, evaluation by tests scores, and layoffs. To be clear we’re not at all against better wages and working conditions for education workers. But such demands must always be fought for in conjunction with demands that benefit *all sectors* of education workers meaning not just defending schools but also transforming their daily effects on all education workers. Further, the final contract in Chicago represented steps backwards in actually getting laid-off teachers’ jobs back, instead accepting a more limited grace period in which laid-off teachers were still paid and considered employees, demolishing teachers’ rights to follow their students when their school closes, and accepting teacher evaluations by test scores in hiring back laid-off teachers. All of this was exacerbated by the unions’ refusal to break the laws limiting demands to very teacher-specific issues and, for instance, not attempting to force a stop to school closures. True, such higher level demands could have taken a long and bruising struggle to win, which would have needed much preparation, but the necessity of that orientation with such preparation is what we hope to prove with this analysis. Otherwise we are faced with detrimental contracts like the one signed and the opening to future run-around attacks like the current attempt to close 54 schools and layoff hundreds of teachers.

Furthermore, with an orientation of joint parent, student, teacher struggle—it is possible to consider tactics that go beyond teacher-dominated organizing. One tactic to consider would be an attendance strike at specific schools or district-wide- parents withholding their students from going to school. This we believe should be seen as a strike as much as a teachers’ strike. It is unwaged workers withholding their labor from the site of (re)production (reproduction in the sense of us as human beings reproducing ourselves as thinkers and workers). It is in this type of creative strategizing where we see the a lot of potential and we hope us and others can further develop this going forward. It represents a shift from parents and students as consumers dependent on district governments’ decisions as final to an identity as workers crucial in the functioning of their real place of power, the school site. If we can thus reunderstand the existing relationships in schools, we can begin to tap the full potential of organizing in--and transforming!—our schools.

Seen this way we should start considering some key demands and struggles we can fight. Short of fighting for a wage for parents and students, to compensate them for the unpaid labor they put into the educational process, we should be considering campaigns centered around demands such as free transit passes for youth and parents, smaller class sizes as a step toward improving quality of instruction, and extending healthcare coverage that teachers get to parents and students. All of these types of demands unify the interests of parents, teachers and students, recognize the labor that all put into the educational process, and may be the basis for joint struggle that goes beyond legalistic parameters of contractual trade union struggle.

The adult education campaign did not form a school committee in the way that we are defining it above. It did show that we could be successful as an independent grouping of k-12 teachers, adult ed teachers, parents and students in fighting back against local austerity policies. This struggle, along with the study of other models of attempts to defend and transform public education, has led us to reimagine what joint struggle of education stakeholders can look like. We share this campaign, not as a perfect or revolutionary example but as one example of our shared potential. We in Oakland have learned much from it and hope others can also. We hope to hear about specific struggles that are shaping their strategy and vision moving forward.

**Strategy Moving Forward**

Reconsidered thus, we believe that the impact of the Chicago teachers’ strike would have been much more profound if CTU hadtaken a leading role in the time leading up to the strike to construct the idea that this strike was not simply a labor union strike but a strike of the whole working class within the education sector. That the strike would raise up equally demands of parents and students with teacher demands. That the strike should be prepared to split fully from the structures of capitalist law and the capitalist political parties. That, aided by the heat of struggle, the leading organization would not simply be the teacher union but instead a workers' assembly of teachers, parents, and students. It would be this assembly, based in direct democracy, which would decide the outcome and strategy of the strike. Taken to this outcome, we can see what would be the full potential--the necessary potential--of our current and future organizing. With this in mind we address this analysis to all interested revolutionaries and education sector workers--teachers, parents, and students--to open a discussion of what should be our strategy going forward.

We are for:

1. School site committees of parents, teachers, other waged school workers, and students organized around a politics of anti-austerity, anti-collaborationism and anti-repression.
2. These school site committees being organized into larger level organizations while maintaining the base of school site committees. Larger level meaning district-wide, at minimum, and when possible region, state, and nation-wide.
3. Independent organizations of all militant education workers (parents, teachers, other waged school workers, and students) which will be the basis for organizing school-site committees.

1. John Garvey, among others, at <http://insurgentnotes.com/2012/10/once-again-on-education-beyond-ordinary-leftism/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. See Lee Sustar at <http://socialistworker.org/2013/05/15/holding-the-line-for-teachers> and Rick Perlsteing at <http://www.thenation.com/article/175085/chicago-rising#>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. David Kaplan at <http://monthlyreview.org/2013/06/01/the-chicago-teachers-strike-and-beyond>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)