

Labor History: Chicago Teachers' Strike

By Ed Leavy, SVFT Executive Union Representative

It's not entirely clear that we can call a strike that ended just two months ago "history," but events happen so fast now that the Chicago teachers' strike seems firmly in the past. Enough time has gone by so we have perspective to view what has happened with some clarity, but the events underlying the strike remain with us today, regardless of where we live. Ultimately, the strike was created by – and did not resolve – a basic conflict in what education reform is and should be, and who gets a voice in creating reform.

The roots of the strike were in two elections. Rahm Emanuel, former Illinois congressman and Chief of Staff for President Obama, ran for mayor of Chicago in 2011 promoting himself as the only candidate tough enough to shake up the school system. A year earlier, Karen Lewis won an election as president of the Chicago Teachers' Union claiming that union leadership, including their affiliate AFT, is too quick to accept concessions under the umbrella of educational reform. Once Emanuel took over as mayor, he pushed an agenda that pushed tying teacher salaries to evaluations instead of seniority and counted standardized test results as 45% of the evaluation. Additionally, he wanted to be able to shut down "failing" schools, fire the teachers, and put non-unionized charter schools in their place. Lewis pointed to dozens of studies that showed the largest factors in student achievement are environmental; with 87% of Chicago students living in poverty and the city sagging under gang-related violence, state-wide standardized test scores were not a reasonable measure of job performance. As CTU vice-president Jesse Sharkey said, high test scores are an unreasonable expectation for a student "who gets shot a week before the test."

As contract negotiations got underway, the two sides were intractable. A fact-finding report from the arbitrator in July called the relationship between the two sides as "toxic." As the first day of school approached on September 10, there was little to no movement. On Sunday, September 9, CTU President Lewis did not bother to respond to calls for last-minute negotiations; she saw no point to it. "It was like nobody was hearing me... They kept asking for a couple of more days. But how long have you known this deadline for?" She became convinced that the city had not taken the September 10 strike-date seriously. She called for a strike vote, and it was overwhelmingly approved.

The city now faced 350,000 students without a school to attend in the morning. Makeshift daycare centers were opened, where children could be supervised and fed, but they were only open half a day. Despite the massive problems the strike caused parents, Chicago residents overwhelmingly supported the teachers. A poll showed that two-thirds of the people agreed with the teachers' position. Emanuel did not have the outpouring of public support he had expected.

Nine days later, the strike was over. Teachers did receive raises, after a year of frozen wages: 3% the first year, 2% the two years after that. The role of standardized tests scores in evaluations was reduced from 45% to 25% (the minimum allowed by Illinois state law). The CTU was also guaranteed that 50% of all hires will be laid-off teachers. There were concessions by the CTU as well. The school year was increased by 10 instructional days with no additional increase in salary beyond the raises. Laid-off teachers would not be returned entirely by

seniority, but must have had a “proficient” or above evaluation to be rehired. Teachers with “unsatisfactory” evaluations are laid off first, regardless of seniority. Principals are given more authority to lengthen the school day.

The compromise agreement returned the students to school, which has to be seen as the most important result for everyone. The broader issues, such as how much of a voice teachers should have in educational reform or the role of standardized testing in school and teacher evaluations, remain a source of contention. The Chicago teachers’ strike cannot be seen as the culmination of this battle, but its first dramatic step.

Information for this article was gathered from a number of Chicago Tribune articles. Additionally, I strongly recommend “Chicago Teachers Strike Contract Leaves Educational Issues Unresolved” from huffingtonpost.com to get a detailed account of the strike and the issues surrounding it.