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USA

Chicago Charter Teachers Strike, Win

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Description:

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Last December 4th educators at the Acero charter chain in Chicago became the first charter teachers in the country to go on strike. This was both stunning to the charter industry, which was created in part to avoid the inconvenience of unionized educators, and revelatory to educators across the country.

After picketing four days, the unity and enthusiasm of the charter teachers, along with widespread sympathy and solidarity among parents, forced the Acero leadership to capitulate. This led to a major step in closing the gap between charter and Chicago public school teachers on compensation, hours and working conditions.

The demands that charter teachers raised included issues that the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) are not even legally able to raise in bargaining with the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). In 1995, Bill 4.5 amended the Illinois School Code to limit mandated bargaining to wages and benefits. Issues including class size and working conditions are only "permitted" if the school board agrees. (This law was designed to affect only Chicago teachers.)

Since charter schools are privately run, charter teachers were able to bargain these issues. The Acero striking teachers won a reduction in class size from 32 to 30 (still too large), established a salary scale for paraprofessionals who often receive short shrift during negotiations, reduced the pay gap between teachers at Acero and CTU and reduced the outrageously long school year without reducing the classroom time.

They also forced the incorporation of sanctuary language, an important issue given that 90% of the student body is LatinX.

These key gains improved the education for students, and will also tend to improve the retention rate of charter school teachers. At the Robert Clemente campus, teachers told me that out of a staff of 32 teachers last year, eight did not return.

Since Clemente opened in 2012 only three original teachers remain. This churn is typical in an industry which prides itself on overworking and underpaying their staff.

Acero became embroiled in a conflict of interest scandal. The politically connected leadership of the United Neighborhood Organization (UNO) gave construction contracts to relatives of UNO board members. This was radioactive for the UNO leadership, whose chairperson Juan Rangel was one of the co-chairs of Rahm Emanuel's election committee.

The combination of internal corruption and political cronyism paved the way for UNO to become the largest unionized network in Chicago! In fact it proved so damaging that the charter had to change their name to Acero.

How the Acero Strike Won...

The strike was won with the overwhelming support of the Acero teachers, who voted 98% in favor of the strike. Picket lines were solid with over 90% of the unionized staff picketing every day. They engaged in exuberant line dancing, going from school to school during the below freezing weather.

Each afternoon teachers from the 15 campuses converged in downtown Chicago to picket the Board of Education, the headquarters of the Illinois Network of Charter Schools (INCS), the Acero headquarters, to attend a rally at CTU headquarters or visit elected officials to explain the deficiencies in their schools and how it hurt their students.

One liberating aspect of the strike was the ability of teachers in the same building to talk to each other on the picket line something that the demands of the job seem designed to prevent.

Over the course of the four days, teachers told aldermen who visited their picket lines of the struggles they have. A new teacher told Alderman Gilbert Villegas about being hired as a special education teacher, only to report to school and being forced to replace the kindergarten teacher who just quit.

Another special education teacher explained how she was unable to spend the state-mandated hour-and-a-half individual time per week on a student's individual education plan but only 30 minutes.

Such compelling stories led the Latino caucus in the Chicago City Council to draft a letter, signed by all their members, stating that "We demand that you agree to a contract and settle the strike as soon as possible; it is truly shameful that Acero Network has come to this point!"

Acero's leader Richard Rodriguez's salary of \$260,000 a year is roughly equal to that of Chicago Public Schools head Janice Jackson. Yet he is responsible for 15 schools while she runs about 520.

... And What It Means

The stunning victory left the anti-CTU Chicago Tribune fuming in a December 23rd editorial "Is the final bell ringing for charter schools in Illinois?" The answer is twofold.

Charter proliferation occurred with a series of structural changes that began to undermine public education. Since Illinois passed legislation in 1996 allowing the establishment of charter schools, the number has increased rapidly.

Today there are 141 separate campuses; 126 are in Chicago, comprising 57,000 students. Ninety-four percent are students of color; most schools are located in poor neighborhoods. Linked to the proliferation of charters is the erosion of neighborhood schools that were forced to "compete" with nearby charters.

The Board of Education, appointed by the mayor, promoted charters through the Renaissance 2010 plan. [\[1\]](#) that led to the closing of 140 schools between 2001 and 2013. As the charters opened, neighborhood schools were destabilized and ultimately closed.

When the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) was elected to leadership of the CTU in 2010, they saw unionizing charter school teachers as part of their mission. So long as these teachers were an unorganized work force, charter operators would use them to build their infrastructure and undercut public education.

Although the project began before CORE won office, the new leadership understood that it needed to organize charter school teachers to fight for the schools students deserve just as CTU members were motivated. [\[2\]](#)

Merging Teachers

The result of this organizing was the creation of a union of charter school teachers across a dozen different networks, the Chicago Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff (ChiACTS). After a process of discussion within both the CTU and ChiACTS, both unions agreed to merge in early 2018.

Some CTU members expressed resentment toward their charter colleagues, wrongly equating them with the charter operators and political forces in Chicago who closed schools and put public school teachers out of jobs. It is clear these forces will use charter school teachers as a battering ram against public school teachers to undercut the wages and working conditions of both. So it makes sense to unite.

From the point of view of the charter school teacher who has just recently joined the union, he/she/they may be worried that the larger organization will overlook one's specific needs. In order to facilitate a healthy merger, each union held discussions and separate ratification votes. CTU teachers voted 77% in favor and ChiACTS voted by 84%.

While these are large margins, a sizeable opposition shows some of the bitterness in the wake of public school closings and the disproportionate dismissal of Black teachers remains. One strong factor in the merger is that both CTU and ChiACTS teachers were on record against further charter expansion. A second factor is that charter teachers were facing the expiration of 11 separate contracts and were preparing to strike.

During the Acero strike, the CTU's organizational experience was put to good use in framing the negotiations around the needs of both the students and teachers. The CTU was able to provide the infrastructure to support Acero teachers in having both a delegate as well as a strike captain at every school.

It also applied the very successful tactics of 2012 to both pickets at each campus and rallies in central locations. This allowed the 500 Acero members to feel and demonstrate their collective power. Picketing was strong at every school as well as participation in the centralized rallies. CTU members who worked in nearby public schools stopped by the picket lines every morning to bring coffee and donuts, and march with Acero teachers.

Underfunding and Corruption

On the picket line I talked to a teacher who took a job at Acero after having taught in the unionized Waukegan (north of Chicago) school system. I asked if it was hard taking a pay cut to work at a charter school, and was stunned to hear that she received a \$13,000 a year raise!

This pointed out to me the particular underfunding of rural schools as the "Red State" teacher strikes have highlighted.

Underfunding schools is a universal problem, and teachers and parents need to demand a quality education for all children. This requires the wealthy to pay a much larger share of the taxes so that there won't be a vast gulf in resources. It means unionization that can unite teachers across boundaries to fight for the education of their students.

This includes smaller class size, wrap-around services, innovative methods of education, music and art as an integral

part of the curriculum and an end to punitive discipline practices.

The Acero strike revealed that charter teachers are just as committed as public school teachers to securing a better education for their students. They can be organized into unions capable of blunting the egregious features of the privatizers and their corporate sponsors. This, in turn, takes away much of the incentive to further expand charter schools.

CICS Strike

On February 5th teachers struck four of the 15 Chicago International Charter Schools (CICS). CICS operates under a self-described "portfolio" model where five different School Management Organizations (SMOs) run subsets of the schools. This portfolio model is eerily familiar to a recent proposal of the Los Angeles United School Board to create a breakup of the district into different portfolios.

CICS is divided into five SMOs, with one to four schools and headed by an executive officer. These layers of duplicated management mean there are 14 executives making more than \$100,000 a year; the overall CEO makes \$231,000. Starting teachers, on the other hand, earn \$8,000 a year less than their counterparts in CPS.

The Lloyd Bond campus of the Chicago Rise SMO lists 11 administrators and 19 teachers. Along with a top-heavy administration, CICS has a high overhead. Roughly 30% of the public funding they receive goes to its parent organization, which holds \$36 million in reserves. Nineteen million in bonds is controlled by a firm owned by Craig Henderson, a founder of CICS and former president and treasurer.

Several of the founders of the SMOs started as Teach For America (TFA) alums; teaching appears to have been a step out of the classroom into the boardroom.

Eight CICS directors come from the corporate world. There are several partners from law firms including Laner, Munchin, Dombrow, Becker, Levin and Tominberg, which concentrates "exclusively in the representation of employers in labor relations, employment litigation, employee benefits and business immigration." Others are from the investment world.

The CEO, Elizabeth Shaw, is a TFA veteran who was part of New Orleans' "recovery school district." Another member of the board is a founder of the Illinois Network of Charter Schools, the public face of the charter industry in Illinois. This is a complicated web of individual entrepreneurs, privatization advocates, and opportunists looking to make a buck out of the charter industry.

A similarity between the Civitas-run CICS network and the Acero schools is the high turnover rate of teachers and unfilled positions in classrooms. At the Quest campus 5 out of 14 teachers left last year, and students ask teachers if they are going to leave them also. It is understandable as a special ed teacher at Quest left for a job that paid over \$8,000 more; the school has been unable to fill that position leading to non-compliance with state mandates on meeting the needs of students with IEPs.

After nine days on the picket lines, CICS teachers won another victory for teachers in the charter industry by reaching an agreement that will bring salaries up to or even surpass CPS over four years. This includes both teachers and paraprofessionals.

Depending on funding increases over those years, the base wage is guaranteed to rise by 31.1%, but may go as high as 38.7%.

Eliminating the disparity between the charter and public sectors of education was one of the main goals of the CTU. Now for Acero and CICS unionized teachers this has been largely closed. This is a huge victory and should provide an impetus to organize the remaining 11 non-union CICS campuses as well as the other 70% of non-unionized charter schools in Chicago.

Along with the wage increases, a firm class size limit was written into the contract. Most classes should be no larger than 28 students with a limit of 30. In grades K-2 grades every teacher will have a classroom aide. CICS had proposed paying for both class size limits and pay raises by cutting student support services like counselors and nurses, but had to back down. They had to guarantee maintaining student supports as well as sufficient special teachers.

Another sticking point that management had to concede was parental leave for staff something that management gave itself. This was a particularly sore point for the mostly female workforce.

A larger share of health care cost will be picked up by management, the school day and year will be shortened with no loss of instructional time for students all of these are blows against the exploitative conditions that charter teachers work under.

CICS will be forced to pay for these concessions by taking money that they have siphoned from public funds to their umbrella organization. They moaned in the press that they would be forced to reduce the number of "instructional coaches" and assistant principals to shift the money toward the classroom. For the first time sanctuary school language was included in the contract, an issue every school needs to address.

Creative Disruption

For strike preparation and during the strike there was both creativity and resolve to force CICS to cave over the demands. The CTU's research spotlighted CICS's byzantine management structure, revealing corporate ties of some CICS board members. Strikers then used that research to carry out direct actions.

A notable example was at the headquarters of Price Waterhouse and Cooper, an accounting firm which employs the current president and treasurer of CICS, Laura Thonn. One hundred and fifty teachers jammed into their Loop high-rise headquarters, blocking the lobby doors, and moving on to block the elevators. Out of the 200 striking CICS teachers and staff, 40 volunteered that day to be arrested.

This dedication on the part of the strikers was key in garnering the support of candidates for mayor in Chicago, a U.S. Senator and members of the city council's Latino Caucus.

With these victories in two of the largest charter chains in Chicago, the bar has been raised for all charter teachers in the city. These examples can lead to unity between all educators, charter and public, in the fight to provide both good learning and working conditions.

Another 13 unionized campuses still have to settle their contracts this year. With these victories, however, a standard

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is being set that all charter operators will need to meet or answer to their teachers who will wonder why they work under much more difficult conditions. Public school teachers and charter school teachers have developed a good working relationship that is deepening as the battles unfold, and as they fight for the rights of their students together.

[Against the Current](#)

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[1] <https://bit.ly/2Ek8jIQ>.

[2] <https://bit.ly/2DUtgSP>.