

Chicago teachers lead the way, again

June 14, 2012

Teacher unionism was born more than a century ago, in Chicago. Teachers in Chicago are once again leading the way by authorizing a strike over the policies that are destroying public education in communities across this country – and the globe. In a letter to education activists, Pauline Lipman, a professor at University of Illinois, Chicago, describes the background to the strike and explains why Chicago teachers deserve support from anyone who wants good schools for all kids:

"Chicago – a birthplace of the neoliberal corporate agenda for schools is now a focal point of the offensive against it. On Monday, June 11, the Chicago Teachers Union announced that 89.73% of its members voted to authorize a strike vote if contract negotiations with Chicago Public Schools fail... Last year, Stand for Children and other education privatizers and Chicago's Mayor Rahm Emanuel engineered a state law requiring 75% of all eligible CTU members to vote yes to authorize a strike vote. Stand for Children leader, Jonah Edelman, bragged that the CTU 'will never be able to muster the votes to strike.' But the arrogant privatization billionaires behind the assault on teacher unions did not count on the profound anger of teachers, paraprofessionals, and clinicians that has been percolating beneath the surface and the courage of a progressive union to stand up. As CTU president Karen Lewis said, the vote was a resounding "indictment" of CPS policies. The vote was amazing: Total CTU voting membership 26,502: 23,780 voted "yes," 482 voted "no," and 2,240 did not vote or their votes were spoiled (all these were counted as "no" votes) (Chicago Teachers Union)."

Wisely, the CTU has reached out to parents and community. Pauline Lipman explains this background: "On June 9, parents and community organizations across the city allied with the CTU, also launched a campaign to end mayoral control and institute an elected representative school board. The battle in Chicago for reinvigorated public education is on and it's strategic. The billionaires behind Stand and other groups are pouring money and forces into Chicago against the CTU. The week of the vote the hedge fund-backed, pro-charter organization, "Education Reform Now," spent \$100,000 to flood Black radio stations with ads to turn parents against the union. This is only the beginning. Meanwhile the union and community organizations are also gearing up a grassroots campaign to support the CTU in their courageous fight for the schools our children deserve

The CTU is an example of what good teachers unions can do to push back on policies that are destroying educational opportunity for the vast majority of children in our nation's schools. Chicago's teachers are no different from teachers in Philadelphia, Detroit, or Los Angeles. What's different is their union leadership, which has the courage and confidence to fight for what's right. Imagine if Karen Lewis were AFT President!