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Illustration: Randall Enos

An Interview with Karen Lewis and Jackson Potter

In a stunning victory, a group of rank-and-file teachers won election to leadership of the powerful Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) this past June. Karen Lewis, a high school chemistry teacher, defeated the two-time incumbent president, winning 60 percent of the vote. Lewis led a slate of candidates from the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), all of whom were swept into office.

For the past two years, CORE has led a growing grassroots movement against the school closings, charter schools, and “turnarounds” that are Arne Duncan’s Chicago legacy. They now face the daunting task of leading the CTU, which represents more than 30,000 educators—including teachers, clerks, substitutes, and teaching assistants—serving more than 400,000 students.

Rethinking Schools editors Bob Peterson and Jody Sokolower interviewed Karen Lewis and Jackson Potter, who is a co-founder of

CORE, high school social studies teacher, and newly elected trustee of CTU.

Rethinking Schools: How did CORE start?

Jackson Potter: It all started in 2007 when another teacher, Al Ramirez, and I started documenting Renaissance 2010 [the school privatization and gentrification plan promoted by Arne Duncan] with video cameras. My school, Englewood High School, was one of those being closed. Arne Duncan labeled our school a “culture of failure.”

There was lots of anger by teachers and parents because we were being targeted as the problem and the proposed school closings and reconstitutions weren’t going to help. We were frustrated because the union refused to get involved in this issue.

Eventually, a group of us decided to explore the possibility of creating our own organization that would try to engage rank-and-file teachers in activist work that the union wasn’t doing.



Jackson Potter Photo:
Courtesy Chicago Teachers Union



Karen Lewis Photo:
Courtesy Chicago Teachers Union

Karen Lewis: At first, CORE was a study group. We were concerned about the massive effort to close schools, to turn them into charters, basically giving away public institutions to private organizations. So we got together, teachers and a couple of paraprofessionals, to try to figure out what was going on. We started reading articles, anything we could get our hands on. The big book that we read was *The Shock Doctrine* by Naomi Klein; it put so much in perspective. We realized our union hadn’t taken a position that was strong enough on these school closings.

JP: In many instances it was actually worse than just no response, because the union was collaborating with management to allow these types of “reform” that were just devastating our ranks. The union had virtually no coordination with community organizations or other unions, so as rank-and-file teachers we had to make a move or else be on the verge of complete destruction.

KL: What we decided to do basically was to attack the Board of Education policies. And to attack the process, which did not include input from communities, from parents and teachers. We also attacked the sham hearings that were being held, the so-called public hearings.

So we started going to the hearings. CORE went to every single school closing hearing, every single charter school opening. Our people asked questions, demanded answers, and testified against what was going on. In addition, we started going to board meetings. We made it so every single month our voices, CORE voices, became a visible presence. We started working with community organizations and doing direct action. We were working with the parents, teachers, and other staff who were almost the victims of school closings.

The first meeting I went to, in 2008, there were eight to 12 of us. We could sit around a conference room table. But we gradually gained strength. We started very small, then started growing. We currently have about 450 members.

RS: So CORE started in April 2008 and by June 2010 you were elected to lead one of the largest teacher union locals in the country. How did you do that?

KL: In the beginning, we hadn’t decided on an electoral strategy. Our most important and urgent issue

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was stopping the school closings.

We held a big summit January 2009 at one of the community colleges. I'll never forget because it was a Saturday morning and there was a blizzard. We invited everyone who was affected by school closings. We had people testifying and then we tried to answer the question "What are we going to do now?"

Five hundred people came in the midst of this blizzard. That's when the teachers' union began to take us seriously. They were sitting around being smug until they saw how many people were showing up. It was an amazing experience.

Teachers started listening to the message and they started coming to our meetings, asking questions and watching how we worked. Once they knew how we were approaching things and saw how inclusive we were, they just started joining, so our membership grew.

RS: What do you mean by inclusive?

KL: The way other organizations run, there is somebody at the top. They make decisions and they tell their caucus what they're going to do. The difference with CORE is we really looked at a rank-and-file model. Anything that comes up, we discuss it, we debate it, we have good vigorous conversations, and then we vote on what to do. Then we task things out. It isn't like a lot of meetings that end up being a lecture from the leadership to the membership.

We also spent time defining what we wanted to do. We had a retreat that first summer. We were pretty much locked down for two days talking about how we wanted this organization to run. We also asked ourselves: "If we could dream it, what would we want our union to look like? What would we want our union to offer? What would we want it to do?"

We consider ourselves inclusive because it's all about rank and file.

What was so amazing was that the first year [2009] we came together and started regularly protesting, regularly going to the board meetings, we got six schools taken off the closure list out of 30. That had never happened before; if a school got on the list, they were shut down. It was never six schools coming off the list. Last year, 2010, there weren't that many on the list in the first place—16. And we still got six taken off the list. That's a huge, huge difference from 30 going on the list.

JP: One thing we talked about was rebuilding our public image as teachers, not allowing the messaging to be dominated by corporate media. That really resonated with members. We need to be aggressive, making our own statements and contesting all kinds of slander against the profession.

We talked a lot about fighting charter schools and privatization, and about the need to support publicly funded education and to promote coalitions with parent and community organizations. Parents are our greatest allies. We need to build solidarity with the parents we serve. That ended up being quite a selling point of the caucus. Parents, students, and teachers are the biggest constituencies of schools, but in charter and turnaround reforms we're invisible. What does that say about those reforms? What's the impact on the children and the people who were teaching every day?

RS: How did you see the union and your relationship to it?

JP: They were a machine local. We live in a city dominated by a political oligarchy where Mayor Daley and his corporate friends make decisions that affect the lives of everyone. And they do so with graft and nepotism and back-room deals. The union had adopted that model. For example, the field reps who were supposed to write grievances and help members respond to contract violations were doing very little, but getting \$175,000 a year with unlimited car allowances and expense accounts. The union had become an aristocracy distanced from the classroom. They had severed their relationship with educators.

RS: How did it feel when you won? Were you surprised?

KL: It was very amazing. By that time, I wasn't surprised. There were five caucuses inside the union, each running a slate. There were quite a few people on them—150 delegates alone to the AFT/IFT convention. Four officers, about 35 people on the executive board, three area vice presidents and six trustees. There was an initial election and then a runoff. I knew if we made it to the runoff, we would win, because the incumbents only got 35 percent of the vote on the first round, and we were able to unify the opposition.

How did I feel when we won? Oh my god, we have this huge responsibility! And we knew that the board would come after us almost immediately, so we started preparing ourselves for that.

RS: How did Chicago Public Schools administration respond to CORE's win?

JP: They came out guns blazing immediately. They were requesting all kinds of concessions to stave off the budget crisis: furlough days, canceling our raises, getting rid of tenure. We were immediately facing this crisis of how to negotiate, mobilize. How do we contest all these things? They announced they were going to eliminate 2,000 positions and raise class size from 28 to 35. They were going to lay people off not by seniority but by getting rid of "unsatisfactory" teachers—despite the fact that there is a due process provision in our contract. They got rid of entire coaching departments, including the literacy coaches. They did all this with no input from the union.

KL: Right away, they wanted us to come to the bargaining table. We said, "OK, but we're bringing 50 people with us." They said, "Oh, no, we don't do that." But we told them this is a new administration and we do things differently—we don't do things under cover of darkness. We want people to see and hear what really goes on so they can make good choices and so they can communicate back to our members. The difference is we're rank and file—we feel the members should make the decisions about what we should do.

The district didn't like the fact that we talked about what happened in the negotiations. They're used to doing things in secret. We didn't go to the press, but we communicated with our members and that meant people were blogging about what happened. And of course the press picks up on that. They told us the next session that we were irresponsible and disrespectful. But we think they're the ones who are disrespectful.

RS: What are your goals for this year?

KL: Keep our heads above water (laughing). Our basic goal for this year is to get our people their jobs back. We want to empower our membership and change the way the union works—from a business model to an organizing model. So we are hiring organizers.

Here's one issue: A lot of people have problems at school and they call the field rep. The field rep will say there's nothing we can do because it's not a contractual issue. So this may not be contractual but it is an opportunity for us as a union to organize around the issue. We want teachers to say, "This is a professional problem that needs to be addressed."

We want to strengthen the professional problems committees in the schools so teachers feel empowered to address certain issues without retaliation. Teachers who advocate for teachers and students become targets for these drive-by evaluations. Maybe you've been getting "superiors" and "excellents" your entire career and all of a sudden you're getting an "unsatisfactory"—primarily because you've had disagreements with the administration. That's something we can organize around in schools and communities.

RS: What are the racial implications of what's happening to the Chicago schools, both for teachers and students?

KL: The board likes to say that they don't keep data by race, especially on faculty, but we know that's not true. We got this list of teachers who were fired—

RS: Fired or laid off?

KL: In Chicago, it's the same thing. There is no recall provision in our contract, so it's not like they can come back. The term is "honorably terminated." These are firings, and that's how we're treating them. It's supposed to be by seniority, but it's not.

In terms of the racial impact, there has been a significant drop in the number of African American teachers—2,078 fewer in 2009 than in 2002. In 2002 almost 40 percent of Chicago teachers were African American; last year it was about 30 percent.

The latest list of fired teachers we received was organized by age, which is also interesting. In the last few years there has been a significant drop in teacher age and also in years of experience. In 2004, the average number of years of experience was 14.5; for 2010 it's 12 years of experience. That is huge.

In terms of the impact on the children, Duncan's big solution was charter schools. [By law, charter schools cannot be part of the CTU bargaining unit and begin as non-union workplaces.] But the charter schools are even more segregated than the public schools. Every one of them is in a community of color; there are no charter schools, to my knowledge, in any of the upper-class, middle-class, or even white ethnic areas of Chicago. They are primarily in Latino and African American neighborhoods. In some areas they're so thick that nearly all the schools in the neighborhood are charters. When you look at where they began, they certainly follow the gentrification pattern. So this whole education program is really a real estate program and a gentrification program under the guise of improving education.

For example, if you look at the school closings under Duncan, they started in the Near South region, in Bronzeville, where they also closed housing projects and destroyed low-income housing. They replaced it with very upscale condos, new housing stock, and expensive rehabs of old mansions. These areas that had been African American are now much more integrated. So the schools got closed.

RS: Where are the kids going to school?

KL: That's a good question. In the beginning they opened some charters there, but they're gone now. Renaissance 2010 started by saying to parents: "You have options, you can go to a charter, you can go to this kind of school, that kind of school. But basically your neighborhood school no longer exists." So Duncan's basic legacy is to dismantle neighborhood schools and open up charters. The children who live in those neighborhoods cannot always go to the charters. The charters have a tendency to cream off the very top. The charter school people will tell you, "Oh no, we do it by lottery." But the fact is the parents have to apply, you can't just walk in with your child. The fact that there is an application process screens off a lot of children. On these applications parents are asked to write essays; parents are asked to commit to a certain amount of time to volunteer.

It's not like middle-class parents are sending their kids to charter schools. Middle-class parents of all colors are desperately trying to get their kids into magnet schools, which are selective enrollment; you have to test to get in. The poorest kids end up in neighborhood schools, which are the most likely to be either closed or reopened with a new faculty—"turned around." The new faculty tend to be younger, white, less experienced, and cost much less than more senior and experienced teachers.

Some of those new teachers are from Teach for America (TFA) and they are taking jobs from people who have been let go. I have a real problem with that. They're looking at career teachers, shutting down their positions, and all of a sudden TFA is showing up. TFA is supposed to be for hard-to-staff schools, but we don't have any hard-to-staff schools anymore. Because they're closing schools and shutting down positions, we have plenty of teachers available to take those positions. TFA has a contract with the city that guarantees them 200 positions. We say if the district is going to break any contracts, they should break that one first.

Duncan's legacy is a scorched earth policy. "I don't know what to do, I can't fix it, so I'll give it all away." That's what he's brought to the national conversation. Fire everybody, fire all the adults. He gets to say that there's this culture of failure. He gets to blame the teachers; he gets to tell a lie about the new civil rights movement. He should be ashamed of himself. But here's the problem: To people who don't know what's going on in schools, all this stuff sounds good.

RS: Do you see CORE as social justice unionism?

KL: CORE is still a caucus within the CTU. CORE was elected to the union leadership, but CTU is not CORE and CORE is not CTU. The union is a big bureaucracy, that's the nature of the beast. What we are doing as CORE is bringing our agenda with us. We are focused on who should be the real beneficiaries of our work. And that's the students. The Board of Education and the city of Chicago for decades have neglected the poorest and neediest people in the city. We want to address that issue and make sure that government of the city addresses that issue.

So we're doing aldermanic outreach, ward by ward. We're trying to make this as local as possible. We're working with community organizations, working with the faith community. We can't do this by ourselves. We know we can't make any changes if we don't

have parents, students, community organizations, and other unions on board with us. We're trying to establish these relationships. Social justice is about treating these communities with respect so we all have input into what is being done. Up to now, that hasn't been the case.

RS: How do you see the national implications of CORE's victory?

KL: Honestly, we didn't realize this was a national phenomenon until we went to the AFT convention in Seattle. That's when we met other union activists who said, "We're so glad you guys won." We didn't even know anybody was paying attention to what was going on in Chicago. What our victory has done is give hope to a lot of people. It says there *is* resistance to the dominant narrative that blames teachers, tests children to death, and calls our schools failures as an excuse to loot the public treasury. I think people across the country realize that and now they're starting to articulate it.

The idea that there is push back, the idea that teachers are not shutting the door and hiding in their classrooms, but are banding together to do something different, is very heartening.

JP: Arne Duncan just gave a speech in Chicago on July 26 and it was an interesting statement. He said we can't blame unions for all these problems—there have been ineffective charter schools, there's the funding crisis. I think we are already seeing a bit of a rhetorical shift because they are concerned that teachers are beginning to have some really severe differences with the Democratic Party. We are a major constituency they've depended on for so long. I think that some of the political hacks in the Obama administration are saying: "This is a problem when we have people like Wisconsin Congressman Obey saying let's redistribute the Race to the Top money. We've got a little bit of a PR crisis."

CORE's victory has taken the third biggest teacher local in the country and turned it into a cauldron of opposition to this whole agenda—in the hometown of the education secretary. We can speak clearly and honestly and with a great amount of detail about how this has played out at the city level and how it's a farce. They are really worried that if this hits the national press the cracks will let the light in and their agenda will be derailed.

RS: What advice do you have for progressive union activists around the country?

JP: I think the key is to speak truth to power. Get into as many schools as possible to talk to your colleagues about what's really going on. Be creative in how you represent the realities on the ground in your school system: use video, use social networking technology. Don't allow the morbid tendencies of union leadership to be the tactics that you adopt. Think out of the box in the way a good grassroots organizer would think. That will only invigorate your campaign and, at the end of the day, strengthen your union's ability to fight the attacks on public education.

KL: People who are progressive unionists need to band together to take the next step. In the beginning, we just thought that we could push our union in the right direction. When it was clear that they weren't ready to go we said, "OK, we'll do it ourselves." For two years, we were a shadow union: We were doing direct action, we were going to meetings, we were speaking out. If people in other unions, other social activists get together, they can do these things on their own, too. You cannot wait for the leadership to agree with you. You just have to do it.

Bob Peterson, an editor of Rethinking Schools, teaches 5th grade in the Milwaukee Public Schools.
Jody Sokolower (jody@rethinkingschools.org) is policy and production editor.