

Democracy & Education

What Makes Hope Possible

A Book Review of *Strike for America: Chicago Teachers Against Austerity*

Review by Amy B. Shuffelton (Loyola University Chicago)



STRIKE FOR AMERICA is an informative account of the 2012 Chicago teacher's strike. In this concise and thought-provoking book, Uetracht (2014) told the story of the strike's genesis, its motivations, its dynamics, and its (short-term, of course) effects on the city of Chicago. Uetracht's political commitments are explicit throughout. The story as he told it is of an embattled and misused sector of the working class standing up for itself to the neoliberal interests that dominate Chicago politics. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) rallied around a commitment to equitable funding for schools and to fair working conditions for teachers, in the face of collaboration between political and business interests to shift massive amounts of money to private enterprise. The citizens of Chicago, from fast food workers to parents of children in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), supported the teachers, making the strike one of those shining moments when American workers threw a collective punch at their capitalist oppressors. As I said, the narrative is not apolitical. It is also well supported with evidence. Uetracht is a journalist, and his book is an example of the kind of in-depth journalism that draws on firsthand reporting, exploration of an event's history, and academic sources. Readers

skeptical of the David-and-Goliath narrative will note that Uetracht's sources confirm rather than complicate his account, but those inclined to say that this *was* a case of David nailing Goliath will appreciate his explanation of how David pulled it off.

Uetracht's (2014) story began with the political organizing that made the strike possible, and throughout the book he emphasized the implications of this for those committed to democratic change. Before the CTU closed down CPS for seven days in September 2012, the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), elected to union leadership in 2010, had dedicated years to coalition building. As Uetracht reported, the strike came as something of a surprise. The CTU had last gone on strike in 1987, and recent state legislation made it illegal to strike unless a union vote garnered 75% support from all (not just voting) union members. As Uetracht reported, this legislation was backed by "the free market reform group" Stand for Children. "As Stand for Children CEO Jonah Edelman

AMY SHUFFELTON is an assistant professor of education at Loyola University Chicago.

explained bluntly at the Aspen Ideas Festival in June 2011, the bill was designed to severely limit the CTU's power" (p. 43). No CTU strike vote had ever achieved these numbers, but in June 2012, 90% of all union members, and 98% of those who voted, authorized action. Uetricht argued that these astonishing numbers—plus the 92% voting rate—were due to CORE having built up a network of union representatives at the school level who learned the tools of community organizing and gained support for political engagement among their colleagues in schools. During the strike, these rank and file union activists proved critical in reaching out to parents and other community members as well. The second reason media analyses assumed the CTU would not go on strike—that parents would not support the suspension of their children's schooling—proved wrong as well. Although not all parents supported the teachers, a solid majority did, with support highest among those with children in CPS schools.

Strike for America is composed of three chapters, one on CORE and the background to the strike, a second on the strike itself, and a third on the implications of the strike for future labor action and democratic politics in the United States. Uetricht's (2014) explanation of internal CTU politics and how CORE managed to build support for the strike was, I think, the most informative section. I spent some of the second week of September 2012 picketing with the teachers at my daughter's CPS school and downtown at the CTU rally, and Uetricht's account of what teachers said about their participation, how parents responded, and how other residents reacted to the sight of teachers—truckers honking in solidarity, police officers waving, parents bringing doughnuts and coffee and homemade signs—accords with my memories. To the teachers and parents I talked to, the strike felt like a nuisance and a glorious moment at the same time. Everyone was eager for schools to get back to the work of educating children, and most of us agreed that this demanded a more reasonable contract than the CTU had yet been offered. What Uetricht's story filled in—and what I suspect will be most interesting to other readers interested in the potential of democratic action to push back against neoliberal resource stripping in public schools—was the steps it took to bring so many people out in support. His history of CTU politics, union organizing in Chicago and the upper Midwest, and Chicago city politics is appropriately brief, but after reading it, I had a much better grasp on the dynamics of the event.

It is probably predictable that a book about recent history was weakest in its analysis of what events might mean for the future. Four years later, the strike seems less of a glorious success. Yes, David hit Goliath hard, but Goliath has friends with money and positions of power, and they came back swinging. In September 2012, picketers held signs telling the mayor that "This is your Blizzard of '79," a reference to previous mayoral ineptitude that led to political defeat in Chicago. In spite of his unpopularity, however, Rahm Emanuel was reelected as mayor in 2015, after spending nearly five times as much on advertising as his opponent. In 2013, the CTU and its allies were unable to stop the Board of Education from closing 49 schools, most of which had been serving Black and Latino students on the south and west sides of Chicago. In the

2015--16 school year, state funding for schools was cut, CPS issued junk-rated bonds to cover current expenses, and teachers worked without a contract. Yet, while telling teachers that nothing can be afforded in light of the budget crisis, the Board of Education continues its plans to open new charter schools.

These events confirm Uetricht's (2014) analysis that political and business interests are intent on bleeding CPS dry, but Uetricht remains hopeful that democratic politics can stop them. The piece of analysis that Uetricht's book is missing, essential to any future progressive politics in Chicago, came to the surface in the most recent CTU strike, a one-day work stoppage on April 1, 2016. Chicago's outrage about education funding pales in comparison to outrage about the Laquan McDonald case, in which a White police officer shot an unarmed Black teenager 17 times. The dashboard video of this event was withheld from public view until after the 2015 reelection of Emanuel, and Black Lives Matter protests have erupted throughout the city since its release. During the April 1 strike, which like the 2012 strike relied on a coalition of progressive political groups, a charter school teacher took the microphone at a CTU rally and announced, "Fuck the police." Although she was not a CTU teacher, so the CTU could have claimed no connection to her, the CTU did not distance itself from her comment. A divide appeared, between progressives who believed CTU should stick with her comment in allegiance to the Black and Brown families whose children make up 90% of CPS students and Chicagoans disinclined to link support for public schooling to anti-police sentiment. This divide pointed directly to the complications race poses to any movement based on social class solidarity. Teachers and police officers are sisters and brothers in a metaphorical sense, after all, and not infrequently in a literal sense. Uetricht wrote that in 2012, the CTU "was successful because its aims were broad and encompassed the aims of Chicago's entire working class" (p. 79). In a city as racially segregated as Chicago, in which the politics of school funding and the distribution of resources have always been shot through with race and racism and in which White members of the working class rarely live with or send their children to school with Black members of the working class, no such entity as "Chicago's entire working class" meaningfully exists. There is a working class that includes the police and supports it, and there is a working class that is, too often, traumatized by it, and although their interests overlap in public schooling, they do not in all domains.

Even if it is not a perfect account of Chicago school politics, Uetricht's (2014) book is a useful one. I recommend it to readers looking for an engaging, detailed account of a moment in neoliberal school politics when there seemed to be grounds for hope. In analyzing what made hope possible, regardless of whether hope held the ground for keeps, Uetricht provided a book that is worth the attention of democratic educators.

References

Uetricht, M. (2014). *Strike for America: Chicago teachers against austerity*. New York, NY: Verso.