

HOW TO JUMP-START YOUR UNION

**Lessons from the
Chicago Teachers**

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A LABOR NOTES BOOK

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The Caucus Runs for Office

The United Progressive Caucus (UPC) had led CTU for 37 of the 40 previous years—at times even militantly, but those days were long past. Leaders seemed to have accepted that the tide of privatization was unstoppable and the best the union could do was manage its members' layoffs. They had made peace, of a sort, with the notion that management would get its way.

What's more, they saw the union's role simply as defending members on bread-and-butter issues—not as fighting for a brighter vision of public schools. When they couldn't do the former, they sat on their hands. "You would never hear from the union," said elementary teacher Nate Rasmussen.

CORE's win in the third-largest teacher union in the country happened very quickly, just two years after the caucus was founded.

Their victory was one-third inspiring vision—which is what drew Rasmussen to the fledgling caucus that was making a stand against privatization and over-testing. "CORE could verbalize that it was part of a different movement, and not just about our contract and whether we got a 4 percent raise," he said. "It was about quality teaching conditions in our schools."

The victory was one-third activist pluck, the willingness to jump into the trenches and start struggling on the issues. CORE activists didn't take a break from fighting school closures while they ran for office—in fact, they stepped up the fight.

And it was one-third good old-fashioned organizing know-how—the persistent list-making, numbers tracking, one-on-one conversations, and shoe leather, for which there is no substitute. "The genius of CORE, more than anything else, is that the people are organizers and they do it well. They think of details," said high school teacher Bill Lamme. "That's why even being such a new group, we were able to win the election."

Starting with Delegates

The caucus first started winning elections at the lowest rung: delegate. CTU's governing body is the House of Delegates, with about 800 elected members—one from each school and more from large schools. The House meets monthly, but its meetings had devolved to doing a whole lot of nothing.

Some CORE members had already been delegates for years; others ran and won. But once CORE had enough seats (around 20) to propose actions from the floor, union leaders responded by blocking new business from delegates. At times, the president would speak for as long as 40 minutes—counting on enough delegates to leave so there would be no quorum.

The next electoral step was a campaign for two vacant seats on the pension fund board of trustees. Every teacher seat on the board was held by a member of UPC, the incumbent caucus. CORE announced its candidates in July 2009, for an October election.

Jay Rehak and Lois Ashford were both veteran teachers, one white, the other black. Rehak had worked for the union during the PACT reform caucus's term in office. More recently he'd been watchdogging the district's fiscal choices, speaking critically in hearings about its sketchy investments in derivatives.

Ashford had taught for 16 years at Copernicus Elementary and joined CORE after she and the school's entire staff were laid off in a "turnaround" and forced to reapply for their jobs. She'd begun researching the pension board's actions at that point, realizing that the "pension was the only thing they could not take away." Now at another school, she was a member of CORE's steering committee.

Running for Pension Trustees

The CORE candidates went from school to school campaigning, bringing leaflets with pension information and talking to union members about what was at stake. "It was more of an educational campaign than a political one," observed CORE communications secretary Kenzo Shibata (later CTU's new media coordinator).

There was plenty to talk about. District CEO Ron Huberman was trying to bust teachers' pension down to a defined-contribu-

tion 401(k)-type plan—just as he’d done to Chicago transit workers in a previous job. Rehak and Ashford promised a more aggressive defense than that of the incumbent trustees, who were caving to both district and legislative attacks on teachers’ pensions, they said.

But Ashford and Rehak weren’t campaigning alone—the whole caucus got involved. David Hernandez, for example, was one of 10 from Social Justice High who stepped up to leaflet around the city. CORE made a spreadsheet of all the schools and broke out assignments by region.

At the October House of Delegates meeting, UPC moved to endorse the incumbent candidates for the pension board. This mattered because a union-funded mailer would go out with all the endorsed candidates’ names on it. In the past these endorsements had been rubber-stamped. But CORE had a plan, an amendment to endorse all six candidates. All the opposition caucuses united behind it, and in a close vote, the motion passed: a good sign.

A Springboard

A week before the election, on a professional development day (when teachers are at school but students are not), CORE members canvassed hundreds of schools one more time. Two days before the election, the CORE candidates spoke once more at a board of education hearing, charging that CPS was trying to short the pension fund \$100 million in a “last-minute, back-door” deal in the legislature.

It all paid off. In the October 30 election Ashford and Rehak were, narrowly, the top two vote-getters.

The pension campaign was important not only for its own sake—to salvage members’ retirement—but also as a test of the caucus’s reach and appeal. As the first union-wide election the caucus had contested, “it was a temperature check of how CORE was organizing,” Hernandez said. It was also a springboard, building momentum for the higher-stakes campaign that would follow a few months later.

Of course, it was a signal to the incumbents, too. After the pension board upset, UPC collaborated with Huberman to publish new rules intended to curtail opposition candidates’ ability to distribute literature or hold meetings at schools. The administra-

tion also challenged the eligibility of one of CORE's likely nominees for top office.

Forming the Slate

In a January 2010 meeting, 100 CORE members voted among five possible combinations and chose their slate of candidates for the union's top offices: Karen Lewis for president, Jackson Potter for vice president, Michael Brunson for recording secretary, and Kristine Mayle for financial secretary. The election would be held in May.

"First of all we wanted to have folks who were seen as really fighters," elementary teacher Norine Gutekanst said, "and we wanted to be representative of the different demographics in the union." The slate should also represent elementary as well as high schools and both veteran teachers and younger ones. It was a plus that Mayle had a background in special education, and that the four lived in different areas of the city.

The caucus also ran candidates for the rest of the executive board (dozens of seats) and for state and national union convention delegates. The next step would be a February-March push for 1,400 petition signatures to make the nominations official.

Potter, who was in a legal battle over his eligibility, withdrew from the ticket at the end of January, before the petition period was to open. He had taken a study leave three years before, and though he had kept paying dues the whole time, the incumbents now claimed he had not maintained the required three years' con-



Jen Johnson

CORE ran a slate of top officers in 2010: Jesse Sharkey, Michael Brunson, Karen Lewis, and Kristine Mayle, along with dozens for executive board.

tinuous membership. CORE activists believed he was in the right, but it would have been too risky to wait for the outcome of the court battle. Senn High School social studies teacher Jesse Sharkey stepped up to run for vice president.

Math teacher Carol Caref was in charge of the petition effort. “It wasn’t hard to get signatures,” she said, “but you actually have to go out and do it.”

(The next time CORE ran, in 2013, the caucus tracked who signed the petition and used it as a recruiting tool. “If in some schools everybody signed it,” said elementary teacher Sarah Chambers, “that’s a good sign. If half signed it, that’s a bad sign, and we would try to have a speaker go there.”)

Making the List

It’s one of the universals of organizing—the first thing you do is make a list. Alix Gonzalez Guevara, a teacher at Telpochcalli School, remembers staying up late transferring data about each school from a district-published book into an Excel spreadsheet: region, address, how many teachers, how many students. This became a Google document, an online spreadsheet available to everyone working on the campaign—all shared the same login information. “I would highly recommend the Google doc,” Chambers said.

The schools were grouped by regions. Within each region, a couple of lead activists stepped up—people who lived or taught in the area—and took responsibility to find people to do outreach at each school. Then, whenever someone went out to leaflet or hold a meeting at a school, they’d document it in the central spreadsheet, so it was easy to track which schools had been visited a lot already and which needed more attention.

After each visit, activists also documented their current estimate of how support was running at the school. CORE didn’t try to track where 27,000 CTU members stood individually; tracking was by school, an educated guess at the school’s percentage of support based on conversations with members there, what the delegate said (and whether she was supportive), and how many had signed the petition to get CORE’s candidates on the ballot. Relationships with delegates were a high priority. “We really tried to recruit the delegates,” Chambers said.

On a typical visit, the CORE activist might spend a half-hour in the parking lot, talking with teachers about the issues. Then she would go inside, chat with the clerk if he wasn't too busy, stuff all the mailboxes with the latest CORE flyer, and leave a personal letter for the delegate, with a phone number to contact CORE if he wanted to set up a meeting. Where possible, she would try to arrange a group meeting so the officer candidates could meet teachers and answer questions.

"We had a group of 20 people who were available to go debate with the other caucus candidates at the schools," said Potter. "The decentralized approach allowed us to run circles around the opposition, who only deployed the four officers."

"We had an operation," Gutekanst recalled. "We really tried to blanket the city. We had a little mini-army of people who were willing to do that. And we were well-organized geographically around the city."

'A Mini-Army'

Chambers estimated 80 to 100 CORE members did these kinds of flyering visits, mostly in the morning or afternoon, before or after school. About 20 took some "personal business" days off to campaign. A few were out practically every morning or afternoon. The most work, of course, was done by the dozens of people on the slate, and the top officer candidates most of all.



CTU

CORE leafletted at Puerto Rican Day Parade.

Special education teacher Margo Murray, who made many such visits, reported it was the personal contact that won people over to CORE. “You have to spend that time talking,” she said. “Reading it, sometimes they don’t get it, but somebody they like or respect their opinion, making that personal contact—if they respect you, they’re going to take a second look.”

Over the course of the campaign, the caucus hit every school—most schools three times and some five times. The tracking made it easier to prioritize larger schools, ones that hadn’t been visited much, those where CORE’s forces were weaker, or, in some cases, schools where the caucus wanted to build up a base of potential activists. Lower priority was given to very small schools or to schools that were totally dominated by strong delegates from other caucuses.

At Caref’s high school, the 10 CORE people met and split up the list of CTU members, with each person having 10 people to talk to. “People get interested in an election,” Caref said. “There were people who hadn’t previously been involved in CORE who took CORE lit to other schools and called their friends and were really campaigning for us. And that happened across the city.”

“You always have to be putting it out there: ‘these are the different ways you can participate,’” Gonzalez Guevara said. Someone might not be willing to hand out flyers, but “they would make some phone calls or host a fundraiser. You have to see what people are interested to contribute.”

At CORE’s general meetings—which grew more frequent, from monthly to every two weeks to once a week by the end of the

24-Hour Bins

One simple tool CORE came up with was the 24-hour bin. A member would volunteer to host a plastic bin outside their house in a place where people could get to it at all hours—on the front porch, for instance, or under the stairs. The bin would be stocked with the latest flyers, posters, or whatever literature CORE was distributing.

During the 2010 campaign there were five of these bins scattered around the city, making it easy for any volunteer to pick up the latest literature at any time. The system proved so handy that CORE kept using it for caucus flyers after the campaign was over. ✪

member in their building. “At that time the union newsletter was big and glossy, with lots of pictures of the officers,” Shibata said. “It worked like campaign lit essentially, and was a bit of a joke with the rank and file. We just did a four-pager, with information on what was going on in the schools—and more people were reading our newsletter than were reading the official magazine.”

During the same period, Shibata started using Twitter to report, in real time, what was being said in board of education meetings. Since the meetings took place on weekday mornings when teachers couldn’t go, “when I’d tweet them all that info, they could watch it in real time.” (Or catch up on their next break.) CORE also started live-tweeting House of Delegates meetings. Oddly enough, Shibata said, the use of Twitter and other new media helped get CORE some press attention. “You can’t get mainstream news coverage as a caucus within a union,” he said. “But the fact that we were using these technologies often became a story, and got our name out.”

As the election neared, CORE bought targeted online ads to make sure the caucus’s logo and the election date popped up constantly onscreen for anyone who listed CPS as their employer on Facebook or was searching for anything CPS-related. This was not only a helpful reminder for supporters and fence-sitters—it was also a fun way to psych out the incumbents, making CORE seem ubiquitous. And when CORE’s name was mentioned in a *Chicago Tribune* story about its EEOC complaint just before the election, the algorithm caused its banner ad to appear right beside the online story. “We had a huge spike in our page views,” Shibata said.

Social and Fundraising Events

CORE’s meetings grew steadily bigger, and sometimes split into regional meetings (North, South, and Southwest) “so the meetings could be a little more intimate,” as Caref put it.

The caucus also sponsored plenty of fundraising events throughout the year. Among the most memorable were a night at a comedy club and one at a blues club, but others were as simple as a night out at a local bar with a door charge and raffle. These events did double duty—not only raising funds, but also serving

as social opportunities to strengthen ties among the activists and welcome new folks in.

Official CORE members paid dues: \$35 a year for teachers, \$20 for paraprofessionals, retirees, and supporters. But that would have been nowhere near enough to pay for the campaign. Slate members were expected to chip in some of their own money, and the fundraisers held at least monthly were crucial. The campaign cost perhaps \$30,000, spent mostly on printing and mailing flyers.

The caucus also continued to organize educational events. In the fall, together with Labor Notes and two AFSCME locals, CORE sponsored a day-long teach-in and strategy session called “Public Sector Workers Unite: Facing the Budget Crisis.” And as the campaign heated up, realizing they still had gaps in their organizing know-how, the teachers went to school. The University of Illinois Labor Education Program set up five three-and-a-half hour classes for CTU activists in February, March, and April, focusing on union leadership, and a couple of dozen CORE members attended.

Round Two against Closings

Meanwhile, knowing that another round of school closings was coming, CORE had taken the offensive, starting off the 2009-10 school year with a bang. In an October press conference at City Hall the caucus unveiled a survey on the impacts of the 20-day rule and highlighted the alarming rise in student violence. CORE argued that CPS’s policies—the rule and the school closures—were intensifying violence by destabilizing students’ lives and communities, and by displacing the veteran teachers (overwhelmingly black) who knew the neighborhoods and students well.

The GEM coalition—CORE and community groups—called for an end to the Renaissance 2010 school closures onslaught in another press conference a few weeks later at a board of education meeting. Speakers included a displaced teacher, several former students, a minister who was on a local school council, a juvenile justice center worker, and the former vice principal of a military school who’d been forced out for resisting the district’s push to make it selective-enrollment (students would have to compete for admission).

CORE held a summit at Malcolm X College in January 2010 to organize against the next round of closings—and to announce its slate for the election. The forum was scheduled for the day after CPS was supposed to announce the 2010 hit list of schools. CPS delayed the announcement, but 400 people came out anyway. The list was published a couple of weeks later: 14 schools targeted for closure, turnaround, consolidation, or phase-out.

Busy, Busy, Busy

It was a busy time. CORE activists continued their push to attend every school board meeting and closure hearing. After they persuaded a couple of aldermen to propose a moratorium on school closures, they had city council meetings to attend, too. They picketed the mayor. They held strategy meetings with GEM and caucus meetings of their own, and organized marches and candlelight vigils against the school closures. They showed up to support actions led by allies, such as parent group PURE’s outreach at a district “New Schools” expo to showcase charter schools, and a march in defense of the public sector with bus drivers, AFSCME, and Service Employees (SEIU). They participated in the “No Games” rallies against bringing the Olympics to Chicago. All this was on top of the nuts and bolts of campaigning for union office.

But after all, CORE’s activist identity *was* its campaign platform. All the meetings and actions gave the candidates plenty of



Sarah Jane Rhee, loveandstrugglephotos.com

opportunities to make their case publicly, tell their personal stories, and prove that their words were backed up by action. The CORE blog was packed with the latest videos and written testimonies from board of education meetings, school closure hearings, and other events. “We always made sure we wore a CORE button, a CORE shirt,” Chambers said. People would “look around when a school’s closing, and they wouldn’t see any UPC.”

The school closure fights were the reason Caref was able to get so many of the teachers at her school to join CORE, attend its events, and eventually vote for the slate. “We were always afraid we’d be next on the list,” she said. (Sure enough, a couple years later, they were.)

“CORE was camping out all night in front of schools threatened to be closed, joining parents and kids,” said Lamme, “while the union was sitting on its hands and being a little too generous in their compensation packages for themselves.”

The board of education voted unanimously February 24 to close eight schools—but spared the other six that had been announced, including Guggenheim and Prescott Elementaries, which had mounted the most vigorous opposition. Unlike in the previous year, three aldermen had showed up to testify against the closings alongside CORE activists, and even the incumbent CTU leaders held a small picket and press conference outside.

‘Name the Names, Huberman!’

The next day, CPS CEO Huberman announced a \$900 million projected deficit and called on the union to re-open the contract—citing teachers’ pensions, raises, and class sizes as targets.

CORE activists didn’t miss a beat, announcing that they didn’t trust the district’s accounting. In a well-researched paper released a week later, the caucus pointed out that CPS had claimed a deficit each January or February for the past eight years—yet somehow the district always showed a surplus in its August audited budget. (CORE’s early study group had learned about this kind of “crisis budgeting” routine when members read *The Shock Doctrine*.) Meanwhile, tax-increment financing (TIFs) diverted \$250 million a year from Chicago’s schools to subsidies for corporations.

And couldn’t the savings be found in other ways, CORE argued, such as by scaling back executive salaries and cutting con-

roversial bureaucracies like the Office of School Turnaround? CORE called on the district to open its books, and filed Freedom of Information Act requests with the state (and later a lawsuit against the district) for information on TIF money and line-item details on CPS's budget.

"Exactly why should we believe CPS's deficit numbers?" Lewis asked, pointing out that Huberman's harsh cuts would mean balancing the budget on the backs of students and educators. "Thirty-five students in a classroom is inhumane and it nearly guarantees school and student failure."

CORE and GEM organized a series of protests demanding that the district "name the names" of its outside contractors and reveal the cost of standardized tests and how much Huberman was getting paid. They pressed Illinois's attorney general to fast-track the information request. Students held a 13-school, 900-student walkout April 8; a few weeks later, student leaders returned to district headquarters again to call on CPS officials to rescind the awful budget. Senior Javier Lara Mendez said students wanted an "equitable, transparent budget with no cuts to students or teachers."

Solving Problems, School by School

CORE activists knew that in many schools, CTU had little presence. The Professional Problems Committees (PPCs) that were supposed to deal with school-level issues had fallen into disuse in many schools, and many delegate slots were empty. CORE members spent time going to these underrepresented schools to meet people. They worked to identify local fights to organize and involve them—such as schools where administrators were aggressively going after teachers.

"In our buildings we all tried to make an effort to get people to solve problems in the place they worked," said Adam Heenan, who joined CORE in the summer of 2009 and later became his school's head delegate. "If you can't solve the problem that's right in front of people's faces, you don't have their trust and you can't have the opportunity to solve bigger problems. But if you can do that, you've gained an ally and are more able to educate them on broader issues that may or may not have to do with the issue that's right in their face."

Lamme had already built that kind of trust over time. His school, Kelly High, did have a well-run PPC—he ran it. When he and the other teachers on the committee would receive complaints or suggestions, “we’d investigate, talk to the people involved,” he said. Often “we got issues resolved before going to the principal.”

And even though it was a big school, with more than 200 staff, “I got to know everybody,” Lamme said—a personal strength. So when the election came around, it made sense that people came to him to ask, “Mr. Lamme, who do I vote for?”

“We didn’t limit our issues to school closings, though that was our main campaign,” Caref said. “We got people in buildings to join CORE; we got CORE people to take on campaigns in their school.”

Many classrooms were short on textbooks, for instance. So after Potter found out about a state program to help teachers find unused textbooks in storage at other schools, CORE spread the word, providing instructions and a spreadsheet on its website to help teachers track down the books they needed. “CORE is teachers advocating for students,” enthused caucus member Joyce Sia, “from fixing the CTU right down to hooking up schools with free textbooks!”

CORE was already “doing what the union should have been doing,” said Lamme. “So when the election came, they didn’t say ‘Elect me and I’ll do this.’ They said, ‘This is what we’ve been doing and we’ll keep doing it.’”

Team of Rivals

Three other slates were also challenging the incumbent United Progressive Caucus in the election. UPC, primarily composed of older teachers and paraprofessionals, many of whom were retired or near retirement, was weakened by a dispute within its ranks, and had taken the union from a big initial surplus to a mounting debt.

The strongest of the other challenger groups was PACT, the ProActive Chicago Teachers led by Deborah Lynch, who had won the presidency in 2001. However, Lynch negotiated a concessionary contract in 2003, and members voted it down. A second, slightly better agreement was ratified, but the concessions were hard to swallow. PACT lost narrowly to UPC in 2004.

CORE tried to ally with PACT early on, but it didn't work out. "We had some common ground," Caref recalled, "but Debbie [Lynch] didn't take us seriously." And although some of CORE's key members had been part of PACT before, the two caucuses had different orientations. CORE was more political (more conscious of race, for instance), more activist, and more focused on organizing—identifying natural leaders and bringing them in. PACT was outspoken in its criticism of UPC, but not big on action.

Residual anger about Lynch's 2003 contract would hurt PACT's chances this time around. Still, PACT sounded a second voice of reform alongside CORE's.

UPC fought dirty, trying to shut down opposition caucuses from campaigning. "Leadership put out stumbling blocks, including telling bosses not to let CORE come to buildings," Lewis remembered. UPC put out flyers saying, "Stop Mob Action, Stop Radical CORE!" and even accused CORE of running for office just to give union money to community groups.

After UPC and the district tried to disallow union campaigning in the schools, PACT filed a free-speech lawsuit, winning a temporary restraining order in March. CORE activists started carrying copies of the order with them when they went to visit schools, prepared to stand their ground if anyone challenged their right to be there.

'Play It Safe,' Incumbents Say

UPC's presidential candidate, incumbent Marilyn Stewart, ducked a public debate with Lewis and made her case online, decrying the reformers' promises she called "pie in the sky." (The five presidential candidates debated in front of the House of Delegates, but the incumbents forbade recording, so few members heard it.) A moratorium on school closings? Hiring more counselors while Huberman threatened layoffs? Reducing class size? Winning a new benefit, paid and pensionable family leave? Halting the privatization of schools? Not a platform to save public education, the incumbents argued, but a series of "unrealistic pledges" made by naïve competitors.

Stewart campaigned on her experience, claiming that Hu-

berman was “rooting for the rookies” over her team. She argued she could best protect the union’s five-year contract—then in year three—which had achieved raises and slowed rising health care premiums.

The week of the election, UPC filed a lawsuit that grabbed front-page headlines, arguing that CPS’s proposed class-size increases would violate fire codes. But it was too little, too late: UPC had come to be associated with charter school expansion and a decade that saw 6,000 members pushed out.

Right to the end, Stewart’s caucus put forward a “play it safe” message. “You don’t make radical changes in times of trouble,” she told the press.

First Vote

As the May 21 election neared, CORE and its community allies in GEM were simultaneously building towards a big “Save Our Schools” rally downtown, May 25, against Huberman’s budget cuts.

They created enough momentum to box UPC into a corner—the event was going to be too big to ignore. So CORE was able to move a resolution through the House of Delegates to support it. The rally got the union’s endorsement “because they knew they couldn’t stop it at that point,” Mayle said.

CORE went all out on publicity, printing up 30,000 copies of a full-color poster featuring a beautiful, simple infographic—a bar chart comparing Huberman’s claimed shortfall (then \$600 million) with the \$1.025 billion CORE calculated could be saved by cutting high-stakes testing, charters, contract schools, turn-arounds, and TIFs, and drawing on CPS’s reserves. The poster also included the rally info and CORE’s name.

“We did a total blitz, made sure every school had these stuffed in mailboxes,” Shibata remembered. Activists were going before school and after school and taking days off to deliver them. The posters were a big hit: easy on the eyes, featuring real information, and with a message of solidarity. Teachers were hanging them up in their classrooms. UPC got mad and called off a joint press conference with CORE. All good signs.

The day of the election, CORE activists and volunteers stood outside the doors at schools, handing out postcards reminding people to vote.

When the votes were counted, UPC got 36 percent and CORE got 33, with the other three slates splitting the other 31

SAVE OUR SCHOOLS!

- \$600 million is just 8.7 percent of Chicago Public Schools' overall budget. So why should school staff face a **25 percent cut**?
- The current "budget crisis" is really a **matter of priorities**. Recently, the city approved \$450 million in borrowing to finance "capital projects." This will mainly go to charter schools. **Aren't neighborhood schools and the education of our youth just as important?**
- Why are **Huberman and other bureaucrats getting fat raises while increasing class size and cutting athletic, after-school and other critical programs?**

Budget shortfall claimed by Huberman

\$600 million

CEO Ron Huberman claims that the Chicago Public Schools face a \$600 million deficit that will require a 20 to 25 percent cut in classroom staffing.

But his numbers don't add up.

\$1.025 billion

High-stakes testing **\$60 million**

TIF money **\$250 million**

Money spent on charters, turnarounds and contract schools **\$315 million**

CPS cash reserve **\$400 million***

* At the end of 2009, CPS had a various reserve funds totaling \$406 million. However, CPS has refused to release the current level of reserves, despite repeated requests.

MASS RALLY, TUESDAY, MAY 25

Everyone who cares about public education should mobilize to defend our schools! Teachers, students, parents and community groups welcome!

Meet at the Board of Education, 125 S. Clark St. at 4 pm

Caucus of Rank and File Educators

www.coreteachers.org

CORE

percent. About 71 percent of eligible members voted, a few points higher than turnout in the 2007 and 2004 elections.

'Save Our Schools' Rally

Close on the heels of the election came the hotly anticipated rally. "It was the first time the membership really showed up," not just a handful of activists but a large-scale turnout, Mayle said. "Everybody knew this was *the thing*."

Five thousand marched downtown, shutting down a main thoroughfare and getting Richard M. Daley's attention when the mayor's limousine got caught in the crowd. Bus drivers joined the march with signs saying "Huberman: Classrooms Are Not Buses"—a reference to the fact that they had endured cuts and layoffs when Huberman was the head of Chicago transit.

"We should have done this every year for the past six years," said Lewis.

"It was quite important, that rally, in helping us land in office," Gutekanst said later. "We were projecting an image of, 'This is what a fighting union leadership should do. We know how to fight and lead.'"



Run-off

Crucially, all the caucuses opposing UPC had agreed that if there was a run-off, all would throw their support to the non-UPC candidates. CORE had maintained respectful relationships with the other caucuses and did no public mudslinging against them. Some PACT leaders were thus quite helpful in the June 11 run-off.

But the insurgents couldn't assume it was in the bag. CORE activists repeated the outreach they'd done in the months before, visiting schools again to distribute literature and talk to people. This time they had new data to hone their targeting more precisely: the results from the first vote, showing turnout and the break-out of votes by caucus at each school. Gonzalez Guevara said she appreciated making the repeat visits—a chance to talk to more people and keep building the communication networks the caucus would need for its ongoing organizing after winning office.

CORE had started two years before with around 22 dues-paying members. By the time of the election, the group was around 400—still a modest organization among 27,000 teachers and paraprofessionals. But in the runoff, with 76 percent turnout, Lewis and the three other top officer candidates each won a decisive 59 percent, more than 12,000 votes.

“CORE has been doing the work of the leadership already,” said Lewis before the win. “So we felt they might as well elect us.”

The slate swept the other nine citywide offices and all the vice presidencies for high schools (six) and elementary schools (17). UPC retained a few paraprofessional slots on the executive board. CORE had well and truly won control of the union.

Caref, one of the newly elected area vice presidents, remembered, “And then we were all like, ‘uh oh, now what do we do?’”

Lessons

- ⇒ CORE got practice and built momentum by running for lower level offices first.
- ⇒ Teachers were inspired to join CORE because of the group's bigger vision—not just bread-and-butter union issues but battling against racism and to improve education for all students.

- ⇒ CORE activists won fellow members' support by jumping into the trenches and doing the work of the union—even calling a big rally—not just talking about what leaders should do.
- ⇒ But winning office also required practical, old-fashioned organizing: making good lists, recruiting volunteers, going out to every school, holding thousands of one-on-one conversations, and carefully tracking support.
- ⇒ CORE held regional meetings after school, pizza/beer get-togethers, and social events as well as its union/political actions.
- ⇒ CORE set up a fundraising apparatus, selling tickets for events, T-shirts, and more. Many supporters dug deep into their pockets.
- ⇒ CORE made it possible to be involved on many different levels, from bringing a few co-workers to an event, to visiting another school with flyers, to running for office. A CTU member didn't have to choose the course of all-out activism that CORE leaders were exemplifying in order to contribute to the effort.
- ⇒ CORE made good use of Twitter and Facebook, but prioritized face-to-face connections at the schools.
- ⇒ CORE used an online spreadsheet (a Google document) available to all, so that information was not trapped in one person's head or on their computer.
- ⇒ CORE used role-playing to train members to respond to tough questions.