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USA

Don't Back Down

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Chicagoans have been asking themselves a lot of unusual questions lately.

Is Mayor Rahm Emanuel's reelection campaign unraveling at the prospect of a challenge from Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) President Karen Lewis? Could the groundswell of support for the 2012 CTU strike be revived through a Lewis campaign for mayor, boost the fortunes of a clutch of independent candidates for city council, and build a movement for social justice? What does it mean to run a genuinely pro-worker, labor-based political campaign for mayor of the country's third largest city? [Since this article was written, Karen Lewis has announced that she will not be running for Mayor of Chicago. She has been diagnosed with a very serious illness that prevents her run. The editors of IV sincerely wish her all the best in her battle for a speedy recovery.]

Not long ago, such propositions would have seemed absurd.

Certainly Chicago teachers bested Emanuel in the CTU strike and partially defeated the mayor's neoliberal education agenda. Nevertheless, Rahm (supporters and detractors alike give him the first-name-only treatment, Madonna-style) remains one of the most politically wired politicians the country.

Rahm has become America's Mayor. And he has magazine covers and fawning articles in Time and the Economist to prove it, along with a CNN documentary series in which producers worked with Rahm's handlers to turn the foul-mouthed, vindictive political operative into a tenderhearted guy who just loves the city's kids "so much so that he reluctantly has to be tough to solve the city's problems.

Then there's Rahm's resumé: an up-and-coming powerbroker in the 1990s Chicago Democratic machine who became a key policymaker and political enforcer in President Clinton's administration; a rainmaker at an investment bank for thirty months, which bagged him \$18.5 million; a six-year stint in Congress; chief of staff for two years in Barack Obama's White House.

Those connections enabled Rahm to win the mayor's race in a walk in 2011. He continues to pile up campaign cash "some \$8.2 million to date" from wealthy donors delighted with his pro-corporate record.

Emanuel was publicly shamed by the Chicago teachers during their 2012 strike, when teachers, parents, and students derailed his plan to defeat the CTU and blame teachers for the many problems of Chicago's public school system. Yet Rahm took his revenge in 2013 by ramming through other parts of his education program; he ended up closing forty-nine neighborhood schools and expanding nonunion charter schools. The money, the networks, his reputation for destroying political opponents "all seem to make Rahm unbeatable for a second term.

Over the following year, however, Rahm's apparent successes actually sapped his popularity as the CTU and its allies made him pay a high political price for the school closures. According to a recent Chicago Tribune poll, some 62 percent of voters side with the union on education issues, compared to 23 percent for the mayor.

Rahm has also taken a political hit for the gun violence that's plaguing poor neighborhoods. Since the recession, City Hall has done little to address the evisceration of black wealth due to falling house prices and rising unemployment "trends exacerbated by the century-old impact of racism, segregation, and poverty in Chicago. Emanuel's austerity policies, such as closing mental health clinics and slicing library budgets, have accumulated grievances

throughout the city.

The mayor has promoted gentrification instead of equitable economic development, even as workers are stuck with subprime mortgages, higher property taxes, and rising rents. Amid his school closings, Emanuel announced that he'd use \$55 million of public money to help build a new basketball arena for a private university. His days are spent, as journalists Mick Dumke and Ben Joravsky found, meeting with "rich guys, campaign donors, powerful contractors, union busters, charter-school supporters, City Hall insiders, aldermanic brownnosers, and other favor seekers."

By early summer, opinion polls showed Emanuel's unraveling support in working-class Chicago. A late summer Chicago Tribune poll found that Lewis "who is now gathering signatures to be on the ballot yet says she's only considering a run for office" would receive 43 percent in a mayoral contest to Emanuel's 39 percent. Among African Americans, Emanuel's support fell to 8 percent in May, according to a Chicago Sun-Times poll.

At the same time, the Latino wing of the Chicago Democratic machine "cultivated by Emanuel's predecessor, Richard M. Daley, and a bastion of support for the current mayor" is in disarray following a major corruption scandal involving Juan Rangel, longtime head of the United Neighborhood Organization (UNO), a leading local operator of charter schools. Notably, Rangel was Rahm's Latino outreach organizer for his first mayoral campaign.

Yet as Emanuel became vulnerable, the person considered best able to oust him, Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle, the city's most prominent African-American elected official and a key player in the local Democratic Party, announced she'd stay out of the race. Lewis had publicly urged Preckwinkle to run (despite the county board president's attack on union pensions). But with Preckwinkle out, Lewis herself became the focus of media attention.

To Lewis' longtime supporters in the CTU and beyond, the prospect of her candidacy seemed to promise a decisive break with politics as usual. "Unfortunately there's really only one party in this country," she told members of US Labor Against the War in January 2013. "It's the party of money, and there are two branches. So we have to work with our allies to develop new coalitions." She's made similar comments in the mainstream media.

Now, however, as Lewis' candidacy for mayor appears viable, she has dropped that rhetoric and taken stances that have disappointed and even shocked some prospective supporters.

The biggest surprise came when Lewis wrote a full-page op-ed piece denouncing Emanuel for proposing that graduates of Chicago Public Schools should receive preferential status for jobs as Chicago firefighters or police officers "a move that would give more blacks and Latinos a shot at those positions, historically dominated by whites.

Lewis claimed that this mild affirmative action proposal smacked of religious discrimination "and even racial bias against whites" because many white cops and firefighters send their kids to private Catholic schools.

Emanuel's backers had a field day with Lewis' piece. "This reads like nothing more than a political love letter to white ethnic voters in Chicago, and a short-sighted attempt to expand her limited base of support," Owen Kilmer of Democrats for Education Reform stated in an email to the *Sun-Times*. "This debate is not about policy for her, it's about courting votes."

Kilmer's teacher-bashing organization has its own reasons for attacking Lewis. But it's hard to disagree with him on this specific point. Lewis knows that the Chicago Fire Department has long been marked by racism, with the numbers of black firefighters kept to a minimum through discriminatory testing practices. In 2011, a judge ordered the city to

hire 111 African Americans as firefighters — people who were denied the job based on racial discrimination back in 1995.

Emanuel's proposals may only address this issue indirectly, but they are a concession to a longstanding black community demand. The mayor has positioned himself to the left of Lewis on the issue.

This policy stance seems part of a broader slide to the right. In the past, Lewis has often spoken eloquently about how violence in Chicago is the product of decades of racism, segregation, and disinvestment in black communities. Her message now: hire more cops, because police overtime means "a lot of tired, demoralized cops on the street." In the same interview in which she made those comments, Lewis spoke approvingly of an agreement between Illinois Governor Pat Quinn and Emanuel to bring in forty state troopers to help Chicago police officers in "a handful of high-crime city neighborhoods."

To some political observers, Lewis' calls for additional cops smacks of old-school mutual back-scratching. The Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) supported the CTU strike, so now Lewis supports them. Yet this message — especially after the uprising in Ferguson that followed the killing of Michael Brown and opened up a national discussion about racism and police brutality — was startling. After all, the Chicago FOP is raising money for Darren Wilson, the cop who killed Brown.

The issue of racist police violence is central in Chicago's African-American neighborhoods, where people still remember the torture of black men administered by former police commander Jon Burge. In August, Chicago Police Commander Glenn Evans — a controversial black cop promoted and praised by police superintendent Garry McCarthy — was charged with battery for an incident in which he allegedly shoved the barrel of his gun into a suspect's mouth. Evans is just one of more than six hundred Chicago cops who have ten or more complaints filed against them.

If Lewis is going to build on the momentum that she and the CTU have created due to their advocacy for black and brown youths, she'll have to take the issue of police violence and racism head-on. Instead, Lewis has sidestepped the question.

Meanwhile, Emanuel is staking out policy positions that are intended to cover his left flank, such as his pledge to push legislation to raise the city's minimum wage to \$13 per hour by 2018, even if the state legislature fails to act on the issue.

The emerging picture could be one in which the arch-neoliberal Rahm Emanuel poses as a champion of economic and social justice while Lewis, the firebrand union leader who galvanized the city in the biggest strike in decades, comes across as, at best, a moderate policy wonk.

Some in Lewis' camp may argue that she has to adopt such positions in order to preempt attacks from her right. But if she keeps moving in that direction, Lewis will effectively kill the possibility of an independent break from the Democratic Party.

Because Chicago municipal elections are formally nonpartisan, it's possible to dodge the question of party affiliation. Many candidates who challenge incumbents for city council call themselves independents. Yet if they win, they settle into the Democratic Party machine, even if they join the council's small and ineffectual Progressive Reform Caucus.

The Democrats have a long history of co-opting and containing challenges from the Left. Lewis faces those

pressures, too. American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, who has tried to sideline Lewis as a potential challenger for union leadership, said that the AFT's political arm would put up \$1 million to support a Lewis mayoral bid.

That kind of money is certainly not available for anyone who plans on bolting from the Democrats. For the AFT leader, such a move could remove Lewis as a possible rival and boost Weingarten's clout as a member of the Democratic National Committee. Moreover, Lewis, despite her public criticisms, supports Quinn — a Democrat who carried out an assault on the pensions of public workers, including teachers — in his re-election campaign against hedge fund boss Bruce Rauner.

CTU delegates themselves, after a sharp debate, voted to endorse Quinn at their September 3 meeting — even though the governor's running mate is Paul Vallas, who ran Chicago schools during the first wave of corporate school reform in the 1990s. Lewis' and the CTU's endorsement of Quinn is a sign of the pressure to stay within the Democratic Party fold, no matter how anti-union Democrats behave in office.

Lewis' turn to the right rests on the widely held assumption that the votes for a winning campaign are to be found by tacking to the center, even in a liberal big city like Chicago. In fact, the CTU strike and Lewis' emergence as the most popular African-American political figure in the city proves the opposite.

According to the conventional wisdom, the CTU would have isolated itself by highlighting the apartheid nature of Chicago schools while protesting bankers and the one percent. Certainly that was the view of Emanuel and his handlers, who didn't think the CTU members could overcome draconian legislation restricting their right to strike, let alone win overwhelming support through mass protests.

Instead, Lewis' bluntness and boldness gave a voice to working people in Chicago that had been absent for decades. Striking teachers were treated as heroines and heroes. A movement for education justice, despite its many ups and downs, has taken shape and helped to revive activism on other issues.

If a Lewis campaign is to build on that movement, it will have to stake out clear social democratic positions — from raising the minimum wage, to a tax on financial transactions, to higher taxes on the wealthy. The fight against racism will have to be front and center. She will have to highlight underfunding in schools, residential discrimination, and the lack of genuine economic development — not gentrification — in black and brown neighborhoods. Such a campaign would also have to confront the reality of police brutality, from Ferguson to Chicago. Immigrant rights should be a major focus, too, in a city in which a growing Latino population faces a dramatic rise in deportations, as well as racism and poverty.

Democratic Party advisers will counsel Lewis to avoid these questions. But they are part and parcel of the struggle for basic democratic and civil rights.

Independence from the Democratic Party is also essential in forming a campaign that can build a lasting social movement and working-class resistance. Democrats have moved steadily rightward to implement anti-worker policies, even if they are capable of putting forward candidates like New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio to tap into discontent and enact a few modest reforms to secure the party's urban voting base.

Lewis faces a choice of running a campaign that's true to the principles she's championed in the past, or running a conventional race in which she adopts mainstream policies to chase centrist votes while turning off a potentially wider working-class political base. Voter turnout in the 2011 mayoral race was a meager 40 percent. If Lewis becomes a conventional Democratic politician, working-class voters will likely stay home again.

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Just as the CTU strike succeeded because of the mobilization of the union rank and file, a Lewis campaign will need to be driven by grassroots organizations and working-class militants, not Democratic professional campaign strategists whose only political principle is "electability."

Running a principled campaign outside the Democratic Party that might lose would do far more to build a grassroots movement than a mainstream campaign that won. It would be a step towards independent political action that would have national implications — a rallying point for working people fed up with the Democrats as well as a focus for a new generation of activists created by Occupy, the Ferguson rebellion, and other protests. Such a campaign — in conjunction with independent city council races — could create a sustainable independent political formation.

What's most important is that the strikes and protests of recent years, especially the 2012 CTU strike, find expression at the polls

Source: [Jacobin](#).