EDUCATION FOR PUBLIC GOOD NOT FOR PROFIT
GREG JOBIN-LEEDS

There is a fight for the soul of public education in the United States. The center of this battle is Chicago, where the mayor, Rahm Emanuel, has closed more than 150 public schools and opened more than 100 charter schools. As charter schools replace public schools, the education of our children is more in the hands of private corporations and less in the hands of the public.

In Chicago, community organizations made up of parents and students fought back against school closings. However, they were not strong enough to make their voices heard. Then something changed. A team of teachers who taught in the communities most affected by the school cuts helped elect a new union president. With Karen Lewis as their leader, the union no longer focused only on defending teachers’ jobs. Lewis argued that unions need to do more than protect their own economic interests. They also need to defend public education. Lewis and the union built coalitions with community groups and helped create a united grassroots movement that was strong enough to push back against the mayor and his corporate school reformers.

Education should “prepare you to become a citizen of the world.”

In the summer of 2012, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) announced it was going on strike. The teachers wanted better working conditions for themselves, but they also wanted to save the schools for the community, especially the children. Thanks to their connection with community groups, the majority of parents and students supported the strike. This is very unusual. Teachers’ strikes are often unpopular because they are inconvenient for parents. But in a great show of solidarity, two-thirds of parents of schoolchildren supported the strike in Chicago. Some parents joined teachers on picket lines across the city.

For Lewis, the fight for quality education is at the center of a much larger struggle. She argues that education is the core of true democracy. “Education is dangerous because an educated mind is not a mind that you can easily lull into complacency.” Some in big business would like to “push education in the direction they want it to be in.” Some government officials, like the mayor of Chicago, support this push. They promote education policy that favors high-stakes testing. They close public schools and open charter schools. They promote education that matches the needs of big business. But Lewis has a different view of education. She believes that education is not the same as vocational training. Education should not just prepare you to be a good worker. Instead, Lewis argues, education should “prepare you to become a citizen of the world. And that means that you participate in your community and you make your community better.”

Lewis has a vision that society should be truly democratic and based on equity. She says, “Parents and students, not private corporations or boards, should have a say in what their schools look like and how they are governed.” With Lewis’s leadership, the CTU created a new model for fighting back against the privatization of public schools. In Chicago and all across the country, unions and community groups are uniting to stop new charter schools and keep public schools open.

SOURCES: This article was excerpted and adapted (by Cynthia Peters) from pp. 29-38 of When We Fight We Win, by Greg Jobin-Leeds and AgitArte. The New Press, 2016. Used here with permission of The New Press. Copies available at <thenewpress.com/books/when-we-fight-we-win>.

WHAT IS A CHARTER SCHOOL?
Charter schools receive public funding. Their money comes from taxpayers, but they are run by for-profit companies or private boards, which are not accountable to the public. Compared to public schools, they do not have better educational results on average. Furthermore, they:

- suspend and expel a much higher percentage of students
- have fewer special education and English language learners
- sometimes push out low-performing students, as well as students with disabilities.
- do not allow teachers to join the union

Charter schools are part of a privatization process that is happening in the United States. Privatization is when public institutions are turned over to private corporations, and the government pays the corporation to run it.