Why are we striking?

Our working conditions are our students’ learning conditions, and we’ve authorized a legal strike to improve both. We want respectful raises for all CPS staff, including our paraprofessionals, many of whom earn wages so low their children are eligible for free/reduced lunch. That raise should be real, not undercut by escalating health care premiums and co-pays. And elementary teachers desperately need adequate preparation time, not more principal-directed meetings and PD’s that even principals oppose.

We’re fighting for the schools our students deserve. Without social workers, nurses and other vital frontline staff and the real restorative justice programs that our students need, the school to prison pipeline will continue to grow. Without resources for quality schools and affordable neighborhoods, Chicago’s Black and Latinx families will continue to be forced out, driving the endless cycle of school budget cuts, layoffs and under-resourcing in our schools.

I’m confused. Just what can we legally bargain over?

Chicago’s district school educators are victims of ‘separate and unequal’ treatment compared to the rest of Illinois, where educators can bargain and strike over school conditions that include class sizes and staffing needs. In 1995, Chicago mayor Richard Daley won passage in Springfield of the infamous Section 4.5 of the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Act (IELRA), which restricted mandatory subjects which the Board and the Union must negotiate to only wages, hours, benefits and contract length. Section 4.5 also created “permissive” subjects we can bargain over if both sides agree: class size, class staffing and assignment, class schedules, academic calendar, and length of the workday and school year. Unlike every other teacher in the state, 4.5 forbids us from striking over these matters.

Could there be a settlement before October 17?

Yes, but settlement is in the Mayor and CPS’ hands. We continue to bargain in good faith, hoping to reach an agreement that will meet the needs of our members and the students and communities we serve. We’ve called upon the Mayor to put her campaign promises in writing. We all know that the verbal promises made during campaign season are only enforceable if they’re enshrined in a legally binding agreement — our contract. The mayor and her hand-picked members of the Board of Education have the power to do this right now and, in doing so, avert a strike.

Is CPS broke? Can they afford our demands?

CPS is not broke. The State funding formulas changed in 2017 with the passage of an equity-based school funding formula that today is sending over a billion dollars a year in new funding into CPS coffers. The mayor could also redirect public dollars from her TIF slush fund — including $1.3 billion dollars in TIF money Lightfoot approved — in a contract, in writing — for Lincoln Yards’ wealthy developers to create an upscale new neighborhood in “blighted” Lincoln Park, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the nation.

What about Resident Social Workers and Teachers?

 Resident Social Workers are one of the newest groups in our bargaining unit. They have signed up as members and will participate in the strike as full members. If they’re assigned to one school, they should report there for picket duty. Others will receive an update on where they should report.

 Resident Teachers are not yet an official part of our bargaining unit. We are in the process of filing a petition with the Labor Board to have them considered as out on a strike for union recognition, and we
believe they should be aggregated to our bargaining unit as similar groups have been, since they share a ‘community of interest’ with our members. Illinois labor law, however, has not yet formally established the legality of such a strike. We think it is very unlikely that the Board will take action against Resident Teachers for respect our picket lines and we will work to defend them should any action be taken.

Who’s on the bargaining team? Why should we trust them?
Members of the bargaining team are elected members of our executive board, selected by you, the members, to play a leadership role in the CTU. They include teachers, school counselors, social workers, school clerks, teaching assistants, and more. Members with particular areas of expertise in matters like special education, early childhood education, health care, bilingual education and so forth are brought in for specific sessions. The team is led by our elected officers, with support and consultation from our chief of staff and key union leadership from the contract enforcement and legal departments. Our Chief Counsel Robert Bloch, a highly experienced labor attorney, is also at the table.

Will we get paid while we are on strike?
We will receive a two-week check on October 25 and, depending on the length of a strike, a check for October 14, 15 and 16 plus additional days if we have returned to work before the end of pay period 23.

What about our health insurance?
Health insurance coverage is based on being in pay status on the first day of the month, so we are covered for the month of October. If our strike continues past the end of the month and management chooses to cut off healthcare, strikers (and their covered dependents) would automatically qualify to continue coverage under the COBRA laws. The employee has 60 days to elect whether to accept COBRA continuation health coverage, and an additional 45 days to pay for the coverage. If the new labor contract is settled and the strike ends (which it almost certainly would) prior to the deadline to pay the COBRA bill, then medical bills will be covered by the insurance company once our health plan is reinstated. [You can read more information on COBRA](https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ebsa) from the US Department of Labor.

Can we use benefit days during the strike?
The short answer is ‘no.’ Some examples are people on STD (Short Term Disability) or people with scheduled health care events like a planned surgery. If you have scheduled sick or personal business days for the time we are likely to be out on strike, you should go into Aspen when it is certain that we are actually going to strike and cancel those days. For people who are already out on a paid leave, your leave will be paused and you will not be paid during the work stoppage, but your leave will resume when we return to work.

Are any loans available during a strike?
Our national union, the American Federation of Teachers, and the Illinois Federation of Teachers, our state affiliate, have made arrangements to offer modest interest-free loans through the United Credit Union for members in the case of a prolonged strike. Members become eligible to apply for these loans after five days on strike. Further details on the loan application process will be made available should we approach that date.

Do we have a contract in effect now?
Yes. Until a new agreement has been signed and ratified by the membership, we are subject to the terms of the current Collective Bargaining Agreement — the Blue Book.
Are TFA (Teach for America) CTU members? Can they strike?
Yes, they are our members and they will be on strike. TFA has at times sent out misleading and confusing info to TFA fellows about the strike. Our leadership and legal team have met with TFA leadership and expressed our concerns about these communications.

We have repeatedly confirmed that the bottom line is TFA fellows are teachers and CTU bargaining unit members – and will be on strike with us. If you hear concerns, reassure them that TFA’ers were on the line in 2012, 2016, and numerous recent charter school strikes and that they encountered no problems or issues about participation. Contact your field rep if you need further assistance with this.

What about teachers and staff who may be DACA recipients?
We have consulted with our lawyers nationally and at CTU, and DACA recipients are covered as employees under Illinois labor law, so there should be no complications whatsoever that should interfere with their rights. DACA teachers should be more careful than others not to engage in any possibly technically “illegal” activity, which would include civil disobedience.

What about teachers who are here as guest workers such as those on J -1 visas?
Workers who are here on J -1 visas are protected by Illinois labor law. If their sponsoring organization notifies them to the contrary, they should reach out to the CTU and we can provide assistance with this matter. J -1 workers have struck in other cities, including in the recent Denver teachers strike, and did not face adverse action. More information is in a note at the end of this document.

What about after-school activities such as sports, clubs and coaching?
What about that special field trip planned for a day that we may be on strike?
Mayor Lightfoot has already announced that all sports and extra-curricular activities will be cancelled/postponed in the event of a strike. Our members will not be participating in any such activities. We will not be leading or taking part in any field trips during the strike.

What is a scab?
A scab is someone who chooses to cross the picket line to work during our strike. The action of scabs undermines our strength and solidarity. Scabbing — crossing or working behind a picket line — is a very serious violation of our constitution, which lays out clear mechanisms to bring charges against any member at your school who crosses our picket lines. Scabs are tried by our Executive Board, and if found guilty are expelled from the CTU.

There are many reasonable reasons that a co-worker might be nervous about striking – fear of retaliation, financial difficulties, or worries about whether we can win. Acknowledging that you understand and can even relate to their concerns can often help as you talk to them about why the strike and our unity is so important. But, although we understand their fear, they are never an excuse to cross the picket line or be a scab.

What about the educator who doesn’t show up for picket duty?
A bargaining unit member who doesn’t report for picket duty is harming themselves and their colleagues. Every effort should be made to reach out to them through your delegate, CAT team members, or a friend of theirs to persuade them to come and walk the line. We need everyone to stand firm and united. How much we win at the bargaining table and how long it takes depend on our solidarity and strength in the streets.
I don’t live anywhere near my school and I would prefer to picket by my house. Can I just go there for picket duty?
No. We really need members to report to their schools. You are just one person, but if everyone who wanted to did this, our picket lines would suffer and this would weaken our strike. It’s important to connect with parents, students and community members from your school community and for the educators you work with every day to show each other the support and unity that we all need.

Will we make up the days from the strike?
Legally, CPS only needs to make up the days if the school year falls below the State-mandated minimum number of days (185 total, 176 student attendance). CPS has recently threatened to violate these mandates. We highly doubt that CPS management would violate state regulation in this way. In the past, we have successfully negotiated make-up days so that our members lose no wages. That will be our goal again as we complete bargaining.

My school has two buildings. My school is spread out and has several key entrances. How do we handle this?
Divide your team, rotate places, cover the places that need to be covered. The strike is only as strong as our weakest link. If you have issues at a particular picket line, ask your Delegate or Picket Captain to contact your school’s regional Strike Coordinator.

What about basics like food and bathrooms?
Encourage your colleagues to bring snacks and beverages to share. As in 2012, parents and neighbors may also bring food. Try to establish a place (friendly neighbor, local business) where you can use the washroom. You cannot enter the school or school grounds. Scout out parking locations in advance; you will not be using CPS lots.

On the Line
Striking is hard and exhausting – and inspiring and exhilarating! Sing, chant, create dance lines, chat with your fellow workers and celebrate your power at the school site. Join your fellow CTU members and thousands of others for our big public activities in the afternoons. Show your ‘RED for Ed’ pride! Our unity is our greatest strength in a contract fight, and when we fight, we win.

Note for J-1 Visa Holders: J-1 workers do have a right to strike under Illinois law. Please inform us immediately if you hear any statements from your sponsor organization or anyone else to the contrary. If necessary, AFT and the CTU will consider legal action to defend. This issue came up recently in a Denver teachers’ strike and the Board had to change its position and acknowledge that J-1 visa holders do have rights to strike. J-1 visa holders have also been active participants in a number of recent strikes in other fields of work.

We do have two recommendations: Before to participating in the strike, we will provide visa-holders with a ‘Letter of Protection’ to show anyone who questions them and it will include lawyer’s contact information and a statement of your rights. We also recommend that you send a letter or petition to your sponsor organization, stating clearly that you do not intend to quit your job, that you will return to your duties following the strike and that you consider your participation in this as a part of your cultural exchange opportunities. Please email DeborahPope@ctulocal1.org if you have any further questions. We will be happy to help you with the letter and/or statement.