**Jen Johnson Oral History Transcript**

**00:00:01**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Alright, so now that we're recording, if you could just state your name and maybe just tell a little bit about your early life, where you were born, grew up, what your parents did.

**00:00:12**

**Jen Johnson:**

Sure, my name is Jen Johnson. I am currently the chief of staff at Chicago Teachers Union. I am from Grand Rapids, Michigan originally, so the west side of Michigan, the more conservative part of the state, although the city of Grand Rapids has often had Democratic leadership, it’s kind of complex politics. So I grew up there, was very lucky to go to public school, often magnet schools, very multiracial and integrated schools. I'm from a multiracial family also, which is important in my story. My mom is white, she grew up her formative years outside of the city of Chicago in a suburb called Wilmette, which my grandparents got to on the GI Bill. My grandfather was a teacher at New Trier High School for over 35 years and, you know, has scholarships named after him and all that, so education in that part of my family runs deep. But my grandparents also took my mom when she was 15 on the last day of the Selma to Montgomery March when she was a teenager, and so she had many other seminal, kind of, intersections with the civil rights movement; they spent a summer in Knoxville doing, kind of, Christian ecumenical freedom school type work when she was also a teenager. So she became very, kind of, aware, and, you know, participated to the degree that she could, in her high school experience. When she was a senior in high school, my grandfather decided to teach in Chicago so he went from Wilmette to Chicago and taught at Marshall High School on the West Side, which is a, you know, was then and is still now, an all Black school. And my mom attended Marshall for her senior year of high school, so she was the only white student in 1966 to 1967, which happened to be the year after Dr. King was working on the West Side, where Marshall is located, on housing.

So I tell that, I always have to tell that because it's very formative for my life and then my father's Black, he's originally from Alabama but his family moved up to Cincinnati for work in the, I want to say, early ’60s, maybe a little sooner than that, but he also became a public school teacher, so he taught for over 30 years in Grand Rapids, Michigan. And then his aunt, you know, was a teacher, so there's just a lot of educators in my family. But my, kind of, rootedness in education is with this very particular racial justice lens because of who my parents are and how they came to become a part of, kind of, the education field and thinking about that. You know my dad grew up poor, became working class, and then becoming an educator was a bridge to the middle class. And he met my mom in college at Kalamazoo College and then they—he landed a teaching job in Grand Rapids, and so it's pure happenstance that I'm from Grand Rapids, but not happenstance at all that I'm an educator or a social justice educator.

**00:03:00**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Wow yeah thank you. And I'm so curious, given that background, did you know from a really early age that you were going to follow in kind of your parents footsteps and become an educator?

**00:03:11**

**Jen Johnson:**

I did. I knew when I was a teenager, I knew before, you know, college applications that I was going to become a teacher and so my college focus was pretty narrow on going into an education program, so I was an education major from the time I was, you know, 18-17. So, yes I knew. The thing that I didn't know is getting into the labor movement, into unions. You know, my dad is still a card-carrying retiree of the Michigan Education Association. That is something that he never spoke to me about a single time. We talked about it for the first time maybe three years ago, four years ago, and he showed me his retiree dues card. But growing up, I had no sense of what it meant to be a teacher's union person, even though we had mugs and cups and things around the house that said Michigan Education Association on it. So that's the part that was more related to my experience in Chicago and what circles I ran in and how I got drawn into the union work of this.

**00:04:09**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Yeah so that's kind of a perfect segue then to my next question which is, you started teaching, it was in 2002.

**00:04:15**

**Jen Johnson:**

2003

**00:04:17**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

2003. And so I was hoping, you could just talk a little bit about your experiences teaching, and I'm thinking about, you know, you start teaching in 2003 and then you attend, you know, your first CORE meeting in 2008, and I guess like you know, what was going on in your classroom, what were you seeing from your students. I read an interview with you that I really love, where you talked about how the students come to school with great traumas but also great assets and I think that's so important to hold both of those at once. And so I was hoping you could talk maybe a little bit about like what are the some of both the traumas and assets that you saw happening. And

**00:05:03**

**Jen Johnson:**

Sure

**00:05:04**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

And also like in what way did that start shaping your thinking as you started moving into to your political dimensions of your teaching and education.

**00:05:12**

**Jen Johnson:**

Yeah, so I started my career in 2003 at the same school in Chicago that I student taught at, which was Lincoln Park High School, which is located in what is now currently seen as a very affluent neighborhood. But the only reason I ended up there is because in college, when I was getting ready for my field placement, I asked my classmates at Northwestern, because I stupidly chose to go there—that's a whole nother story, and I asked my classmates: “Are you student teaching in Chicago?” Some of them said yes, so then I narrowed to talk to them. I said, “Is the school that you're at diverse?” That narrowed it down, a few of them said yes. And so I asked my classmate Annie, who was a year ahead of me, where she was student teaching and she said Lincoln Park High School. So I went to my supervisor and I said, “I want to student teach at Lincoln Park High School,” because it was in Chicago and it was diverse, and that was my criteria. And so luckily I got a placement there and then I got a job there. I say this because Lincoln Park is very unlike most Chicago public schools. It is a neighborhood school, a magnet school, and a selective enrollment school. There is just a myriad number of layers of how you can get in. And so at the time when I started there, the Cabrini-Green housing projects, right, had been recently torn down, and so the housing community was shifting, but there were still housing projects in the area, and still some Cabrini kids who still attended the school. And so you have students who come from this incredible housing community, like in some ways people don't talk about that, like Cabrini was such a community, and who experienced great amounts of violence, you know, instability in other ways. And so those kids were coming into the same school as kids who walk two blocks from their million-dollar mansion to come to Lincoln Park. And so, for me it was pretty jarring coming from Grand Rapids, Michigan—I'm going myself to like magnet, nice you know, gifted program-type schools—to be in the school where you had the “gifted” programs, but you also had like the neighborhood kids who are coming from public housing. And so it was for me very much like all of the microcosms of Chicago were in my face every single day during my class schedule. I would go from teaching a “regular” sophomore American history course to teaching a pre-international baccalaureate European history and civilizations course in the same like two-hour block. And so what the kids brought to school with them was different, obviously it overlapped though too, right, you have affluent kids who come from experiences with abuse and neglect too, also, access to things like drugs that even some of the other kids wouldn't necessarily have so I saw some of that with with my older students. So yeah I mean it was an education in all of the different parts of Chicago coming into my classes every day and because it was magnet, many of my students traveled from two hours on the train to get to the school.

So, so it was a lot for me to take in, it kind of required me to ask questions about, you know, what created this situation and conditions and luckily, being a history teacher, you get to kind of ask those questions right. And so I started going to a lot of history professional development, particularly I would gravitate towards Black history but also Chicago history because I wanted to learn Chicago history. And so I ended up in several grant programs in my early years through, mostly through Newberry Library and through education grants. And so I would learn, you know, PD content, you know, learn Chicago—some about Chicago history or American history or US history but with educators from around the city. And so that's where I met one of the young people, he's only like a year or two older than me but at the time he felt like very wise, Jackson Potter, whose name will come up with if you talk to anybody from Chicago. So we met in history professional development, I want to say like my second or third year teaching. And he's the person who invited me to the first CORE meeting and he's the person who, you know, found out that I'd become a delegate. And, you know, the story I most often tell is that my librarian tapped me to become a delegate and then my school principal went after her and fired her, so I ended up embroiled in this really chaotic horrific union battle my third year of teaching, and I just become a delegate and I was still untenured. And so I messed up, I did a whole bunch of things wrong, I did not defend her to the degree I should have in her legal case, but I was doing all this organizing to try to help her publicly in the school. But so, you know, I was learning about Chicago and I was learning about union politics, I happened to meet Jackson Potter, I happened to get tapped to be a union delegate. And then those things kind of all converged when he invited—I was one of the people at the very first CORE meeting, the absolute first one. Yeah I kind of lost the thread but hopefully that was what you were looking for.

**00:10:05**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Yeah that's, that’s great. And I was, you know, I read that there was some type of like a retreat in ‘08 towards the beginning of CORE. I was wondering if you attended that and what…

**00:10:16**

**Jen Johnson:**

Oh yeah, I was at every meeting, literally every meeting. I was the recording secretary for the first six years of CORE

**00:10:21**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Oh wow

**00:10:22**

**Jen Johnson:**

So I took all the meeting notes at the general meetings, at the steering committee meetings, we met every other Sunday for years eventually, mostly at Karen's apartment or condo. So, so say more, what else?

**00:10:39**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

So yeah I was wondering, so at the retreat there was—I was reading something about how, like, there was, it was kind of like a visioning of like what you all wanted to do, and I was curious if you could speak to that at all, and what that was, what you remember about that.

**00:10:52**

**Jen Johnson:**

Sure. Ironically, as like a history teacher I'm—I have a terrible memory. So I always end up having to go back in notes and things like that, which is why I was the notetaker probably but, so the convention that I remember, the planning convention actually occurred, I believe it occurred at University of Chicago because my husband worked there at the time and he got us space. And so we were in I forget which exact building and we did, we used sticky notes to try to, on a wall, put together like what our values would be. And that was the process by which we identified the first CORE platform with five items that are—were on the business cards that we made for ourselves afterwards as steering members. And so we ended up with this massive wall of colorful sticky notes and then we grouped them, and that's how we identified our core principles at that time, which, you know, focused on publicly-funded public education, transparency and accountability, a member-driven union, a strong contract, and then there's one more that I always end up forgetting and I have to like dig out the old card. But that's four out of five so that's pretty good. But yeah that by that point Karen was there, kind of a lot of the key actors were there by that point, and helped participate and shape the vision. And then ultimately, I was on the constitution bylaws committee with Karen for a while, when we developed our first CORE constitution.

**00:12:13**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

And I'm curious, you know, one of the big things I see you talk about about early CORE is this idea that you were really formed to kind of be this outside force and just push union leadership and

**00:12:23**

**Jen Johnson:**

Yeah

**00:12:24**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

And, you know, in a certain direction. When did it become apparent that you all were going to. run for election and become a caucus within, you know, the formal structures of…

**00:12:39**

**Jen Johnson:**

Yeah, I mean I think everything for all of us, I would guess most people would cite the 2009 January summit at Malcolm X College as the moment we all kind of realized that we had more power than we thought. That summit was kind of our first really big event; we planned it with several of the community partners that we've worked with now for more than a decade and had—people had had relationships with, so like Jitu Brown spoke at that first summit and Malcolm X and the summit’s goal at that time was to expose the connections between charter proliferation and school closings for parents, students, community, and teachers. And so there were panels that had rank and file members, students, parents, community leaders talking about the impact of closing and privatization. And, you know, it was planned some Jan—early January evening and it started snowing—or no, it was in the morning, it was the morning, like a Saturday morning, and in the night before it started snowing and it was like the biggest blizzard in years. And so we all were just like panicked, like oh my gosh nobody's going to show up at this thing. And the next day I remember Jim Cavallero and I were sitting at—we were running the registration table, we ended up having over 500 people come through and register even though it was the morning after and like not all the streets were clear. And so, you know—and then the other piece that let us know we were on to something is not only that the community showed up, it's that Marilyn Stewart, the then-CTU president, showed up. And she, you know, we’d invited them, we'd said, like, you absolutely are invited to participate, you know, I think we may have even invited her to speak and she didn't, you know, agree. But she showed up and she was like, I remember her lurking outside of the main hall and we were like, she's watching what we're doing, but she's not like coming up and talking to us, I'm sure maybe she did at some point or somebody approached her. But we thought, oh man CTU leadership is tailing us, so we're on to something. So it's not that, like, the next day we decided to run, it's that the momentum had shifted at that point and the discussion became: can we run. And over the next months, right, we ultimately decided that it was important to run, whether we won or not, to continue to push the ideas forward. So I would say that summit.

**00:15:16**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Great yeah, thank you. I'm so happy to hear more about that, I think you mentioned it very briefly in this one video and I wanted to know more about it, but it’s incredible to have 500 people come out on a blizzard

**00:15:17**

**Jen Johnson:**

Yeah, now you know at that time I was like 20—woah gosh how old would have been—2009, so six years later, like 26, 27 like I was super young, naive.

**00:15:34**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Um so it's, so then—I don't want to like gloss over, but you all won in 2010.

**00:15:44**

**Jen Johnson:**

We did.

**00:15:45**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

And so I'm so curious, you know, one thing that CORE seems very intentional about is trying to maintain some sense of like horizontal power relations, even within these hierarchical structures. How did you all, how were you all intentional about that as you came into office, what kind of strategies did you try to use to do that, and what are some of the maybe learning pains and stuff that you have.

**00:16:14**

**Jen Johnson:**

Oh yeah, it has definitely been easy, or it has definitely not been easy, you know I think at the time we, you know, were trying to model ourselves after folks like the British Columbia Teachers Federation, who had been, you know, kind of a dissident group that had come into power, reform power. And we'd look to other, kind of, unions that were outside of education for models and, you know, so like one of the things that we very much intentionally decided was that we could not let the caucus go dormant. In many of what we had studied there had been experiences where the dissidents, you know, take power but then kind of leave that caucus base to languish. And so one of the very intentional things was to make sure that the caucus didn't stop just because you took over union leadership, right, but there still needed to be this separate caucus space, both to push people's thinking, you know hold leadership accountable, and to kind of make sure you’re connected back to your principles and making sure your principles evolve obviously. Like, right, we added a principle a few years later that was more specifically tied to a racial justice, and that is a plank, right, an actual platform plank of the caucus still.

You know I think the the goal originally was that some folks who were in caucus leadership would have to then be on staff, right. So there was a migration of some folks to staff, and, you know, part of that is natural and part of that is intentional. I was one of the people who resisted going on staff immediately, I wanted to stay, I didn't feel ready, I was still super young, so I stayed in the classroom three more years before joining staff. And so you know I think those two things were definitely pretty strategic and instrumental, right, being—bringing the bridge of the principles and the values into the staff and then making sure that, just because you're a winner, you won, that you can't not have that caucus space. And so you know that's been important, it's also been, you know, part of the challenges, the caucus has attempted, right, to quote hold leadership accountable, and in some of the ways that it's done that I would probably question whether that was really the goal or not. And in other instances it's been really healthy and it's been a space where new leaders are identified and leadership is, you know, stays grounded and connected.

You know there hasn't yet been a breakaway caucus from our caucus, you know, I don't think we're immune from those tensions and pressures. You know and it's been 10 years, right, so it's like, a different thing to be a dissident caucus out of power than it is to be you know what you—you still think of yourselves as dissidents, right, you still want to say no to everything, you still want to fight everything and everybody, but you're in power so like, how do you balance that right. And I think that's been the hardest challenge is balancing that, like people rightfully have hugely raised expectations because of how CORE operated and how we've operated over these last 10 years, and it means that the expectations…high can be really hard to meet and, kind of, can ignore the organizing that necessitates being done in order to to meet some of the demands that people have. So it's like a good problem to have, to be ambitious and it means that, you know, some folks are unhappy in the caucus space or can be unhappy because they lose arguments, but because of that like dissident spirit, you feel like you shouldn't have to continue to lose. But yeah, I think it's been, like we should really be writing a book about that at some point, about how do you, how do you build accountability structures and systems that respect leadership and respect individuals. There's also, you know, the challenges that everybody faces with racism and sexism, like those things are not outside of our spaces, they come into play in our spaces and some of that, I think, has also been a part of that dynamic, unfortunately.

**00:20:22**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Yeah it definitely sounds like, yeah there could be a whole course maybe about this. So I—I'm trying to think, kind of, where to take this now. I want to be cognizant of our time, but I think maybe I'll stick with maybe one more question kind of about— on I think a similar track that we're on and then maybe jump into, kind of, pairing some questions about 2012 and 2019 because I'm curious kind of how you see those two strikes in kind of—in your mind. But I guess my one other question I have is, you know, how did, especially those three years that you were— and even before CORE came into power in 2010—but especially the three years where CORE is in power and you’re teaching, how did you balance your role as an educator and teaching your kids and grading for your kids and being there for your kids, and this, this whole political dimension of your activism like what—how did that work? What do you—I'm just hoping you could speak to that, yeah, that a little.

**00:21:36**

**Jen Johnson:**

Yeah I mean I think that that remains something that I'm pretty impressed by because we still have a tradition of really active rank-and-filers put in hours and hours of mostly unpaid time, you know, sometimes you get stipends if you're in certain elective roles right; I was on the Executive Board that whole time before I came on to staff. And so, you know, I think some of it is being young and naive and not knowing any better, I don't have children of my own to juggle also. But it's also just like the principles and the reason for my connection to this work are very specific right. I'm really in it because of the racial justice work and my labor mind, right, has come a long way, but it's still deeply connected and rooted in a racial justice lens. And so…you know, had leadership steered in a way that was going away from that I wouldn't still be—I still would not have been—I would not have been a participant any longer, I would not have come on staff. So for me there's very much like the lens and the principles by which we’re operating that kept me coming back that felt meaningful and important. And I certainly, like I said, never would have predicted that I would be doing that kind of work from a union space. So I think there are still an incredible number of rank and file members who come to CORE and come to the union work with that lens, and there's folks who, you know, grew up with a stronger labor sense, right, and come at it from a traditional unionist standpoint, like their family were in unions and they were taught to believe in unions and for some of those folks the racial justice piece has had to evolve and for some people it has, and that's the work that the caucus has done, and there are some people who still resist and who still think that we should be much more narrowly focused and in that regard we tell them there's another caucus for that and it's not the one that's in power, which is, you know, difficult sometimes. Does that answer that, does that answer the question?

**00:23:43**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

No, I think it did, yeah, thank you.

**00:23:45**

**Jen Johnson:**

Because, you know, I stayed in, when I stayed in the classroom, I you know I really, I had had this goal in mind of teaching for 10 years and I was only seven by the time we took office, and so it felt like a) it's premature for my own instructional goals, b) I've never thought to work outside of a classroom, I was very intimidated by that, and c) we needed rank and file leaders in the caucus to stay in the classroom, everybody couldn’t come on staff. So I was, I was on the Executive Board, I was still on CORE steering, I was still the recording secretary, so I was coming at every meeting. And then when we went on strike, that was my last year in the classroom, in 2012, 2013. So I was a strike leader, I was an area vice president, so I was pretty high up on the Executive Board, so I was actually going to strike headquarters in 2012 as opposed to going to my school picket line. I only actually got to go to my own school picket line I think once, which is somewhat unfortunate but worked out really well in that my people stepped up and did it without me, which is pretty dang cool and I felt really proud of that.

**00:24:56**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

That's great yeah. So let's talk about the strikes, I know it—obviously there's so much lead-up to them and they didn't happen in a vacuum. Can you talk a little bit though about like what were, you know, the key concerns in the 2012 strike versus the 2019 strike and, just as someone who was as involved as you were in the classroom in 2012 but also very involved in the EBoard and everything on staff in 2019, how did that maybe shape your your involvement in the strikes in different ways as well?

**00:25:28**

**Jen Johnson:**

Yeah definitely. So I mean I think the basic way that we often contrast these to open-ended strikes, cause we've also had single-day strikes in between, and charter strikes, is that the 2012 strike was very much a defensive strike. The context then was *Waiting for “Superman,”* it was Rahm Emanuel saying our teachers got paid and our students got the shaft. They were initiating and had just initiated state law in Illinois to make more rigid teacher evaluation, right, Michelle Rhee was at her height, Bill Gates was at his height, and they were essentially you know looking for any opportunity, including our contract, to chip away at public education as we know it and increase evaluation, increase privatization, right, continued charter proliferation. And so, our strike at that point was very much to stop and block those initiatives, slow their momentum, change the narrative on what a teachers union could be speaking out against. Obviously, you know, we were bargaining over traditional issues of salary and working conditions too, air conditioning was a big part of what we talked about back then. And, and you know we put out the platform The Schools Chicago’s Students Deserve in the lead up to that strike where we said here are the 10 things that we think—maybe it’s 11 actually—that are essential to children being successful in our public schools and we're here to defend them—not the school district—we’re actually the ones who are on the front lines every day, and what you're hearing out of the mayor and his appointed School Board is glossing over the truth. And so it allowed us to guard against some of the worst things they were trying to put forward and then start to change the narrative to get more ground later to be very frank. You know we—they had taken raises from us in the lead-up, so part of it was getting some of that salary back, we did not get all of it back. You know, and then it was about changing the bounds of what we could bargain over, starting to open up that dialogue around bargaining for the common good. You know, and so then in the ensuing years, we continue to be a part of the growing national network of teachers unions, right. You've seen more dissonant caucuses popping up, you know, our strike wave leads to the UTLA strike wave, other efforts—almost, lots of almost-strikes in other places. And we were in dialogue, like, I think that that can't be understated, that the network of teachers unions being in regular communication is not—it means that a lot of what's happening is not accidental, like we are strategizing, we are coordinating, we are talking. I email with Alex like five times last week, with Arlene, with Jeff, who are all from UTLA. We've coordinated with St. Paul on a million different things, we've been—we've all been to each other’s cities, not just at UCORE or Labor Notes, but outside of those spaces, we make time for one another and really value learning from one another.

So you know I think some of the shift nationally was because of all of our work, right, but the context in 2018, 2019 was very different for the most recent strike, right. You no longer have Rahm Emanuel, you have Mayor Lori Lightfoot coming into office, and she came into office after we'd already been bargaining. And then the financial contexts had shifted in our state and in our city, and so there was, you know, knowledge that under a Governor Pritzker versus a Governor Rauner, state funds are moving again and the city is not going to be completely abandoned. And so the prospects were also different, right, he also, you know—not only was Michelle Rhee mostly discredited, right, and the tide kind of shifted, but our local financial and political context shifted, partly because we helped shift it, right. We made it very—we contributed to the movement that made it impossible for Rahm Emanuel to stay in office, right, the 50 school closings, we made a reckoning for him and his administration. We supported the youth and the movement folks who were calling out the Laquan McDonald cover-up, we did not stay on the sidelines, we participated with community on that and stood very loudly with people fighting for police accountability and took a lot of lumps for it. So we contributed to the environment that shifted the political climate, we created an independent political organization—the United Working Families—that is now an active part, an active player in our—in our political landscape and runs candidates and helps win champions—progressive champions. So like there's all this work done to shift the context, and then the context was actually shifted. And so in 2019, it was much more an offensive strike. It was a—we've had the referendum on The Schools Chicago Students Deserve, everybody agrees with us, and if you don't make good on some of that, you're gonna have a price to pay.

And so, you know, the 2019 strike very much centered staffing needs, right, and so had UTLA’s strike, right, centered staffing needs, particularly like nurses and social workers, restorative justice coordinators, librarians, sustainable community schools, and we had won sustainable community schools in the 2016 contract, but you know we're able to build on and extend it in this 2019 strike. So that's how I would you know kind of contrast them. 2019 couldn't have happened without 2012, but 2019 we were able to be on the offense, we've won the narrative, we've won the arguments, it was time for the mayor and the city to put their money where their mouth is, and to some degree the strike very much shook a lot of that loose. And, luckily for us, we also laid the groundwork for that to be a payoff for our least paid members also, right, like our bread and butter is, you know we can poo poo it but it's also it's bread and butter for a reason, and our paraprofessionals, some of whom, I think it was something like two-thirds of whom, technically still made poverty salaries because their contract salary tables had not been lifted beyond the kind of COLAs in decades. And so, over the course of this contract, because of the strike, paraprofessionals I think are seeing on average like a 40% raise over the life of the contract. So really lifting those salaries out of the basement was critical in that fight and could have only happened, right, because of the groundwork. And there's a million other parts of that 2019 strike that we can talk about but that's kind of how I would broadly characterize it.

**00:32:12**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

That's really, that’s a really, really useful way of thinking but I really appreciate that. I think my last question, or maybe set of a couple questions here before we wrap up, I really want to hone in on the, you know, your bread and butter as a unionist, your racial justice work, right, and what brings you to it and, you know I don't know I feel like I have a couple questions at once. So I might have to—but you know I saw you speak in an interview of kind of almost these two tracks of racial justice work that the CTU needs to engage in. And one is about keeping Black educators in the city and in CPS and in CTU and one is about just advocating for the resources that Black and brown students need. And so I was—and then I think the reason I—one other kind of area I wanted to focus on is when you brought up Laquan McDonald, CTU in my mind has been really this kind of beacon of what it could look like for a teachers union to really, you know, stand with, you know, Black Lives Matter activists, other Black community activists, and talking about fundamentally rethinking school, discipline, or just, you know, all of the aspects of how schools have been you know so hyper brought into kind of the the carceral state. And so I'm just curious as to, you know, what work have you been excited about that you've seen CTU, you know, engage in and has been successful, and where are the areas on racial justice activism that you'd like to see CTU go next that—and other teachers unions go next, what are you thinking.

**00:34:16**

**Jen Johnson:**

So let me try to rattle some things off so I don't lose them. Areas that I'm proud of, I personally have spearheaded with some rank and file members a lot of work around supporting the Reparations Won curriculum, which was mandated by city ordinance out of the, you know, police torture survivors under Jon Burge. And so we have been really proud to be a link to that work and supporting the Chicago Torture Justice Center and the Chicago Torture Justice Memorial to have that curriculum fulfilled and we've done our own professional development on it, I led some of that. And really trying to champion that what happens in the classroom has to live up to kind of these broad ideals of anti-racism outside of the classroom. Related to that, you know, we currently have a group of educators in our sustainable community schools doing anti-racist curriculum work, they won an AFT innovation grant specifically to be paid to do that, so it's it's been really exciting and one of our organizers Jhoanna Maldonado has been lead on that and it's really, it's awesome. So they've now been leading professional development in the 20 sustainable community schools that we won in our contract and are able to pay educators to do that work, so that's really inspiring. There's lots of other, like, small pockets, our Human Rights Committee has done really good work around PPLCs—Professional Personnel Leadership Committees—and schools that are supposed to have a say on curriculum. We have members who have tried to push a resolution that has yet to pass on Palestinian Liberation which I think is deeply connected to some of this. Our organizers have done great work with members who have been excited to support student activism around police out of schools and so that's been over several years and I think over, I think we're up to over—I'm going to get the number wrong, but I'm sure it's, I definitely know it's over 20 high schools, might be closer to 30 by this point, who have voted out one or both of their police officers that are stationed in their schools. And you know we weren't the only ones working on that by any means, the students have really taken the lead, but we've been pretty intentional about supporting that work.

So those are some of the things that I'd say off the top of my head I'm really proud of. We also, recently, the state gave funds to the IEA for a mentoring program and then the IEA split the money with the IFT, and then we're splitting money with the IFT to do a mentoring program in Chicago, and rather than just do any educator, we have specifically focused on Black educators in our program. You know, we can't exclude anybody technically but like the focus has been on Black educators and so we're going into the second year, where we have an actual infrastructure and a staff person, Tara Stamps, who comes out of organizing out of Cabrini, Jenner School in that area, she's phenomenal, she's been leading it now and this will be her second year of doing that. So I think that's related, right, to kind of the long-term mission and vision of keeping Black educators in particular, and the rest of the state programs are not—they don't have that focus, so I think again we’re kind of at the forefront. I'm sure there's other things I'm forgetting too, right, like you could really argue that the work around expanded sanctuary in our 2019 contract, you know, connecting the Black struggle to the immigrant struggle for sanctuary in this country was a part of the 2019 strike.

So, I'm sure I could think of other things, I think the challenge just continues to be that. The right-wing attacks on us for doing the racial justice work, particularly the police work, are pretty relentless. And they were sharpest in 2015 and 2016, when we came out in favor of police—civilian police accountability and when Laquan McDonald was murdered. But they don't go away, they're not sharp or visible, but they still remain. So there are a number of internet trolls who have gone after specific individual rank and file members of our union who’ve been outspoken, tried to get them fired, you know, screenshotting posts and things like that. It's really ugly, and it really, you know, it's frightening for people, and it, you know, it takes a particular toll on teachers of color and leaders of color, right. Karen took the brunt of racist attacks when she was president. Stacy takes the brunt of attacks now that she's vice president and a Black woman, not you know not Jesse, Jesse is not going to take—he doesn’t have to take those hits. You know, like I've even seen messages on our caucus listserv just over this past week recapitulating and re-trying to argue and retrade some of the police accountability work because there was an ordinance, right, passed in city council that creates the first kind of civilian and police accountability program in Chicago, and some folks see it as a huge win because it's now actually going to be, you know, city law and some folks see it as a weak first step. And so our caucus obviously has supported true accountability and is listening to the organizers and saying if they say this is an important first step then we say it's an important first step, but some folks are still questioning why are we quote anti-police. So it's just, it's constant, you can never, you can never let your guard down and it takes a real toll, I guess what I'm saying, on particular leaders of color, like myself, I'm exhausted of like we're—you have to constantly defend the humanity of your kids and your fellow people of color, it's just exhausting.

I wish we'd done more around Black Lives Matter at School Week, you know, and you can read in the Black Lives Matter at School book about me saying that, I have a chapter in there. And you know I think we've had a hard time going deep. I think we're always doing so broad, we're always doing so much that that means that, you know, Black Lives Matter at School Week is a thing that we support every year, we pass some resolution every year, we get shirts every year, some of our members will take leadership and do events every year. But because we're not, we're not very good at having a narrow list of priorities, we’re very good at a large list of priorities, I don't think we've participated as in-depth as we could have in some of these efforts. And so I, like I really just think the leadership that people have shown in places like Philly in their dissident WE caucus and, you know—which I know has had their own troubles and problems—the C caucus in Seattle, really the educators in St. Paul, to kind of be intentional and have like study groups and really try to promulgate racial justice understanding more explicitly is something that I want us to be able to make more space for. I'm proud of us because it is embedded in everything we do, we don't, like, it is our muscle to have a racial justice lens no matter what, that's our strength. And like that means that we can't just leave it to the educators in this innovation grant or our Human Rights Committee to do the work on educators and what they're teaching in school, it has to—we have to figure out how to broaden that work and make it go a little deeper.

**00:41:27**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Thank you so much for that reflection, and for everything. And so I guess I’ll—before I stop recording, I'll just say, is there anything else that you didn't say that you'd like to share or just anything that comes to mind or—before I pause the recording.

**00:41:46**

**Jen Johnson:**

Just as a history teacher, I appreciate that you're doing this. I think it's really important work to kind of figure out how to archive these stories and be able to share them and I'm excited to see what other people contribute.

**00:41:58**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Wonderful.

**00:41:59**

**Jen Johnson:**

Because, you know, nobody talked to me, like I said, about being a union member in my teacher prep program in academia, right, my dad didn't talk to me about what it could mean to be a part of a labor union, we, like, we really have to encourage people to have these conversations sooner, because the work could be even that much greater.

**00:42:20**

**Joel Berger (he/him):**

Thank you.