GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING
CARVING INROADS IN EDUCATION, HOUSING, AND HUMAN SERVICES

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From Top Left to Right: March to Rauner’s Condo to Stop Budget Cuts; Bilandic Bldg - Fair Budget & Progressive Revenue; State of Illinois Bldg Announcing HB557 (ERSB); Takeover of Cappleman’s Zoning & Land Use Meeting; At Maryville; City Hall-Disrupted Council Meeting to Protest Maryville TIF; Rally at Maryville Property; At Cullerton’s Law Office; At April 1 March from DHS to the Thompson Center; March to Ald. Cappleman Office -Stop Harassing Homeless; March to Rahm’s House to Stop Maryville TIF & JDL Development; Action at Rockwell Brown Line Stop - Pass ERSB
No Foolin’! April 1st Tremendous Show of Unity

Karen Zaccor, Education Chair & Marc Kaplan, NA4J Board Member

The media did their best to describe the April 1 strike as an example of the selfishness of the Chicago Teachers Union. But the reality is that April 1 made clear that unions and community groups around the city and the state will not accept austerity measures as a solution for Budgetary woes in a wealthy state in the richest country in the world.

The day of action kicked off at 6:30 a.m. with teachers manning picket lines at all of Chicago’s schools. NA4J members joined in at Uplift where 100% of the teachers marched and chanted before traveling to NEIU and joining the event there that highlighted the devastating effect of the budget standoff on higher education opportunities for the lowest income students.

Leaving a large rally at Northeastern with high spirits and eagerness, NA4J members headed to the Department of Human Services headquarters on South Clinton Street.

There NA4J joined other member groups of the Alliance for Community Services – ADAPT, AFSCME locals, and IMPRUV, and with allies from SEIU – HCII to demand that the state fund real humane human services, and eliminate the policies that are having horrible impacts on lives of low income people in general and people with disabilities in particular. Speaker after speaker attacked newly implemented policies like the mandated cut in hours that home health care workers can take care of their clients, and rules that make it easier to cut people’s benefits and harder to get them. As Kathy Powers, an NA4J Board member and Alliance activist said, “We have to keep fighting because these policies implemented by Governor Rauner’s administration are destroying our families, friends, neighbors and our own lives. We have to fight because we don’t have a choice, and I am so proud and excited to be a part of this with all of you. Together we will win.”

The group, now grown to over 200 militant and determined people, marched down Clinton Street to meet the thousands of people gathering at the Thompson Center from all over the city. Led with the drum beat and blasting instruments of Queen Nzinga’s Brigade Marching Band the contingent marched up Clinton to Jackson and then east on Jackson to JP Morgan Chase Bank. We rallied there briefly, demanding that the bank (recipient of a multi-billion dollar taxpayer bail-out) not finance a luxury high rise in Uptown, and to renegotiate the exorbitant interest from toxic swaps that rob funds from our communities. A river of green, purple, red and gold, marchers took LaSalle north through the financial district, chanting: “Full funding for people’s needs; schools and children and our communities! Tax the rich! Human need not corporate greed!”

At the Thompson Center the contingent joined marchers coming in from actions all over the city, including marches and rallies to shut down the Juvenile Detention Center and end mass incarceration; a teach-in and rally at Chicago State demanding full funding for community colleges; actions calling for an end to mass deportations of immigrants; and the Fight for 15 dollars an hour minimum, living wage; as well as NA4J members who rallied at Sullivan, Boone and other schools showing support and solidarity with teachers, parents and students.

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After more than 6 years of work, House Bill 0557, the Elected Representative School Board Bill, passed the House in early March with a 110-4 vote.

ERSB Bill passed in IL House—More to Do!

Marc Kaplan, NA4J Board Member

The hard work that was done over the years by a coalition of groups around the city resulted in this hard won victory. These groups, including NA4J, (first as CODE and now as GEM) united and carried out a sustained campaign that got the legislation to this point. This included a lot of grassroots education, which led to the overwhelming victory of the Elected School Board referendum in the election of November 2012.

In 387 precincts around the city, over 87% of the voters, voted yes. This was followed by the drafting of legislation and lobbying to get the support of legislators. Then in February of 2015, in 37 wards around the city, an even larger percentage of voters voted yes to an Elected School Board. The people of the city had seen the results of the mayors’ handpicked board. The destructive, racist, and anti-children moves of the Board, including the closing of 50 schools, the severe budget cuts, the mandated over testing, the toxic swaps with the banks and the conviction of the CEO of CPS on federal charges, made it clear to 9 out of 10 Chicagoans that we needed an Elected School Board now. The legislation was modified and House Bill 0557 was introduced by chief sponsor Representative Rob Martwick this session. The lobbying and education moved into high gear, and in March the bill passed the House by a huge margin.

The next step is to pass the bill through the State Senate

When the bill moved to the Senate, Senate president Cullerton (a good friend of Mayor Emanuel, the main opponent of an elected school board) used his position to grab the bill and become the “chief sponsor”. It became clear after two months of stalling that Cullerton’s real motive for sponsoring the bill was to stall it or bury it. The GEM (Grassroots Education Movement) Coalition was not going to allow Cullerton to sabotage the bill. GEM sprang into action with a campaign focused on putting pressure on Cullerton to assign the bill to committee and call it for a vote in the Senate. We conducted two days of canvassing Cullerton’s neighbors door to door and at the Rockwell brown line stop. This was followed by two weeks of actions. The first week was focused on Cullerton’s office.

For three days people (including NA4J members) rallied outside Cullerton’s office. Chanting – “What do we want? An Elected School Board. When do we want it? Now!” and “Call the Bill”, the activists exposed Cullerton’s attempt to sabotage the bill.

On the kick off day, Wednesday, May 11, Kim Jeffries, NA4J member and newly elected Brennemann School LSC member, said, “Senator Cullerton’s refusal to call the bill is a parliamentary maneuver to suppress the will of the people of the City of Chicago and keep us the only city in the state that does not have the right to elect our school board. We are calling on Senator Cullerton to assign and call HB 557 for a vote immediately. Anything less is unacceptable and we will continue to do whatever is necessary to get this bill passed and have an Elected Representative School Board in Chicago now.”

The actions at his office were followed the next week, by actions at his business interests. A loud and attention grabbing action was held at Tavern on Rush (a restaurant where he is a partner) during the lunch hour on Wednesday, May 18. Some potential diners turned away when it was explained what we were doing. Others went inside. Passersby were handed fliers and were asked to call Cullerton. On Thursday the group focused on Cullerton’s law practice. Riding up to the 37th floor at 55 E. Monroe, the group unfurled the Elected School Board banner and chanted for several minutes until security removed them from the building. All of these actions and pressure had an effect. Senator Cullerton released the bill and Senator Kwame Raoul is now the chief sponsor. The current focus of the group is to do intense lobbying, followed by more direct actions if the bill is not assigned and voted on quickly.
Deep Negative Impact of Service Cuts Renews Calls for Taxing the Rich

Revenue Options:
Proposed by a large coalition of groups, including NA4J and the Alliance, have made some progress:

- **LaSalle Street Tax:** On June 7, 2016, the coalition testified a LaSalle Street Tax hearing at State of IL Building.

- **End Toxic Swaps:** After several years of agitation, education and direct action the City Treasurer, Kurt Summers agrees and has recommended that the city sue the banks over the toxic swaps, to recover the outrageous interest that the banks have been getting from those loans.

- **Other progressive Revenue Sources**
  - Progressive Income Tax
  - Bad Business Fee

State Budget Showdown

**Kathy Powers, Human Services Board Member**

Currently, there is still no state budget. Illinois wins the bottom place in the country for funding human services. Vital services such as education and childcare are in serious jeopardy. Governor Rauner’s new twists on human services cuts revolve upon several underhanded policies that further depersonalize human services and obfuscate illegal compliance of federal laws. New issues have arisen since our last NA4J Newsletter that call for our immediate attention.

**5050 N. Broadway and Skokie DHS Offices to move:**

We don’t know where and we don’t know when. We do know that the DRS and the Call Center will separate from the regular service office. NA4J and the Alliance for Community Services plans to petition and flyer at the 5050 N. Broadway building to raise community awareness of the impending move and what people should know about what they need to do when they are reassigned. We need volunteers from outside of the Human Services Committee to help with these actions. They are very important to our community members. Call Kathy at 773-791-3523 to let her know when you are available for 90 minutes off time.

Unfair Overtime Rules Foisted Upon Persons with Disabilities who Need Personal Assistants for more than Forty Hours per Week

An impossible requirement for persons who need personal assistant support for more than forty hours per week forces the hiring of several more personal assistants to take over when one worker reaches the forty-hour mark. These overtime rules are followed inconsistently between different offices and counselors. A uniform law is needed. In this regard, it is possible that this new rule should be presented to the public for comment and approval and then submitted to the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules because these new rules enforce a new policy by DRS.

Unfair Proposed Appeal Rules Still Not Addressed by JCAR since August 2015

NA4J proposes direct actions on rules, the budget, and JCAR. In that regard, Kathy will arrange a meeting with Representative Greg Harris who is on JCAR to brainstorm ways of moving Republican members of the State Legislature on human services issues.

Next Steps:
- We want a Citywide Alliance member conference/gathering in the late summer or early fall.
- We are looking into a Town Hall on the North side or central Chicago with Independent Voices.
- We especially need to promote human services actions at the NA4J general meeting.

The next Human Services Committee meeting is June 18, 2016, at 2:00 pm
LSC Election Victories a Step Toward Building Sustainable Schools

Karen Zaccor, Education Chair

Are Local School Councils—the elected body for each school that is dominated by parent and community voices speaking for what is best for their children—still relevant? The mayor and CPS would like to say no and have taken many steps to push for irrelevance such as forcing schools to have CPS appointed LSCs with less power, or removing principals and making turnaround plans without input. But committed parents and community members continue to fight to keep the power awarded them by state legislation, and this past April, several NA4J members were among those elected to LSCs at Courtenay, Brennemann, Uplift, and Field.

“I have always been vocal about Chicago politics and the closing of 50 schools a few years ago gave me plenty to talk about,” says new Courtenay community rep Carla Langston. “But now, I believe that it’s time for me to put action behind the talk, and for me to get involved.” Kim Jeffries is a long time education activist and was elected as community rep at Brennemann and parent rep at Uplift. “I want to help the schools in any way possible,” explains Kim. “We are all affected by the outcome.” Other NA4J members elected were Marc Kaplan as community rep at Uplift and Art Strobeck as community rep at Field. A number of NA4J allies were elected to north side schools as well.

Each NA4J candidate ran on a platform that includes working together with other LSCs on the big issues plaguing our schools. They pledged to fight for an elected school board, for adequate funding to support neighborhood schools, and an end to charter schools which siphon money away from public schools that accept every child while not bringing demonstrably better educational results.

One of the key points of unity moving forward is in building momentum for sustainable school transformation. The philosophy behind this movement is that schools do need to improve but change should come from the needs and interests of the school community, particularly the parents, students, and teachers. The five pillars of the sustainable school campaign are:

1. Curriculum that is engaging, culturally relevant and challenging
2. High quality teaching, not high stakes testing
3. Wrap around support services like health services and counseling
4. Positive discipline practices such as restorative justice
5. Transformational parent and community engagement.

This summer, as the new councils take office and huge budget cuts are looming, our newly elected council members will help lead the fight for revenue to allow schools to open with the resources they need.

Join the Education Committee!
Our dynamic committee meets on the fourth Saturday of each month from 10:30-12:30 at Karen Zaccor’s apartment, 4441 N. Malden. Snacks and beverages always served! The next meeting will be June 25 and the agenda will include plans for LSC members, the petition campaign for a referendum to stop charter schools, follow ups on the elected school board fight, and the campaign for fair funding of the schools.
In March of 2015 at a building meeting at 4626 N. Magnolia around the upcoming aldermanic election, one of the tenants, Sheila Monroe, talked about the conditions at the building and asked if anything could be done about them. She and other tenants were specifically asking about the lack of mailboxes, cold apartments because of faulty windows, water leaks and the lack of tenant services. A member of NA4J who was at the meeting asked if the tenants were interested in working together to get the conditions fixed. Several of the tenants said yes and they were linked up with the THREAT (Tenant Housing Resource Education and Action Team) and NA4J’s housing organizer, Elce Redmond. The tenants canvassed the building, noting the chief problems and issues that the tenants had and set a date for the first meeting. About 25 tenants came to the first meeting. They put together a list of building issues that needed to be addressed and decided that they needed to form a Tenants Association. Elce contacted the Lawyers Committee for Better Housing and Victoria Ogunsaya agreed to be the attorney represent the Tenant Association. The Association set up a meeting with the head property manager at Mercy Housing (the non-profit that owns the building) Tenants listed the many problems in the building and noted that the lack of mail boxes was an extreme problem. They said that they had missed appointments and other important events because they could not get their mail in a timely manner. The tenants stated that while they appreciated the situation and would work with other people around the city to get CHA to release the funds these serious problems had to be dealt with now. They made it clear that they are paying rent and they are entitled to and expect safe, decent housing. One of the tenants commented that his windows are so bad that there is frost inside of the windows when it is cold out and there is wind that blows through the apartment. The property manager said that she understood and would take the problems back to the owners and get back with the tenants in two weeks, In the follow up meeting with the tenants the property manager said that the owners had agreed to fix all the problems and also would agree that the tenants would have a voice in how discretionary money for tenant services would be used. As we go to press, the new mailboxes are being installed. Maurice Scott, one of the leaders of the Tenant Association stated, “It was definitely worth organizing an Association and working with NA4J and the Lawyers Committee for Better Housing. We have won everything we were asking for and the tenants are now respected. At first whenever you complained about something you would get a violation. Now the owner knows that they have to respect the tenants. I plan on continuing to work with NA4J and THREAT and help other tenants learn what we’ve learned.”
About a half mile away from the Carlton stands 840 W. Sunnyside, a 120 unit building, with a diverse and low and moderate income tenant population. It is one of several buildings in Uptown that was built during the late 60’s early 70’s with HUD subsidies, that were given to developers under the condition that the buildings would be affordable (by HUD guidelines) for low and moderate income residents. It was one of several buildings that was saved and protected as affordable housing by tenant and community organizing and a lawsuit in the mid 80’s. It continues (like 850 Eastwood, 4640 Sheridan and other buildings) to remain affordable because the units are subsidized through HUD’s project based, section 8 program which attaches subsidies to almost all the units in the building. Tenants pay one third of their incomes towards the rent and the federal government pays the difference up to the fair market value of the apartment. This building is owned by Group Fox Realty and the section 8 contract is up in August of 2017. There are credible sources who have said that Fox has given some indication that they may not renew the Section 8 contract with HUD. “I suspect that this is happening because of the rampant real estate speculation that is now going on in the community and the alderman and city’s fueling of it with proposed projects like the JDL luxury housing at Montrose and Clarendon that would be subsidized by 15.8 million dollars in TIF funds if the alderman and mayor get their way,” said Ryne Poelker, chairperson of NA4J’s Housing committee. The tenants faced with the prospect of losing their homes have begun to organize. Working with NA4J and ONE Northside and volunteers from other community organizations, the tenants have organized two very highly attended meetings. There are many tenants from the different ethnic and racial groups that have attended and there have been lively and spirited meetings. The tenants have decided that they need to organize themselves into a Tenants Association so that they can protect the affordability of their apartments and deal with problems that they have. So far over 50% of the units have signed up to join the Association. Regina Jones, one of the tenant leaders said, “I have lived in this building for close to two decades. My children have grown up in this building and this is our home and our community. When I’ve reached out to my neighbors about the situation the positive response has been overwhelming. At the first tenant’s meeting, where people could sign up for the Association everyone signed up and people are were going to their friends and neighbors and bringing them down to sign up. People realize that this is a serious situation and we have to act now. I have never seen so much unity and participation in all my years here.”

Organizing Effort Gaining Steam at 840 W. Sunnyside

The collective spirit and determination of the different contingents from around the city was anchored by a mighty sea of Red -- the members of the Chicago Teachers Union.

The high level of unity was apparent to all the participants. The highlight of the short rally at the Thompson Center was the appearance of CTU president Karen Lewis. She spoke to the unity of the day and the union’s demand for schools that our children deserve, with full finding for high quality public schools and a fair contract for teachers.

The march of thousands then stepped off, up Clark Street, to Wacker, east to Michigan and then south to Grant Park at Jackson. With banners furling, calling for full funding for human needs, an elected school board, education not incarceration, and end to police brutality and disrespect; a fair contract for the teachers, the sea of humanity took over the streets of downtown and brought the message to the mayor, the governor, the banks and the elites that run the city: We want justice and we want it now! Even the downpour and nasty weather could not dampen the spirit of the participants. As the march ended, there was resolve to carry the message back to the communities and organize, build the movement so that the demands of the April 1 Day Of Action are met.
On May 14th at Northside Action for Justice’s last monthly general membership meeting, we were joined by Jorge Mujica who talked on immigrant justice and economic rights before our membership. Jorge has been around in Chicago for a while now. In almost 30 years of political activism in Chicago, he’s earned the respect of labor rights advocates, immigrant rights supporters, and ordinary working people.

Among many things, Mujica is known as one of the key organizers of Chicago’s historic immigrant rights marches in 2006, which put an estimated 1 million people on the streets to call for humane, fair immigration reform. It was arguably one of the largest political protests in Chicago’s history. Jorge also has run effective insurgent campaigns for elected office while having little to no financial resources. His first race was against notoriously conservative corporate Democrat, Dan Lipinski, in the 3rd Congressional District. Earning nearly 25% of the vote, Jorge spent a mere $12,000 to Lipinski’s $800,000. In the most recent election, Jorge ran for the 25th Ward aldermanic seat against one of Chicago’s most infamous developer-friendly incumbent, Danny Solis, often referred to as “Alderman Danny Sleaze” among the Pilsen residents. In that election, among a half dozen other contenders, Mujica received nearly 15% of the vote with less than $20,000 in campaign funds to Solis’ war chest that spent over $1.2 million (with political backing from Rahm Emanuel’s well-funded Super Pac). Today, one can often find Jorge leading marches for immigrant rights and working to ensure all low-wage workers receive the paychecks that they are owed. Jorge works at Arise Chicago which is a worker center that assists low-wage workers who are cheated on their paychecks. Despite such an important and busy job, Jorge still finds time for political activity such as facilitating discussions on immigrant justice to grassroots activists.

Mujica highlighted an array of issues and common misconceptions dealing with undocumented immigrants in the United States. (see inset)

Mujica touched on as many immigration topics as he was able to. It was an eye-opening discussion for our membership who don’t always agree on this complicated crisis. Thanks to Jorge for his time and dedication. It is likely we’ll see him again out on the picket lines and in the streets fighting for the kind of justice everyone deserves.