



# Karen Lewis

President, Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) | Chicago, Illinois

***“If we’re waiting for somebody to just let us in,  
we’ll be knocking on doors forever.”***

Chicago Teachers Union President offers words of advice for getting to the top

*Karen Lewis taught high school chemistry in Chicago Public Schools for 22 years and has been a proud member of the CTU since 1988. Her commitment to education resulted in her election as president of the 30,000-member union in 2010. Her goal is to improve Chicago Public Schools and stand firmly against the privatization of public education. She believes that students, parents, teachers and community members are educators’ natural allies.*

*Lewis successfully led a nine-day strike against the Chicago Board of Education in 2012. The CTU negotiated and won higher wages, enhanced teacher training opportunities and ensured that the board would hire more than 500 new teachers. Two years later, Lewis explored the possibility of running for mayor of Chicago. Early polls showed that she was well positioned to win, and Chicago newspapers called her a “formidable challenger.” But a brain tumor forced Lewis out of the race. The fiery and charismatic union leader is now focusing on her health and on her leadership role at CTU.*

*Lewis is a product of Chicago Public Schools. She attended Kozminski Elementary School and Kenwood High School. She then enrolled at Mount Holyoke College and transferred to Dartmouth College where she earned a sociology and music degree. She was the only African American woman in the class of 1974. Lewis comes from a family of educators: her father, mother and husband, John Lewis, were all Chicago Public School teachers.*

**F**or black women to be well represented within labor leadership, it will take people taking black women seriously.

Part of the problem is that you have a movement that's dominated by working-class white men who already feel pressure and already feel like everything's been taken away from them. I mean, the latest study I know of on women leaders in unions shows that in no case does the number of women in leadership correspond to the number of women in membership. Then you add this layer of, "Oh, I've got to let in

First of all, the labor movement has to encourage black women to move up the ranks. They have to develop their leadership levels and be willing to allow them to run for office. And for that we need mentorship. All research on mentorship shows that employees who have mentors are usually more likely to believe that they will advance in their career—and they receive more promotions and higher salaries. But, in labor, we don't have formalized mentoring.

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somebody else who I don't know, I don't trust, doesn't look like me, doesn't deal like me, and doesn't respond like me." So for black women, the question becomes, "How do I insert myself into those conversations?" And if we're waiting for somebody to just let us in, we'll be knocking on doors forever.

I think the issue is how to assert yourself appropriately. How do you appeal to the rank-and-file so that you can win elected office? That's what needs to be done. Those are the skill sets that can be learned. They are not intuitive.

tell you things. You can read it in a book. You can do a lot of things. But in order to know how to navigate relationships, mentoring is important.

And it's not just about building relationships; it's about building skills. When you have that combination, it's amazing.

I know the importance of mentorship from experience. The problem is that there are so few women in labor leadership. So we don't tend to help each other because we're so busy.

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That’s one of the things we have to figure out—how to make time to have that interaction. It would be nice if we got together. It’s also important to realize that we have to build layers of leaders by continuing to work with the rank-and-file. We’ve got to bring them up and move them along.

Black women and other women of color have to move in this direction. We’ve been moving in this direction since slavery. Let’s be honest. And we have to remember to keep our sisters with us; and our brothers, too. We have to find ways to continually integrate that make us stronger.

Also, black women have to stop thinking that we have to do it all ourselves. That’s one of the hardest parts of leadership. As a woman, you have a family and all these other things that you’ve got to do. You have things that you’re responsible for and you have to understand that you don’t have to take all of this on all by yourself. You’ve got to learn to delegate and learn how to let some things go. That’s hard for us in a way, but I think that’s the only way to make the movement more vibrant and continue to bring more people in.