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Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson calls for a general strike: Here's why it matters

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Brandon Johnson speaks to a massive crowd of a quarter million at Chicago's "No Kings Protest."



Chicago's Mayor Brandon Johnson, in a fiery speech to a quarter million people at the recent "No Kings Protest" that went viral, declared:

“If my ancestors, as slaves, can lead the greatest general strike in the history of this country, taking it to the ultra-rich and big corporations, we can do the same thing. I’m calling on Black people, white people, Brown people, Asian people, immigrants, gay people throughout this country to stand up against tyranny. To send a clear message, we are going to make them pay their fair share in taxes, to fund our schools, our jobs, health care and transportation!”

What did Johnson mean by ‘the greatest general strike’?

Johnson was referencing the “General Strike” of enslaved Black people during the Civil War, described by scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois in his book “Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880.”

This seminal work shatters the myth that freedom was given, documenting the pivotal role that Black people played in fighting chattel slavery. Du Bois explains this in the most class conscious manner.

Chapter 4, entitled “The General Strike,” opens with:

“How the Civil War meant emancipation and how the Black worker won the war by a general strike which transferred his labor from the Confederate planter to the Northern invader, in whose army lines workers began to be organized as a new labor force.”

Du Bois correctly reframed the mass exodus of enslaved people from Southern plantations during the Civil War not as a passive by-product of the war, but as a “General Strike.”

How enslaved Black workers crippled the Confederate economy

By withdrawing their labor — the primary source of the South’s wealth — Black people disrupted agricultural production, leading to food shortages; undermined the

logistics and infrastructure supporting Confederate armies; and forced the Confederacy to divert troops from the front lines to guard against insurrection and capture runaways.

This “strike” forced the hand of the U.S. government. Initially, Lincoln’s goal was to preserve the Union, not to abolish slavery. However, the flood of “contrabands” (escaped enslaved people) to Union camps created a practical and moral crisis. It became clear that the war could not be won without addressing the source of the South’s power: slavery.

Thus, the “General Strike” was a primary catalyst for the Emancipation Proclamation and the shift to a war for freedom.

As Du Bois wrote, the half-million enslaved people who walked away from plantations were the most effective “army” operating behind Confederate lines, whose actions were as militarily significant as any battlefield engagement.

Why this history matters now

It shows that a “general strike” in its many forms can act as a catalyst for historic change. It demonstrates that workers’ action does not always have to be directed solely by what’s considered the formal labor movement — though unions remain essential and powerful.

In a period of declining union membership, this history underscores the need to organize the working class broadly, across industries, identities, and geographies.

May Day 2006 ‘A Day Without Immigrants’

The catalyst for the 2006 movement was H.R. 4437, the Sensenbrenner Bill, which would have criminalized undocumented immigrants — and anyone who assisted them. This draconian measure ignited a firestorm within immigrant communities,

transforming long-simmering frustration into mass action.

Organizers urged supporters to abstain from working, buying, selling and attending school. Farms, construction sites, and factories across the Midwest and South fell silent. Meatpacking plants in the Great Plains were forced to shut down. Workers at Tyson Foods and Cargill walked off the job.

Restaurants in major cities closed their doors. The Port of Los Angeles, the nation's busiest, slowed to a crawl as truck drivers joined the boycott.

A nationwide mobilization of millions

On May 1, 2006, the nationwide "Day Without Immigrants" boycott and march drew 1.6 to 2.2 million participants. In cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York, the air was filled with chants of "¡Sí, Se Puede!" and the sound of Spanish-language radio stations, which had been instrumental in organizing the masses.

In Chicago, estimates of protesters ranged from 400,000 to 700,000. Walkouts and protests occurred across the country, including Milwaukee, Phoenix, and Denver.

May Day 2006 was a moment when an often-invisible workforce made itself seen, an often-silenced community made itself heard — and for one day, the United States was forced to confront a simple, powerful truth: The nation runs on the labor of immigrants. This seismic event shook the nation's political and economic landscape.

Ultimately, H.R. 4437 died in the Senate.

Is Johnson's call for a general strike realistic?

The evidence suggests yes. In an interview with Block Club Chicago, Johnson clarified that he was calling for a nationwide strike as a political goal, urging workers and communities to organize toward that possibility.

Ald. Byron Sigcho-Lopez (25th) said he and other progressives fully support Johnson's call and are exploring how the city can legally support such an effort. This includes meeting with local labor leaders and compiling a list of small businesses to support and large corporations to boycott.

The mayor's goal, according to Sigcho-Lopez, is to "inspire conversations" among organizers and working people. Both officials have endorsed the [plan](#) by the United Auto Workers (UAW) to hold a general strike on May Day 2028.

Signs of action sooner than 2028

Some unions are preparing for action well before 2028.

Chicago Teachers Union Vice President Jackson Potter stated that the CTU is preparing for escalating actions and "strike action — probably much sooner than 2028."

"We're working towards building a more spectacular, broader, and stronger version of the UAW's call for a General Strike in 2028," Potter said. "We aim to align our contracts to make demands that benefit all working families — national health care, free college for all, and other essential needs that many are struggling to achieve."

Other national labor voices have echoed similar calls, including [Sara Nelson](#), international president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO, and [Richard Hooker Jr.](#), a Philadelphia Teamster leader preparing to challenge the reactionary Teamster president, Sean O'Brien.

Chicago's legacy of struggle

May Day had its origins in Chicago. Two days after tens of thousands of workers marched for the eight-hour day on May 1, 1886, police and company guards opened fire on the McCormick Harvester strikers in Chicago, killing as many as six.

In the 1800s, workers toiled for 10, 12 or more hours a day. The Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (a precursor to the AFL) called for a national movement for an eight-hour day, to take effect on May 1, 1886.

At a massive protest rally at Haymarket Square the next evening, a provocateur's bomb killed several police, leading to the frame-up of eight anarchists, most of whom were not even at Haymarket Square that evening. Four of them were hanged. This familiar history is recited at annual May Day celebrations everywhere.

In 1889, the Second International declared May 1 as International Workers' Day to commemorate the "Haymarket Martyrs" and the struggle for the eight-hour day. Around the world, May Day is celebrated as a day for worker solidarity and protest.

The 2012 Chicago Teachers' Strike

In September 2012, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), representing nearly 30,000 educators, went on strike for seven days. It was the first major teacher strike in Chicago in 25 years and became a national flashpoint in the debate over public education.

The strike was notable for its strong, militant parent and community support and is widely seen as a victory for the union. It preserved key job-security provisions, limited the impact of test scores on evaluations, and provided a pay raise.

The success of the 2012 strike and the iconic "Red Wave" cemented the influence of a more progressive, social-justice-oriented caucus within the CTU and established a model of militant unionism that has shaped labor actions across the country ever since.

It helped advance a new approach where unions make demands that benefit not just members but entire communities. This legacy is directly connected to today's CTU leadership — and to their close alignment with figures like Mayor Brandon Johnson,

a former CTU organizer.

