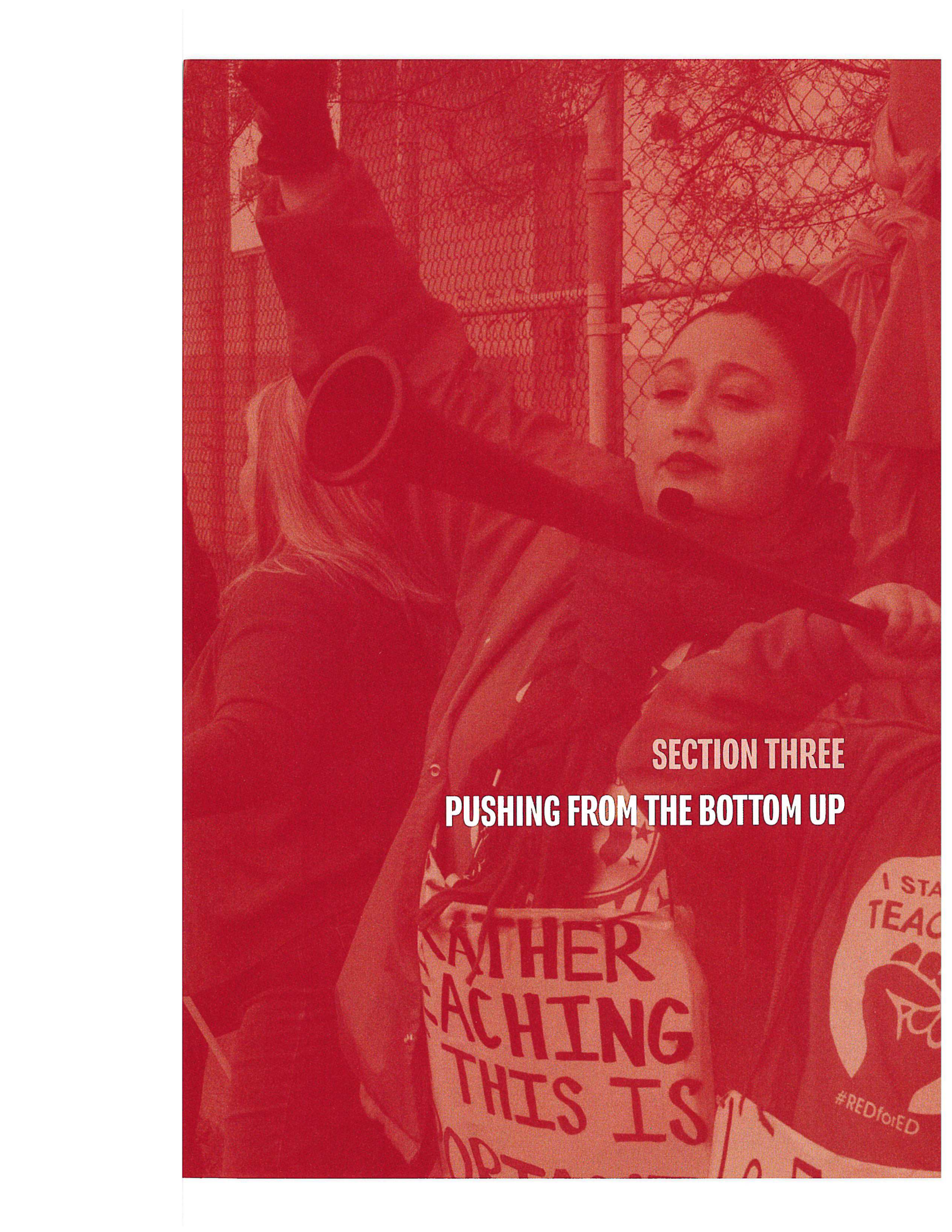


A photograph of a woman with dark hair speaking into a microphone at a protest. The image is overlaid with a solid red color. In the background, a chain-link fence and other protesters are visible. A sign in the foreground reads "NEITHER TEACHING THIS IS OPTA". Another sign on the right says "I STAY TEACH" and "#REDforED".

SECTION THREE

PUSHING FROM THE BOTTOM UP



The Power and Challenges of Social Justice Caucuses

BY MICHELLE STRATER GUNDERSON

In a media interview during the 2012 teachers' strike in Chicago, a reporter asked me, "Do you speak for the union?" I thought about this for a minute, then replied, "No. Because we have a democratic process at the Chicago Teachers Union, my union speaks for me."

I have not always felt this way. For many years during my three decades as a Chicago teacher, our union was run in what is called a "business" or "industrial" union model. It focused almost exclusively on the contractual needs of membership, such as pay and benefits. It was not until 2010 when the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) gained leadership in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) that I felt I had a voice in my union and that my union was ready to fight for the schools our children deserve.

Since 2012 I have been in leadership of CORE. I have also been an active leader in the United Caucuses of Rank and File Educators (UCORE), a national network of social justice caucuses.

Individuals can't transform their unions alone. But working together in rank-and-file caucuses can be vehicles of such change. In the last decade caucuses have had a meteoric rise and will likely play a significant role in the labor movement in coming years. In this article I give an insider view into the workings and purposes of union caucuses. To find additional details on caucus work, read *How to Jump-Start Your Union: Lessons from the Chicago Teachers*, published by Labor Notes.

What Is a Union Caucus, and How Do They Work?

A union caucus is a group of members who share a social and political analysis of their union and come together to try to change it. It may be a particular issue—such as the imposition of an odious district policy that the union has ignored. It might be general concerns about the lack of member input or lack of union leadership in the time of crisis. At times caucuses focus on winning union elections.

In the process of forming, caucuses often see the need to develop a shared set of principles. The mission statement of UCORE consolidated the principles of more than 25 caucuses that are members. This is the preamble:

We are social justice educators and unionists committed to creating schools and workplaces that advance economic justice, racial justice, and democracy. We call for equitable public education as a human right. We assert that the workplace rights of educators are an essential element of public education and that the well-being of communities in which our children live is as much a part of our mission as the work we do in our schools.

Most caucuses also agree to a set of rules or bylaws in order to keep work focused and productive. An important aspect of a caucus is that it's member-driven and members are able to have deep discussions to build unity around goals and strategies. In CORE, the members elect a steering committee that is in charge of general organizing. It gets input from members during monthly meetings. There are also informal ways for members to meet with one another through regional meetings, book clubs, and Listserv discussions.

Emergence of Caucuses

Over the past 10 years we have seen an emergence of teacher union caucuses across the country—in urban centers such as Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and New York—and in entire states as in Massachusetts, North Carolina, and New Jersey. In most instances, the concerns of these caucuses have roots in the negative impact of corporate education reform and the failure of entrenched union leadership to react appropriately.

In my case, I saw the increased amount of standardized testing completely change the culture and curriculum in my school. I joined CORE as a place to put my energy fighting what I saw as a war on the work teachers do. I also saw austerity budget measures in Chicago being used as an excuse to attack our union. Schools were being starved of resources, and teachers were being blamed for our “failing schools.”

Each caucus member has individual reasons for joining and yet what we are experiencing in schools is also universal. There are no safe places in the United States where teachers are not affected by what Diane Ravitch calls “vulture philanthropists” like the Koch brothers, who use their wealth to promote an anti-union agenda, or the Gates or Walton foundations that have negatively influenced education policy for more than two decades. When Barbara Madeloni, former president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association and a leader in the Educators for a Democratic Union caucus, talks about neoliberalism, she puts it in a broad perspective: “We’re not just fighting the Koch brothers. We’re fighting every Koch brother that’s ever been.”

Social Justice Unionism

The term social justice unionism can mean different things, depending on the context and priorities of activists and caucuses. One way of defining the concept is to compare it to other union models. (See Editors, p. 102.) The main union model

historically has been “business” or “industrial” unionism, which describes a framework of unionism that is transactional—concerned mostly with the “bread-and-butter” issues such as pay, conditions, and benefits. That model is often accompanied by a top-down leadership style. A second model is “professional unionism” that focuses on promoting teacher leadership in educational matters. Social justice unionism builds on the strengths of these two models but goes well beyond them. It is interactional, with members working with each other and the community to address broad social issues as well as bread-and-butter issues and pedagogical concerns. A key element of social justice unionism is that it involves bottom-up grassroots organizing, and that it promotes democratic practices throughout the union instead of a hierarchal leadership style where union members only look to elected officers and staff to take care of member concerns.

During a CORE steering meeting, Karen Lewis, former president of the Chicago Teachers Union, said, “Love doesn’t end when we walk out of school.” This is one of the foundational tenets of social justice unionism. We cannot compartmentalize our teaching lives when so many outside factors influence our work and the lives of the students we teach.

The terms “social justice” and “social justice unionism” can be watered down or co-opted. Some activists and leaders believe that passing resolutions in solidarity with different struggles (often a positive thing) makes a union a “social justice union.” Others label programs “social justice,” but because of top-down leadership and a lack of membership involvement, such programs are less effective than they might be. A new leader or leadership team can’t just declare that by virtue of their politics they are now a social justice union. It’s hard work. Real transformation of a union encompasses change in many areas: internal decision-making processes, vision, campaigns, addressing race and gender issues, relationships with parents and communities, and much more.

Caucuses Transforming Unions

A key way a caucus can push their unions to be more democratic is to analyze how power is structured inside the union. Madeloni describes it clearly, “The power is not in the leadership. It is in us.” In other words, we—all members—are the union.

To make that a reality often requires both structural changes as well as a change in the mindset of members. This might include organizing for changes in union election rules, the composition of bargaining committees, or who gets released to do union work. In some cases this leads to struggles over amending the union’s constitution or challenging age-old practices.

Caucus work can also seed union democracy by providing space outside the normal union structures to have deep discussions about the direction of the union.

We cannot compartmentalize our teaching lives when so many outside factors influence our work and the lives of the students we teach.

An example of a structural change in Chicago was the expansion of the bargaining team in the 2019 contract negotiations. Our team had more than 40 members, chosen for their leadership in CORE and committee work throughout the union. A small team of elected union officers wasn't in a position to know the working conditions of such a large district with the various job descriptions and types of schools. Broadening the leadership can be clumsy, but it does increase the likelihood that contract demands reflect a wider range of members and concerns.

"When we fight, we win" is a common phrase used in organizing. A large part of caucus work is deciding which issues to address and building the capacity in members to organize around these issues while simultaneously modeling how the entire union should organize. There are clear differences between just mobilizing people to come to an event or rally and doing the hard work of deep organizing that builds real union power. (See Schirmer, p. 248.)

Broadening the leadership can be clumsy, but it does increase the likelihood that contract demands reflect a wider range of members and concerns.

Amy Roat, a leader in the Caucus of Working Educators in Philadelphia, summed it up this way: "You can't just do one thing and expect movement."

Lewis built a three-pronged test for us to measure whether or not to move forward on an idea. She would say, "Does it build our power? Does it build our strength? Does it unite us?"

Caucuses aren't always oppositional. They can help union leadership make strategic decisions. We know our working conditions and can better gauge whether our fellow workers will embrace proposed strategies or campaigns. For example, when the CTU decided to have informational pickets at our work sites caucus members helped our union develop the literature and cover schools in the district that did not yet have strong school site organization. This normalizes the importance of organizing union power at the work site so that the leadership or union staff doesn't swoop in to solve a problem. And when members learn to fight collectively at the building level the entire union is stronger for larger struggles.

Challenges of Caucus Work

The agenda of social justice caucuses can be incredibly ambitious. We seek to change the social and racial inequities driven by government and corporate entities that have vast resources and power. We are the Davids in the current struggle with corporate Goliaths. We are trying to transform and help lead teacher unions that have many strengths and in some cases much baggage. Because of the enormity of the tasks, the dialogue, decision-making, and resulting tensions inside caucuses can be difficult.

The purpose of caucus work is to bring people together who share a common understanding of how to grow this work, but this does not mean that there is agreement on all issues. There is often discord at CORE meetings, and the debate can

take lots of time. None of the decisions are easy. We have to constantly reflect as to whether or not we are living our values as a caucus.

Another dilemma that caucuses face is to not replicate the power and privilege that is omnipresent in broader society. Many union locals have long-established leadership that is removed from the workers in the schools and oftentimes women and people of color have historically been marginalized. That can happen in caucuses as well.

And finally, the day-to-day life of teaching under increasingly demanding working conditions is hard enough, to say nothing of working in a union caucus at the same time. “We need to talk about the truth of how exhausting this work is,” says Roat. This speaks to the importance of building large enough caucuses so that the load can be shared among many people. Someone has to order the pizzas, print the agendas, book the meeting spaces, make the phone calls, and monitor social media. The inner workings of a caucus require lots of unglamorous but essential work. A few people can’t do it alone.

Conclusion

If you are currently working in a school, ask yourself, “What is our union doing to promote education justice?” Think of your role as an educator and the world you wish for your students and yourself. If your union is stagnant and reluctant to fight for students, teachers, and communities, it is time for deep and structural change. This is the purpose of a caucus. Consider joining one or creating one with your colleagues.

In the end, we want to put ourselves in a place that protects children and the integrity of our work as educators. As a parent at my school said to me recently, “A Chicago without CORE becomes an uglier place.” 📍

Michelle Strater Gunderson is a teacher and union activist from Chicago. She is a 34-year teaching veteran and currently teaches 1st grade in the Chicago Public Schools. She serves as trustee for the Chicago Teachers Union and is the former co-chair of the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE).

Lessons in Social Justice Unionism

An interview with former Chicago Teachers Union president Karen Lewis



In 2008 Karen Lewis was a chemistry teacher, one of eight Chicago teachers who formed the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) to fight school closings. Lewis was elected president of CTU in 2010 along with a slate of CORE members. In 2012, as president of a transformed, democratic Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), she led the 30,000-member union in a successful strike in the city that has been a launchpad for opposition to neoliberal education strategies. This interview with Lewis was conducted in 2012 by Jody Sokolower, Rethinking Schools' managing editor at that time. Lewis retired in 2018.

Set the scene for us: What were the issues that led to the Chicago teachers' strike this fall?

The strike was a result of 15 to 25 years of anger about being blamed for conditions that are beyond our control. That's part of it. The other part was a clear rebuke to the mayor and his friends about the top-down "reform" agenda and how it absolutely does not address the needs in the schools.

As soon as Rahm Emanuel [President Obama's former chief of staff] came to town to run for mayor, he had as his education advisor the head of a charter school network, Juan Rangel. We knew from the very beginning this was going to be an ugly, bitter fight. Once Emanuel won the primary, before the general election, he was already heavily dabbling in Springfield and insisting that we not have the right to strike. Working hand in hand with Jonah Edelman from what I call "Stand on Children" [Stand for Children], he tried to raise the bar so high that we would have our right to strike theoretically, but wouldn't have it in reality. They got legislation passed that meant we need 75 percent of our entire membership—not our voting membership—to authorize a strike.

Our membership was incensed; this was a law carved out just for Chicago. My response was: "Brothers and sisters, if we don't have 75 percent of our members in favor of a strike, we shouldn't strike. A strike is not something you do lightly." Then we spent more than a year talking to members about the contract, getting them involved in the contract fight, getting their wishes and desires as part of the proposal

that we presented to the board.

The parents understood that the mayor was bullying us. Parents also understood that we were being blamed and attacked for stuff that had nothing to do with how we managed our schools. They were clear about that. But we were adamant: We have a contract; we expect you to follow that contract.

Because you wanted the extra time to organize?

Absolutely. Had to have it. We were not mobilized, we were not organized, we were not ready. We needed the extra time to organize, but also to plan for the better day.

In the past, union leadership always said, "Save your money, we might go on strike." But that's not how you get people ready to strike.

We did not want to strike. I assumed that Emanuel would do everything he could to settle it before we had a strike. I was very wrong about that. We had a lot of pressure not to strike from politicians and advocacy organizations. But all along, we were very open about what we were going to do and how we were going to achieve it.

CHICAGO TEACHERS UNION



Building for the Strike

When did you realize that you might need to strike?

About when we announced it.

You thought they would settle?

I knew they would settle because they said they wanted to. Finally I said, “Well, I guess you don’t want to enough.”

How did you prepare for the strike?

We had a timeline based on the new law and we backwards-mapped based on what we would need to do if we were going to strike in September. We wanted to be prepared for it. Most unions aren’t prepared for a strike. It’s more a threat than a reality.

We created contract action committees in every school. We created an organizing department; our union never had an organizing department. We created a research department that we never had before. Between organizing, research, and political action, we had the ability to go to schools and talk to people about what meant the most to them. One thing we did was get and use data. We asked people, “What do you think? What do you want?” We went on listening tours for a year before.

We started talking to our members, building by building, pointing out that the board had given us a list of proposals that basically gutted our contract. Then we started with simple things like showing solidarity—wearing red on Friday. That became a big campaign and, as we got close to the end of the school year, people were wearing red everywhere. So a principal would say, “You can’t wear red on Friday.” We told our members, “Look, if you all wear red on Friday, the principal can’t write you all up. So here is a way to address your principal and show that you are in solidarity with one another.”

There are things that happen in a building that are out of the contract and there’s nothing you can do: “The principal’s being mean to me,” for instance. There’s no grievance you can write. But what you can do is figure out how to solve the problem. A lot of times if you talk to other members about a teacher who is being targeted by the administration, they’ll say, “Oh, that’s one of the crazies.” We tried to have our members embrace disaffected teachers rather than isolate them. “If the problem is over there now,” we said, “it’s going to happen to you next.” Because one of the things that has been happening in Chicago is we have a very high turnover in principals, not just in teachers. They recruit very young people as principals, people who don’t see principalship as a culminating event of their career, but as a steppingstone. One of the problems with having young principals is, by and large, they don’t have the wisdom of experience. They tend to be more into control, more into data, as opposed to establishing good relationships with teachers and staff. Older veteran teachers are frequently targets of new principals.

We discussed how to have relationships with people in the building you don’t necessarily like or agree with, how to conquer differences by doing things as a building, doing things in solidarity.

We also talked about having conversations with parents. I tell our members, “The first conversation you have with a parent cannot start with ‘Your child is driving me crazy.’ The first conversation should be about how glad you are to have their child in your class, what your plans are for the year, and saying, ‘If there is any help I can give you, please call me. I’m sure if we work together, we can make it be a great year for your child.’”

“We Won Some Respect”

What are the most important things you won?

You might be surprised. One of the things our members wanted was the ability to do their own lesson plans and not have lesson plans imposed on them.

We got textbooks and materials on the first day of school.

For clinicians, we got a room with privacy, access to locked doors.

We got a paperwork reduction. If you add something you want us to do in terms of paperwork, you have to subtract something else.

We have an anti-bullying clause because we have some principals who are out of control; they stand up in front of the entire faculty and staff, and belittle and humiliate people.

But the most important thing we won is some respect we didn’t have before. The clear understanding that this union moves together. That was a very important win.

What are the most important issues on which you had to compromise or put off a fight until later?

One would be money. Also, we couldn’t bargain class size without the board’s agreement to put it on the table, because it’s a permissive rather than mandatory subject of bargaining, and that means we couldn’t strike over it. It’s problematic that we could not lower class sizes.

Moving Past “Color Blindness”

When we talked shortly after your election as CTU president in 2010, you explained that one of the results of privatization and layoffs in Chicago (like elsewhere) has been the disproportionate firing of teachers of color, particularly African American teachers. Did the strike address that as an issue?

I had to fight to get language in our contract that says that the district will actively recruit racially diverse staff. I had to fight to get the word racial put in our contract. The essence of the problem is so-called “color blindness.” This man who has a lot of power on the other side of the table said, “I don’t care what a teacher’s color is, I just want good teachers.”

I said: “But you are recruiting nothing but young white teachers. There’s a problem with that. There’s something wrong with your measurement of ‘good’ if the only people you’re hiring to work in Chicago are young white teachers who don’t stay here.”

I promised him, “I’m going to have a conversation with you about white privilege.” There’s a whole field of academia on white studies.

But now we have language in our contract that includes the board being obligated to consult with us on a “systematic plan designed to search for and recruit a racially diverse pool of candidates to fill positions,” specific training for principals and head administrators on how to implement the plan, and union access to data and periodic meetings to assess progress. And we’re going to enforce that.

Changing the Conversation About Education

How do you think the 2012 strike changed the situation in Chicago?

It has awakened a lot of labor unions to what solidarity looks like, what it means. We had so much support from police, from fire, from laborers, from all kinds of different places you wouldn’t necessarily expect. It says a lot about working people in Chicago, what kind of pressure we’ve been under.

The strike has changed the conversation about education in Chicago. It made clear that we are the experts on education, not these consulting firms, not these millionaire dilettantes. They have a lot of money to throw around, but they’re not educators. We have taken them to task for that.

It also brought to light that people actually like teachers. You do the polling and it turns out that people like teachers. They don’t like the union, but they like teachers. What we tried to show is that the union and teachers are one, we’re not separate entities.

What about the union’s relationships with community organizations?

We have had school closings and all kinds of dysfunctional stuff happening in Chicago since 2004. So we have built relationships with communities since then. This didn’t happen to us overnight. This CTU leadership has had experience working with community organizations for a very long time. We have a community advisory board. Unions never had that before. We’re trying to build a coalition of people and organizations to explore policy and have a voice, for goodness’ sakes—unlike other organizations that just tell you what you should be doing to support them. We really believe in the democratic process.

Women’s Oppression, Women’s Leadership

There was such a strong presence of women at every level in the strike. Obviously part of that is because most teachers are women, but do you think there were specific ways that women’s leadership and women’s strength played a role in the Chicago events?

I do. I think it’s part of the clash between myself and the mayor. I don’t think he’s used to anyone like me who can tell him no. I said, “Look, I want to work with you, but we have to have some modicum of respect here.”

I am a woman, so I don’t know what’s it’s like to be a man. I’m Black. I don’t know what it’s like to be white, and being Black is infinitely more problematic than being female; that’s my experience. But I’m looking at an assault on social services. Who provides those? This mayor closed down mental health clinics, curtailed library hours. How are you picking out social workers, librarians, and teachers? By

and large, these are occupations that are done by women.

In the CTU today, all of our area vice presidents are women; we have a preponderance of women on our executive board and a preponderance of women in our house of delegates—because that's the nature of teaching.

Fighting with Our Tools, Not the Bosses' Tools

Every city is different, but are there things you have learned that could be helpful to teacher activists in other districts?

I think a democratic, rank and file-driven union doesn't hurt anywhere—a union leadership that is not only responsive but actively seeks input and advice from a variety of members, including people who you don't necessarily share the same politics with.

Some people think you elect a president and the president makes all the decisions for the union. No, that's not it, that's not how it works. In the past, what we saw in Chicago was leadership that tried to stifle opposition. I think that opposition deserves to be heard and deserves to be part of the process. We had a very large rank-and-file bargaining team, 35 people. And they included people from all the different caucuses. Because we're a large local, we have a lot of different factions. We felt that going into the negotiations, we needed to be on the same page with one another because this affects everybody. We went across the political divides and reached out to make that happen.

In a lot of locals, leadership is a little wary of trusting rank-and-file membership with the responsibility of negotiations, but I think it helps so much and informs the process.

We're fighting a corporate strategy that's trying to destroy public education. Union leadership needs to be really honest with its membership about whatever is happening in that community because I can guarantee you, wherever you are, you're going to have a "Stand on Children" or a StudentsFirst, or a Democrats for Education Reform, or something similar. There is nothing like the disinfectant quality of sunshine. You need to point out who these people are, what organizations they belong to, what boards they sit on, how they intertwine with other people who are making decisions about public schools who are not public school parents, teachers, or kids.

It all comes down to how you teach people to fight with the tools they have. We have been fighting with the bosses' tools. We can spend a lot of time doing legislation. I think that's fine—have a legislative approach. But understand that you don't control that process. We can talk about electing the right people, but ultimately, unless we have a statehouse full of teachers and paraprofessionals and clinicians, I don't think we'll get what we want coming out of state legislatures. You need to have good relationships with legislators; you need to have members get in

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touch and let them know what's important to you. That's one tool. But it's not the only tool.

Our best tool is our ability to put 20,000 people in the street. I don't care if one rich guy buys up all the ad space. The tool that we have is a mass movement. We

have the pressure of mass mobilization and organizing.

**And we have the first
line of defense, which
is the parents!**

And we have the first line of defense, which is the parents! We can see parents every day if we want to. Once parents believe that what you're fighting for is something that's good for their children, they're on your side. If you're just fighting for money, you're never going to win the parents over. The parents don't care, except in a situation like ours where we had a longer

day—parents do understand about that—but you have to do the work to find out what it is their children really need.

Another tool is knowing what is on your members' minds. A lot of union leaders tend to think for their members without asking them, "What do you think?" And you need to be honest. You need to say, "This is what we did get, this is what we're going to try to get next time." Because a contract is not the solution to all your problems. A contract will, by necessity, be a compromise. The key is to keep people engaged in the process of movement building. ❧

A longer version of this interview is available in the Winter 2012 Rethinking Schools (Vol. 27, No. 2).

The Seattle Educators' Strike

BY JESSE HAGOPIAN



TED S. WARREN | AP

On Sept. 20, 2015, thousands of Seattle Education Association (SEA) members voted to approve a new contract with the Seattle Public Schools. The vote officially ended a strike that had delayed the first five days of school. The new contract contained many hard-fought social justice wins:

- An end to the use of standardized test scores in teacher evaluations—a huge blow to the testocracy in Seattle and across the country. This victory built on the yearslong struggle of educators, students, and parents in Seattle in opposition to high-stakes tests, including the boycott of the MAP test that began at Garfield High School in 2013 and spread to several other schools in Seattle.
- A guaranteed minimum of 30 minutes recess in every elementary school. Recess had been vanishing in Seattle's schools, particularly those that serve low-income students and students of color. The campaign for recess was launched by a citywide organization months earlier called Lunch and Recess Matter, which was made up of parents, students, and teacher members of Social Equity Educators (SEE), a rank-and-file caucus of social justice educators in Seattle.
- Enforceable caseload caps for educational support associates, such as school psychologists and speech language pathologists, who provide vital support to some of our most vulnerable students.
- Racial Equity Teams. Black Lives Matter activists and racial justice organizers, including Seattle NAACP members who issued a statement supporting the strike, got behind the demand for Racial Equity Teams in every building. The school district originally agreed to teams in only six schools, but the power of the strike pushed the district to agree to anti-racism committees in 30 schools. Given that Seattle schools suspend African American students at four times the rate of white students for the same infractions, it is clear that every school in the city needs to organize actively against inequality and racism.

These were groundbreaking victories. And yet with the overwhelming support of the Seattle public, SEA could have won so many more of the most basic necessities for students and teachers.

It's hard to overstate the outpouring of support for the strike. Marching band students used their pep band anthems to root on striking educators at picket lines around the city, and local businesses donated to the picket lines. Thousands of parents supported the strike actively—from signing petitions, to joining Facebook groups in support, to delivering food to the picket line. One of the greatest developments from the strike was the group Soup for Teachers that formed to bring sustenance and solidarity to picket lines at every school in the district. Liza Rankin, who went on to run for school board in 2019 and win, formed the organization and had many parent volunteers join her. Even the mainstream media reported that parents were in support of the strike and that the educators were winning. In fact, the enthusiasm for educators was so great, Seattle City Council, led by socialist councilmember Kshama Sawant, passed a unanimous resolution in support of the strike.

With this unprecedented outpouring of support, SEE members helped launch the Coalition for the Schools Seattle Deserves (CSSD), to unite parents, students, and community organizations around the city to support the strike. SEE had truly

hoped that SEA would organize this kind of coalition with parents and social justice groups, as had been done in cities like Chicago, where there was a strong commitment to a social justice approach to unionism since the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) won leadership and led a strike in 2012. Leaders in SEE argued that if the union could galvanize the widespread public support into a visible showing of solidarity, they would be able to win so much more at the bargaining table.

The strategy of mass mobilization of membership and community is prerequisite to a social justice union approach, as has been shown in cities around the country. In Los Angeles during their 2019 strike, for example, UTLA organized multiple rallies of the membership that were joined by parents, students, and community—mobilizing some 60,000 people at a time in the streets. Those mobilizations helped give all educators—and especially the bargaining team—the confidence to demand more in their contract. In the end, UTLA reached one of the most impressive union victories in recent history that included a full-time nurse in every school, a full-time librarian in every middle and high school, enforceable class size caps, reduction of standardized testing by 50 percent, and more. Unfortunately, despite the widespread call from the members, including from SEE, SEA refused to organize a single rally of all of its members during the strike. Worse, union officials chastised association representatives who decided to lead their picket line in a march to the school district headquarters to help show solidarity with the bargaining team and show that there was pervasive support for a rally.

While SEA refused to organize a mass rally, SEE and the CSSD joined Grammy-winning singer-songwriter Kimya Dawson to host a benefit concert for the striking teachers that drew many hundreds to Seattle's historic Neptune Theatre. The crowd filled the venue, and this became the only large-scale gathering during the strike. The success of the event was undeniable. Thousands of dollars were raised for those most impacted by missed paychecks. It allowed educators to speak publicly to the issues that mattered most in the strike. Much of the local media attended and captured images of kids getting their faces painted and students learning lessons of collective struggle from their parents and educators. The SEA bargaining team attended briefly, before they had to return to the bargaining table, and it helped to show them the support from the community that existed.

With a visionary set of demands and the overwhelming support of the parents, students, community, and even the Seattle City Council, it was disappointing that the union ended the strike before we achieved all we could at the bargaining table. Seattle is among the nation's top 10 cities for highest cost of living. Educators at that point had not had a cost of living increase in six years, and they are increasingly unable to live in the city where they teach. It was a mistake to agree to raises

These were groundbreaking victories. And yet with the overwhelming support of the Seattle public, the SEA could have won so many more of the most basic necessities for students and teachers.

ranging from 3 percent the first year to 4.5 percent the third, which couldn't even offset rising healthcare costs.

With the new contract, school nurses were still forced to split their time among several schools and thus unable to provide the care that students deserve. Unfortunately, kids don't get sick only on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and we can't have nurses only available at schools on specific days. It is truly outrageous that in the city of Seattle—a municipal area that is home to the two richest people the world has ever known and some of the wealthiest corporations in history—that there are kids who go to a school where their basic health is not cared for. We also know that nursing services are especially important for low-income students—disproportionately Black, Latino, and immigrant—who likely have no health insurance or are underinsured. It is simply stunning to me that the union didn't build a massive publicity campaign and rally, with parents by their side, to demand a full-time nurse in every school, every day. With all the overwhelming support for our strike, we truly missed an opportunity to fight for equity and the well-being of our youth.

The strike achieved lower student-to-teacher ratios in some preschool and special education programs, but the union actually agreed to a 30 percent caseload increase for the special education Access Program. We also acceded to the district's demand to lengthen the school day by 20 minutes. With more of a focus on mass rallies to unite teachers and parents, it is clear that we could have won important victories for students and educators in these areas.

Nonetheless, the strike was an important part of showing educators the purpose and power of unions. The union's demand to end the use of high-stakes testing in teacher evaluation helped educate the public about the misuses of standardized testing and helped support the growing opt-out movement at the time. The strike helped illuminate the issue of disproportionate discipline as a component of the school-to-prison-pipeline. In addition, the strike went a long way toward educating the public about the need to fully fund our schools at the state level. But the most important outcome of the strike won't be found in the fine print of the agreement. The true triumph of this contract battle was the solidarity—between teachers, office professionals, nurses, school librarians, instructional assistants, parents, and community organizations—in the struggle for public schools. When the union decides to fully embrace the power of that solidarity, well, then we can win the schools our children deserve. 

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You Need Rank and File to Win

How Arizona teachers built a movement

BY NOAH KARVELIS



ARIZONA EDUCATION ASSOCIATION: GAGE SKIDMORE

Across the nation, a powerful teachers' movement has been growing. The potential of this movement first became apparent when West Virginia's teachers went on strike in February 2018, and ultimately won a 5 percent raise for all public school employees. Following this, Oklahoma's educators mobilized and won raises and additional funding. Then teachers in my own state of Arizona went on a six-day strike in April and May 2018, and won \$406 million in new funding. In the following two years, educators in Los Angeles, Oakland, and Chicago also waged successful strikes.

The successes of these movements, as well as the persistent and rampant attacks on public education, have inspired many educators across the nation to build teachers' movements in their own states. While every movement has been different, I want to share my experience as one of the teacher-organizers who helped with the Arizona movement. I hope that by breaking down what happened in Arizona, I can help others as they begin to build or grow their own teachers' movements to fight for the schools that they and their students deserve.

The Spark

The seeds of a teacher rebellion in Arizona were sown more than a decade ago when a steady barrage of cuts to education funding first began. Years later, and despite a growing economy, this funding was never restored. By the time teachers mobilized in the 2018 #RedForEd movement, Arizona's schools were suffering from a budget deficit of \$1.1 billion, per-pupil spending was 48th in the nation, and Arizona's teachers were among the lowest paid in the country. For years, we taught in crumbling schools, lived paycheck to paycheck, and struggled for even the most essential resources for our students.

When West Virginia teachers went on strike—and won—Arizona teachers saw a glimmer of hope. Following the strike, our union president, Joe Thomas, put out a tweet asking Arizona's teachers if they had been watching what happened in West Virginia and if and how they wanted to mobilize in Arizona. I responded and said that yes, we had been watching and I believed Arizona's teachers were supportive of going on strike. After a quick back and forth on Twitter, Thomas sent out two additional tweets: "Talking is good. The first step toward any statewide action is local actions. What can you do locally—at your site—to reveal the level of readiness for a statewide action?" And, "Having everyone wear Red for Ed (a red shirt) on the same day would be a fine indicator."

I never imagined anything would come of this exchange. Teachers, far too often, view teaching as a passion and an act of martyrdom, and Arizona was no exception. But in the wake of West Virginia, the atmosphere was different. There was hope for change. As I started sharing a simple Facebook event and a call to action, word of the first #RedForEd day spread quickly. A few days later, the Facebook page had more than 7,000 people who said that they were interested, or planning to participate. And on March 7, 2018, Arizona's schools were a sea of red as thousands of teachers showed that they were ready to fight back.

The Structures

The first #RedForEd event quickly ballooned into a massive form of protest. As interest grew, it was clear that there were both a need and a desire for something beyond a single day of action.

In the days leading up to the T-shirt action, I had connected with Rebecca Garelli, Derek Harris, and Dylan Wegela. We quickly decided to create a Facebook group, Arizona Educators United (AEU), as a space to plan further action and get organized. Much like the #RedForEd Facebook event, this group quickly swelled

to several thousand members. The page functioned, and continues to function, as the central hub of the Arizona teachers' movement. The five teachers who serve as the group's "administrators" post events, share information, organize mobilizations, discuss our actions, and agree on demands with 52,000 other educators and supporters. Another team of about 12 teachers reviews content, screens requests to join the group, and moderates the Facebook page.

While several other teachers' movements such as those in Oklahoma and West Virginia utilized Facebook to organize, we embraced the platform in a different way. Instead of having one group page where educators executed essentially all elements of the movement, we created a network of Facebook pages. Our main page existed solely for movement leaders to disperse information and organize the rank-and-file educators. Other pages, such as the AEU Discussion Hub and local #RedForEd Facebook groups, were organized by district or town. Teachers and supporters were encouraged to discuss the movement and plan actions in their communities.

In addition, we collected data and contact information from the very beginning so that we could reach teachers outside of Facebook through email blasts, calls, and texts. Without any funding or resources, this was done primarily through the work of Vanessa Arredondo, a teacher and AEU organizer in Yuma, Arizona, who dedicated herself to developing the infrastructure through countless email lists and Google Forms. In doing so, Arizona's movement circumvented one of the primary drawbacks to organizing through Facebook—the fact that (especially in a group of 40,000–60,000 people) the amount of content and information on the page can be overwhelming, and vital information is consequently quickly buried or lost.

Engaging the State Affiliate

Arizona's movement was also unique in the way the grassroots activists in AEU were able to work with the state's union (Arizona Education Association) leadership. Our union leaders realized that we had ignited a spark that they'd been unable to cultivate and told AEU that they wanted the teachers to remain at the helm of the movement. We worked hand in hand with the union as we built a movement that was designed to engage all educators, regardless of union membership. Through this relationship, our grassroots energy was matched with the institutional power and experience of the union to create a mass movement in a "right-to-work" state. This relationship between rank-and-file activists and union leaders was vital to the successes in Arizona.

Site Liaisons

Along with the Facebook pages and the close relationship between the union and grassroots leaders, we also built a "site liaison" network. This is a network of more than 2,000 individual teachers who are volunteer organizers for their campuses. These teachers communicate with movement leaders primarily through the AEU Site Liaisons Facebook group and email as they direct the day-to-day activism of

the teachers at their schools. Most of these teachers were also union site representatives, but for many this was their first experience in organizing. By developing the liaison network, we were able to create a bottom-up infrastructure that allowed teachers and advocates to engage in meaningful local actions as well as to lead the larger statewide fight.

Site liaisons are in charge of dispersing information to all of their colleagues at their campuses. They also perform essential tasks such as organizing and hosting the strike vote, which was facilitated by both AEU and AEA. Through this structure, local leaders become empowered to not only perform these tasks and help sustain the movement, but are also encouraged to organize their own local actions. Many site liaisons began organizing actions such as “bridge takeovers” where dozens of teachers stand on overpasses with signs bearing education facts and phrases while wearing red shirts, individual sick-outs that shut down entire districts, local marches, car painting events, and dozens of other tactics to help increase momentum and grow power. As movement leader and teacher Dylan Wegela put it, “The site liaisons are essential to the movement. They organize at the ground level to build power of #RedForEd.” Without their involvement, #RedForEd would never have built the power that we have now.

The Tactics

We knew that the grounds for a teacher strike had to be developed through a series of deliberate tactics focused on increasing our power and support. And one strategy we borrowed from West Virginia was a slow escalation of tactics.

Our first tactic in this gradual process was the #RedForEd T-shirt action in early March 2018, when thousands of teachers wore red on the same day to signal that they were ready to take action. We encouraged teachers to not only wear red, but also to post images of themselves in red shirts on social media and use the hashtag #RedForEd. Then we engaged teachers in another simple yet more personal ask. We asked teachers to wear red again, but this time to post a picture with a piece of paper and the three reasons why they were #RedForEd. Through this tactic, we showed the faces of the teachers and began to tell the stories of why we were fighting back. For example, 8th-grade English language arts teacher Chad Schafer held up a sign with these three reasons:

- I live with three other teachers just so we can afford rent.
- Schools and students are losing amazing teachers because they cannot survive on their salaries for educators.
- We elementary teachers are more than 20 percent below the national average for teacher salary.

About two weeks later, the union had its annual “Day at the Capitol” where educators on spring break lobby legislators and learn about the bills being heard. The union invited both members and non-members to the event, bringing together more than 100 teachers. A week later, around 350 teachers arrived for a second

lobby day. By opening this event up to all teachers, the union showed that it was willing to work with the rank-and-file members of AEU. This event proved that the #RedForEd movement was not simply a social media phenomenon but was prepared to mobilize in person and hold legislators accountable.

As both energy and participation grew, we continued to mobilize largely in person. After building the confidence and power of teachers through social media actions and the Day at the Capitol events, we knew that we could then move away from online organizing and begin to ask teachers to show up at events and protests in person. The actions that followed included protesting Gov. Doug Ducey's appearances on a local radio station, testifying in legislative committee hearings, and the near-constant efforts of site liaisons in local protests. While these actions were taking place, it became clear that a full-fledged teachers' movement was truly developing.

Five Demands

We hosted a series of polls in the main AEU Facebook page that allowed teachers to offer suggestions for demands and vote on what was most important to them. Ultimately, these polls developed what became the five demands of the movement. These demands included a 20 percent raise for teachers, competitive wages for all classified staff, no new tax cuts until Arizona's per-pupil spending reaches the national average, a return to 2008 funding levels, and yearly raises until Arizona's average teacher salary reaches the national average. Middle school science teacher and AEU organizer Rebecca Garelli summarized the demands as intended to "secure the future of public education in Arizona and fight for the schools our students and educators deserve."

We officially announced these demands at a rally on the Capitol grounds that was attended by several thousand teachers and education advocates. It was clear educators were prepared to take radical action, and talk of a strike began to spread quickly.

Securing Community Support

All this had taken place in roughly four weeks. Beyond our network of educators and advocates, our communities were largely unaware of the desperate state of our schools, as well as the goals of the Arizona #RedForEd movement. We knew that we must engage with our communities. We're in a conservative "right-to-work" state, and without community support, we were destined to fail. So we utilized the walk-in tactic that was used in West Virginia. We created Facebook events and encouraged site liaisons to communicate with parents to tell them that we would be holding walk-ins and what could be expected. And for two consecutive Wednesdays, teachers wore red as they met with parents and students outside of school before classes began to discuss the issues that we all faced in Arizona schools, as well as the #RedForEd movement's goals. Then, teachers and community members walked into their schools together in a show of solidarity.

These walk-ins proved to be essential in securing the support of parents and

community members. On one walk-in day, more than 110,000 community members and educators entered schools together in bold solidarity and sent a resounding message throughout the state. Just days before, after an interview at the local radio station KTAR, the governor had brushed the movement off and claimed that it was “political theater” and that he has a “day job” and no time to concern himself with our demands. Yet, one day after the massive walk-in mobilization, the governor announced that he had a plan for 20 percent raises for all teachers.

Suddenly, the movement was no longer just angry teachers in red shirts. Now, the entire community was behind us. The governor simply had to act or be crushed by the sheer force of the movement.

The tactic of the walk-in was, and is, the defining moment of the Arizona #RedForEd movement. By engaging with our community and winning their support, the entire playing field shifted. Suddenly, the movement was no longer just angry teachers in red shirts. Now, the entire community was behind us. The governor simply had to act or be crushed by the sheer force of the movement.

However, the governor’s proposal was riddled with holes. It ignored four of our five demands, left out pay raises for our colleagues such as bus drivers and paraprofessionals, stole funding from other public services, and had no sustained revenue source. It was a sham, so we continued to escalate our actions and soon called for a strike vote.

Before the vote, there was a sense among movement leaders that many educators were willing to accept the governor’s pay proposal. We wondered if educators would stand with their students and colleagues and continue to fight or if they would take off their red shirts and take the governor’s 20 percent pay raise. But when the results of the vote came in, the answer was clear as 78 percent of all school staff across Arizona—union and non-union, AEU member and non-member—voted to authorize a walkout.

The Strike

While the strike eventually secured a \$406 million investment in public education, resulting in significant raises for many teachers and school employees, it also became clear that the governor and the Legislature were not willing to replace the remaining \$700 million still missing from our schools.

We were left with a difficult decision. With the legislative session closed and the legislators leaving the building, should we stay out of our classrooms and continue the strike, or turn to a new tactic? Could we force a special session? We had to act quickly, as the budget passed and another school day slowly crept nearer and nearer.

We quickly sent teams of leaders and union staff to talk to teachers on the ground at the Capitol and see what they wanted to do. We asked the teachers, “If the budget passes, do we stay out on strike or change tactics?” While we were not

able to conduct a full, democratic vote (one of my personal regrets from the entire movement), the teachers at the Capitol told us overwhelmingly that if the budget passed, they wished to return to their classrooms.

In response, we called for an end to the strike. However, the movement's leaders understood that teachers could not go back to our classrooms and accept pay raises without winning anything for our students and our colleagues who went on strike with us. We needed to change our tactics. AEU's leadership endorsed the InvestInEd initiative—a tax increase on the top 1 percent of income earners to generate \$700 million for education. In roughly five weeks, teachers and advocates gathered more than 227,000 signatures to put the InvestInEd initiative on the November 2018 ballot. However, in August the Arizona Supreme Court, overturning three prior rulings, controversially pulled the InvestInEd initiative from the ballot.

While this was a devastating development in the movement, Arizona's teachers remain dedicated to the fight for public education. We simply changed our focus to the November elections and asked candidates to sign a pledge of support to the movement and its demands. By Election Day, we had 78 candidates who had signed pledges. Teachers then knocked on more than 80,000 doors to help secure seats for these pro-public education legislators. We saw the results of these efforts as several teachers and public education advocates—including Kathy Hoffman, a public school speech therapist, first-time candidate, and now Arizona superintendent of public instruction—won major electoral victories.

The Lessons

The first lesson I hope people take away from Arizona #RedForEd is that a grassroots, rank-and-file movement is absolutely necessary—particularly in “right-to-work” states. Whether the rank and file assume leadership through Facebook pages, forming local collectives, or by getting elected to official union leadership positions, it is clear that the energy and leadership of teachers themselves is what is needed to lead these battles. And while the rank and file must lead, they should also be deliberate in securing the support of their union leadership in order to create a powerful partnership. Simultaneously, union leadership must be willing to not only work with rank-and-file teachers, but also to allow them to assume authentic, meaningful leadership roles.

It is important to recognize that teachers need to be allowed the space to grow as leaders. As Jay Barbuto, a middle school English teacher and now established movement leader and union organizer, said: “I’m passionate about teaching. I’m the teacher that goes above and beyond for his students. They’re family. So, when #RedForEd became a thing in Arizona, it just seemed like an opportunity for me to show these leadership skills and enthusiasm in a different light.” Leaders in both union and grassroots organizations must constantly recognize that teachers like Jay are waiting for their opportunity.

The second lesson is the need to have a community-centric orientation to teachers’ movements. In Arizona, the turning point occurred when we went into our communities and spoke with our neighbors and friends about what was hap-

pening. In response to walk-ins, town halls, and car window painting events for parents, the community threw their support behind the teachers and the entire tide shifted. Suddenly, #RedForEd signs were in the windows of homes on every block, car windows were painted with education facts, and the force of the movement was felt far beyond the walls of the school. This community-based approach to a labor movement was what made transformative change possible in Arizona.

The third lesson is that democratic organizing, whether through union reforms or establishing new structures such as Arizona Educators United, must be embraced. Through the site liaison network, thousands of teachers became powerful local leaders. And by using online platforms such as Facebook to vote on tactics and demands, the voices of the teachers were not only heard, but also acted on. This authentic engagement of the rank and file created spaces for teachers—regardless of political affiliation or union membership—to participate. As elementary school substitute teacher and #RedForEd supporter Allison Ryal-Bagley told the *New York Times* as she voiced her support for new taxes to fund public education, “I’m a die-hard Republican, and I’m dying inside. Republicans aren’t taking care of our kids.” By engaging in democratic organizing that both respected and welcomed people like Allison, we were able to create a movement that cut across partisan lines and mobilized thousands of public education supporters.

Another lesson is that the gradual escalation of tactics that was embraced in Arizona and elsewhere is a vital strategy that can be duplicated in nearly any setting. We realized that we could not simply dive headfirst into a statewide strike. We needed to bring more teachers into the movement, develop our message, and provide time to engage with our community, gain their support, and recognize their values and ideas. By gradually escalating our actions, we were able to accomplish this while we simultaneously built structures such as the liaison network, which allowed us to begin building toward lasting power and not simply a strike.

Finally, the most important lesson to be learned is that teachers have tremendous power. It is simply undeniable. Across the nation, we have seen the power of teachers when they unite and fight for what they believe in. And as conservative and neoliberal attacks on our schools continue, it only becomes clearer that there is no hero waiting in the wings to save us. Teachers themselves must become the very leaders who will save our schools. And there isn’t a second to lose. It is time to fight back. 

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New Teachers Energize Their Union!

BY GABRIEL TANGLAO



BRIAN STAUFFER

As a child, I looked forward to visiting my mother's workplace. Like many Filipinos, her pathway to U.S. citizenship was as a professional nurse. One winter day at the hospital, we pulled up to a spectacle that left me in awe: A large group of people marching in circles along the sidewalk. We were greeted by my mother's co-workers with warm

hugs, and the sounds from the crowd were rhythmic and uplifting, as everyone raised their voices in unison. “What are they saying?” I asked. Mom replied, “Our chant lets people know that we are powerful together.” This experience marching with my mother at this union rally planted the seeds of collective joy in action that later grew into a deep passion.

Years later when I started teaching in Bergenfield, New Jersey, my first impressions of the local union were less inspiring. The hurricane of paperwork, meetings, lesson plans, and dozens of new colleagues converged into an overwhelming stream of information. It felt like drinking water from a fire hose. I remembered sitting uncomfortably in the dense August air of the auditorium for orientation. A captive audience of new and returning teachers was enduring a long lineup of white, male, suit-wearing authority figures. “What a waste of time! These are the same PowerPoints they used last year,” complained a veteran teacher loudly from the back row.

The local Bergenfield Education Association (BEA) president was the final speaker for that day. He made a mostly dry presentation about legal rights, contract language, grievance procedures, and evaluation processes. In retrospect, the union president’s placement at the end of a long, boring program left him with an impatient audience anxious to be set free. “Ugh! We could have just read through the PowerPoints ourselves. Don’t they know how much work we have to do to prepare our classrooms?” proclaimed a fearless young lady in the hallway. Her honesty felt like a breath of fresh air cutting through the humidity. We became instant friends.

Jasmin had a quick wit and a wealth of knowledge that made her an engaging person and a great teacher. It must have been fate that we shared a classroom, and

taught different sections of the same financial literacy course. I remember being motivated by her relentless commitment. Jasmin spent countless hours planning, preparing, and modifying lessons for her modern world history class. She also served as advisor to the Genders & Sexualities Alliance and Academic Decathlon, and she rarely missed an

“Our chant lets people know that we are powerful together.”

after-school game. As we grew close, I learned about how influential Jasmin’s family was in shaping her character. Her mother, like mine, was also a proud union member.

Jay, a close colleague of ours, taught honors U.S. history two doors down from our classroom. He was highly respected by students, despite his reputation as the “hardest history teacher.” Ironically, we had grown up in the same hometown, but only later became friends through teaching. One day during lunch, Jay pitched a game-changing question: “What are your thoughts on our contract?” I admitted, “I haven’t carefully read the contract.” Then I asked, “How do contract negotiations even work?” This moment eating lunch in the workroom sparked a conversation that lit a flame.

For the next few weeks, we started exploring the contours of our district that led to the current contract. Since we are in a state that recognizes collective bargaining rights, our local union reps negotiate on behalf of all teachers, including teachers at every grade level and all education support professionals. The salary guide is a complex grid that allocated pay scales based on years of experience and level of education. This often leads to thorny decisions that sometimes encourage union leaders to prioritize increased pay for senior teachers over new teachers or vice versa. We also looked into how our pension payments and healthcare costs added nuance to the calculations. It took time to understand the complex process of contract negotiations, but the trail of bread crumbs made us hungry to learn more.

We checked in with each other regularly to share our discoveries. Jay had a methodical nature that gave us important context for the bread-and-butter issues that impacted our take-home pay. Jasmin had great instincts and people skills that helped uncover personal accounts of how contentious elements of the contract played out. I started to identify key players and assess power dynamics through a social justice lens. Bergenfield was one of the most diverse communities in New Jersey with a 40 percent Latinx, 30 percent white, 20 percent Asian, and 10 percent Black student population. But the administrative staff and school board were dominated mostly by white men.

We reached out to the local union officers and asked how we could get involved. After some time, we received no response, and I followed up in person. “Hello,” I said to our union president during a break at an inservice. “I’m Gabriel. I just wanted to follow up on an email we sent last week asking about how Jasmin, Jay, and I could get involved with the union, and help out.” His confused face confirmed that he did not read the email or take us seriously. “Help out?” he repeated. His implication was clear. I was viewed with suspicion as an eager young educator of color—a rarity in this longtime union officer’s circle, I imagined. Our exchange felt a long way from the warm hug that I remember the day of my mother’s union rally. Still, we persisted.

Jasmin encountered a more patronizing, but equally dismissive attitude. Jay was up next. It may have been his powers of persuasion, or his position as a white, heterosexual, cisgender man, but he was our most effective messenger—evident by the result. Soon we were all nominated to serve as “building reps” and asked to attend “just one monthly meeting.” Each meeting started with an opening monologue by the local president who spent an exhaustive amount of time disseminating information. The central message was clear: He speaks, we listen. The occasional daydream would cross my mind of those rally chants: “We are powerful together.”

We began to exercise our voices to ask questions. “Should we use Robert’s Rules of Order during meetings?” I asked. “Where can we find copies of our constitution and bylaws?” Jasmin followed up. “Will we receive an agenda in advance of the next meeting?” Jay asked. This volley of questions was not meant to be disruptive, but rather to help us move business forward and make our union pro-

cesses more transparent. I was soon nominated by a veteran building rep to serve as sergeant at arms and help enforce the rules of parliamentary procedure. These rules can be bureaucratic and confusing, but it was also an opportunity to open up discussion and include more voices. I did my job, perhaps too well.

One of my responsibilities was to keep time during meetings. This sometimes meant calling “time” on people who spoke too long, including officers. “Sorry, that was three minutes,” I would say respectfully. The president bristled at any attempt to check his control of discussions. Having been in power for more than a decade, the local president seemed used to unquestioned authority. This tension grew into hostility at my first winter leadership conference, a regional union event that offered leadership training for members.

As I made my way through the hotel lobby, I walked over toward familiar faces expecting to be welcomed with some friendly greeting. My local presi-

dent took a swig of his drink and slammed his glass on the countertop. He turned to me and said, “You’re not going to tell me I have three minutes to speak in my meeting!” He then launched into a verbal barrage. At first I tried to de-escalate the situation, but I eventually raised my voice to demand some respect. Flanked by the vice president to my side, the president was able to slip away without a clear resolution. His message could be summed up as “know your

In that moment, I realized that changing that dynamic would require more than an individual confrontation . . . it was time to squad up.

place, and stay in it.” In that moment, I realized changing that dynamic would require more than an individual confrontation; it would take collective action. It was time to squad up.

I texted Jasmin to ask if we could meet up after our first training session. We found a quiet table near the lobby to speak privately. She listened intently as I told her about the encounter. Rather than react, we decided to take time to think about our next steps. The following week, Jasmin invited a few trusted co-workers to her house for an informal meeting. I shared my experience with the group, uncertain of how it would be received. I felt affirmed when people shared similar experiences. “This leaves us no choice. How can we continue to work with these people?” one person said. The purpose of the meeting quickly shifted into a strategy session, and thus started “A New Day for the BEA.”

The confrontation with the local president was a turning point in our union journey. It prompted us to organize a slate of candidates and challenge the incumbent officers in the upcoming elections. Our team of five candidates for union office was majority women, and one person of color. Jay ran for president, Jasmin ran for vice president, and I ran for treasurer. We asked Phyllis, the person who nominated me for sergeant at arms, to run for corresponding secretary. She was a veteran middle school teacher with union experience. Fortunately, a friendly elementary school teacher also decided to run for recording secretary. The attitudes of the incumbent officers grew increasingly hostile, but there was no turning back.

In an effort to learn about issues that impacted our members, we organized a districtwide listening tour. Within three weeks, we visited seven out of eight schools, and connected with nearly a quarter of our 450 members. Representatives who were loyal to the old regime attempted to put up roadblocks, but rank-and-file members showed up. Almost every teacher, librarian, secretary, counselor, custodian, and paraprofessional shared stories of their struggles, frustrations, and hopes. “This is the first time I can remember candidates running for union office having ever visited our school,” one woman said with gratitude. The common theme was a desire for greater communication.

It became clear that democratic process had not been exercised regularly in the local for many years. Most people were hard-pressed to remember the last time there were any challengers, let alone a slate of candidates. In fact, it took weeks to even receive a copy of the constitution and bylaws that outlined the election rules, procedures, and timeline. One event that we were encouraged to attend was a meet-the-candidates debate. “They are going to frame us as weak and inexperienced. That will be our advantage,” Jay said with a cool resolve. As coach of the debate team, he was ready to go toe to toe with anyone. The outcome of that event was as clear as the outcome on the ballots.

We won a resounding victory for all five union officer positions. Having successfully campaigned for office, we hoped to transform the culture of our union to be more inclusive and transparent. Our team shared a sense of urgency about the need to engage members from our generation. We were acutely aware from our recent experiences that fresh blood in the ranks of active membership meant a healthier union. It was also visibly apparent that we did not reflect the rich diversity of the Bergenfield student body or local community. “I should not be the only person of color at the leadership table,” I affirmed. But we were moving in the right direction.

We kept the concerns of members from our listening tour at the forefront of our minds. We centered organization, communication, and engagement as our main priorities. Internally, we focused on the empowerment of building reps with opportunities for training, support, and resources that we wished we would have had. That summer, about one-third of our building reps attended the statewide summer leadership conference to participate in trainings on a variety of issues. As I walked into the crowded dining room on the first night, I had a flashback to the previous winter’s confrontation. I heard my name, and started walking over toward the familiar faces waving me over.

One of our new building reps had thoughtfully saved us all seats at a table in the conference dining room. We sat together and shared our excitement about the weekend. This was a new experience for most of our team, and it felt good to have

In an effort to strengthen face-to-face relationships, we mapped the buildings to connect building reps with clusters of members located in their respective hallways.

other people to share in the journey. We checked in with each other at each meal to share discoveries. “Do we use any funding from the PRIDE Community Organizing grant?” one person inquired. “Is there an Evaluation Committee?” added the new building rep. “Who serves on our Legislative Action Team?” another person asked. This was a very different experience from the last conference. It felt like that collective joy in action.

This wave of momentum carried our growing team into the following school year. Starting with small teams of people, we revived the committee structures including the Legislative Action Team, “PRIDE” Community Organizing Committee, Evaluation Committee, and others. In an effort to strengthen face-to-face relationships, we mapped the buildings to connect building reps with clusters of members located in their respective hallways. This effort paid dividends when we invited people to the social events that Jasmin would plan. From happy hours for new members to retirement celebrations, we tried to attract educators to take collective ownership of our union.

We grew into each leadership role with every experience. Jay was our contract guru who mastered the grievance procedures, organized the negotiations team, and was the lead defender of members’ rights. Jasmin’s dynamic personality and thoughtful nature was an incredible asset as she led, planned, and launched a series of membership engagement events throughout the year. I discovered the radical possibilities of this union work in and beyond the district. I represented our local to the Parents Association, community groups, political organizations, and our state and national affiliates. We each discovered our own leadership style, and added to the collective vision in different ways.

I admit that the work was fun and challenging, but also frustrating at times. As chair of our Legislative Action Team, I wanted our union to have a real impact

in our larger community. As we acknowledged the lack of diverse representation in our administrative staff and faculty, we set our sights on the local school board elections. It took months to identify worthy candidates and navigate the complexities of local politics. We spread the word throughout our membership. We partnered with the Parents Association, who hosted a meet-the-candidates night. We even organized a community door-knocking to turn out the vote with Bergenfield residents who were also union members.

Despite all of the time and effort, we were able to help elect only one candidate of color. This did not shift the balance of power, or change the racial dynamic in a substantive way. This “L” was not a loss, but a lesson: The strategic vision of transformational change takes time, and could take years of sustained collective action. We were also reminded that the power is in the people, not in the position. Organizing to support the campaigns of school board candidates of color led to deeper connections with the community.

We reshaped our local to be more intergenerational and inclusive for educators, students, and families of color.

At the swearing-in ceremony of the newly elected school board members, I was greeted by Andres, a board candidate who had lost the election. Andres, who had migrated from the Dominican Republic to earn his doctorate and planted his family roots in Bergenfield, was a parent of a former student of mine and board president of the Bergenfield Public Library. “Welcome, my friend,” he said. “We would like to invite the Bergenfield Education Association to partner with us on our annual Multicultural Celebration.” That was the beginning of a partnership between our organizations that has allowed us to collaborate for more sustainable change in the community.

From our core team to our rep council, from local membership to community spaces, we used our union as a vehicle to drive change forward. It took time and effort, but we reshaped our local to be more intergenerational and inclusive for educators, students, and families of color. In three years, we reached a contract agreement in record time, established community partnerships, and started to shift the political landscape of our district. None of this was easy, and it could not be done alone. It was a collective effort and truly a labor of love. We learned some simple, yet important lessons: 1) show up; 2) step up; 3) squad up; 4) build community; and 5) enjoy the journey. 🌱

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Social Justice Unionism Comes to Baltimore

BY RACHEL M. COHEN



Three co-founders of the BMORE caucus, Natalia Bacchus, Corey Gaber, and Cristina Duncan Evans

JOCELYN PROVIDENCE, BMORE

In the middle of May 2019, 37-year-old Diamonté Brown won her bid to lead the Baltimore Teachers Union, defeating Marietta English, who had led the nearly 7,000-member union for most of the past two decades. The shakeup in Charm City school politics marked a victory not just for Brown, a middle school English teacher, but also for the Baltimore Movement of Rank-and-File Educators (BMORE), a social justice caucus that has been organizing since 2015.

The change in leadership was not without debate. English, who had been seeking her ninth term in office, said she could not “in good faith concede” and demanded a revote—alleging Brown and the slate of candidates she ran with committed a series of election violations, such as illegally campaigning on school grounds. Critics said the incumbents had their own campaign missteps to account for, including writing rules that discouraged challengers and trying to suppress the vote.

The American Federation of Teachers, the national parent union for the BTU, had to step in and hold a formal hearing to adjudicate the complaints. The election drama reflected a stark departure from what are typically sleepy Baltimore affairs.

Still, with roughly 500 more ballots cast during this election compared with the previous one, observers said the increased interest in voting marked a significant shift in Baltimore’s union culture.

BMORE caucus members say they’re here to stay, joining a national movement dedicated to using teacher unions as a vehicle for broad social change. This movement first caught fire with the Chicago teachers’ strike in 2012, an eight-day protest of educators, parents, students, and community members who called for increased funding for public services. Similar radical caucuses have since emerged in cities like Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Seattle, and St. Paul and now they’re banding together to support each other.

Building a Caucus

BMORE’s story began with Natalia Bacchus, an ESL teacher who moved to Baltimore in 2013 after teaching in suburban Maryland for nine years. Bacchus was bewildered by the bureaucratic hurdles she encountered at nearly every turn.

“When I worked in Montgomery County, I didn’t know anything about our union. I was just like, I’m a public school teacher, I’m a public servant, I have a unionized job, that’s cool,” she said. “Then I came to Baltimore, and I was like, wow—everything is a hassle every step of the way. And what do you mean kids can’t drink from the water fountain? And kids have to go to bathroom in groups? All these restrictions that would never fly in Montgomery County.”

Bacchus didn’t know many other Baltimore educators, and didn’t know if she was alone in feeling this way. Eventually she met Helen Atkinson, executive director of the Teachers’ Democracy Project, a local education advocacy group. In 2014 Atkinson invited Bacchus to become a TDP fellow, where she would research progressive teacher unions around the country.

The next year Bacchus and Atkinson started traveling to different cities to learn from activist teachers. In August 2015, they went to Newark, New Jersey, for the annual United Caucuses of Rank and File Educators conference, and began asking more practical questions about what launching a union caucus might look like.

“I was like this could be big, and Chicago’s social justice caucus was called CORE and New York’s was MORE—we should call ours BMORE!”

"I was like this could be big, and Chicago's social justice caucus was called CORE and New York's was MORE—we should call ours BMORE!" Bacchus said.

That fall, Atkinson introduced Bacchus to two other radical educators she knew in Baltimore—Cristina Duncan Evans and Corey Gaber. Bacchus was then working at a traditional public elementary school, Gaber was a charter middle school teacher, and Duncan Evans was teaching at a specialized high school for the arts. Their diverse experiences struck them as a powerful opportunity.

Together they started a book club, reading texts like *How to Jump-Start Your Union*, about the Chicago Teachers Union, and *The Future of Our Schools*, by education scholar Lois Weiner. They traveled to Chicago later that year to meet the CORE educators in person. That summer, Samantha Winslow from Labor Notes, a union activist media organization, came out to Baltimore to lead an organizing workshop, and five Baltimore educators went to Raleigh, North Carolina, in August for UCORE's next conference. Leaders describe BMORE's beginnings as "a lot of slow, but really deep" organizing.

In the fall of 2016 the newly formed BMORE steering committee decided to launch their first campaign—a petition drive to allow absentee voting in BTU elections. That winter, they organized the official BMORE launch party at a local barbecue restaurant, wondering if anyone would even show up. Nearly 70 people did. "We knew then that this type of connection and work was resonating with people," said Gaber.

Amplifying Black leadership and centering racial equity, they stressed, would be at the core of their efforts. They created a closed Facebook group for members, and began holding regular meetings at different schools. By April 2017, they had formally met with their union's leadership, receiving guidance from Philly's social justice caucus on how to approach that conversation. The BTU, they said, was surprisingly receptive to their group.

"Marietta even offered to come to our meetings, but we said no, that's not how we operate," explained Bacchus. "We're from the rank and file."

BMORE's organizing got an unexpected jolt the following winter, with local and national media reports on Baltimore students trapped in freezing classrooms with broken heaters. Some schools never even opened because of malfunctioning boilers, while others sent children home early. BMORE quickly organized and sent a list of demands to the school board and the school district CEO, signed by more than 1,500 supporters. The school CEO, Sonja Santelises, wrote BMORE back with gratitude for "fiercely advocating for solutions," and the school district largely adopted their recommendations. The next month BMORE joined educators in 20 other cities in hosting a Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action, demanding things like more culturally competent curriculum and the hiring of more Black educators.

In the summer of 2018 BMORE leaders started discussing running their own candidates in the next union election—something that happens every three years. They decided to team up with another young social justice group, the Caucus of Educators for Democracy and Equity (CEDE), and run jointly under the

banner of the Union We Deserve. Diamonté Brown would run for president, and they'd run additional candidates—including Gaber and Duncan Evans—for the executive board. The Union We Deserve slate would compete against the Progressive Caucus, a slate that included English and had held power in the union for years.

The insurgent candidates admitted there were some things the BTU already did well. Baltimore teachers have some of the highest salaries in both Maryland and the nation, and their healthcare benefits are notably strong. “At a time when people are going on strike over low wages and poor health care, the Progressive Caucus has pushed for even more salary increases and our good health care to get even better,” said Corey Debnam, the Progressive Caucus chair and a Baltimore educator for the last 19 years.

Still, the teachers with the Union We Deserve said they wanted more than an effective service union, and to prioritize more than just good pay, benefits, and professional development. They wanted to mobilize teachers into a political force for students and communities—through the ballot box, at the bargaining table, and through direct action.

“I taught American government for nine years, and 6,000 organized voters can really have a big impact on electoral politics when you look at the turnout in some of our races,” said Duncan Evans. Baltimore is a deep-blue city, and in the last Democratic primary for mayor, the winner emerged with less than 2,500 votes.

A Contested Election

English did not respond to a request for an interview, but Sandra Davis, chair of the union's chapter for paraprofessionals and school-related personnel (PSRPs), and a member of the Progressive Caucus, told the *Nation* that their disputed election was extremely unusual, and that in her 30 years as a Baltimore educator, she's “never seen anything like [it].” Upholding Brown's presidency would mean Brown would serve over a joint executive board—with the teacher chapter chaired by Duncan Evans, and the PSRP chaired by Davis.

Davis and Debnam said union members contacted them to object to BMORE/CEDE supporters' canvassing at their homes in the weeks before the election. The union's guidelines prohibit the BTU from sharing members' personal contact information, leading some to view the canvassing as a violation of their privacy, even if BMORE/CEDE didn't get the home addresses from the union itself.

“We had people who were really offended that someone late at night—at 6 or 7 p.m.—is coming to their home to campaign about an internal election,” Debnam said. “That's just something we would never do.”

They wanted to mobilize teachers into a political force for students and communities—through the ballot box, at the bargaining table, and through direct action.

The Progressive Caucus had not just accused BMORE/CEDE of wrongly canvassing at people's homes. They also accused them of illegally campaigning on school grounds. With additional election rules like prohibitions against teachers' leaving campaign literature in educators' mailboxes and sending campaign literature on work email accounts, candidates are left with few ways to actually reach prospective voters. Critics say that's by design, to protect those already in power. Bacchus, who resigned in 2018 and now works with the Teachers' Democracy Project full time, said the Union We Deserve's main goal throughout the campaign was to spread awareness about the upcoming election. "Most teachers don't even know that every three years there's an election for BTU leadership," she said.

BMORE/CEDE, for their part, said the BTU leadership tried to suppress the vote before and during the election, in part by limiting voting hours, removing a voting location, and denying a block of absentee ballots. On Election Day, local media also covered complaints from educators who said the ballots on their voting machines were designed in a confusing way, formatted as if to encourage reelecting the incumbents.

Duncan Evans said she wasn't entirely surprised her caucus's victory was contested. "The BTU has challenged elections in the past," she said. "So I certainly knew this was in the realm of possibility."

On July 11, almost two months after the election was held, the AFT released the results of its investigation, confirming that Brown was indeed the winner. BMORE leaders said their next steps would be to meet with individual members, revamp their union website, and bring full-time organizers on staff.

"I'm looking forward to people understanding more about how a union works, but I think a large part of transparency means us listening," said Duncan Evans, the newly seated executive board member and teacher chapter chair. "This is all long overdue." ■

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For more information on the BMORE caucus, see their website at bmorecaucus.org.

How One Elementary School Sparked a Citywide Movement to Make Black Students' Lives Matter

BY WAYNE AU AND JESSE HAGOPIAN



SHARON CHANG

It was the morning of Sept. 16, 2016, and a conscious party of resistance, courage, and community uplift was happening on the sidewalk in front of John Muir Elementary in Seattle. Dozens of Black men were lined up from the street to the school doorway, giving high fives and praise to all the students who entered as part of a locally organized event called Black

Men Uniting to Change the Narrative. African American drummers pounded defiant rhythms. Students smiled and laughed as they made their way to the entrance. And teachers and parents milled about in #BlackLivesMatter T-shirts, developed and worn in solidarity with the movement to make Black lives matter at John Muir Elementary.

You never would have known that, just hours before, the school was closed and emptied as bomb-sniffing dogs scoured the building looking for explosives.

That September morning was the culmination of a combination of purposeful conversations among John Muir administration and staff, activism, and media attention. John Muir Elementary sits in Seattle's Rainier Valley, and its student population reflects the community: 68 percent of Muir's roughly 400 students qualify for free or reduced lunch, 33 percent are officially designated transition bilingual, 10 percent are Hispanic, 11 percent are Asian American, 11 percent identify as multi-racial, and almost 50 percent are African American—mostly a mix of East African immigrants and families from this historically Black neighborhood.

By that autumn, John Muir Elementary had been actively working for months on issues of race equity, with special attention to Black students. The previous year, Muir's staff began a deliberate process of examining privilege and the politics of race. With the support of both the school and the PTA, Ruby Bridges—who as a child famously desegregated the all-white William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans in 1960—had also visited Muir as part of a longer discussion of racism in education among staff and students. During end-of-the-summer professional development, with the support of administration and in the aftermath of the police killings of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, school staff read and discussed an article on #BlackLivesMatter and renewed their commitment to working for racial justice at Muir.

As part of these efforts, DeShawn Jackson, an African American male student support worker, organized the Black Men Uniting to Change the Narrative event for that September morning. In solidarity, school staff decided to wear Black Lives Matter/We Stand Together/John Muir Elementary T-shirts designed by the school's art teacher.

A local TV station reported on the teachers wearing #BlackLivesMatter T-shirts, and as the story went public, political tensions exploded. Soon the white supremacist, hate group-fueled news source *Breitbart* picked up the story, and the right-wing police support group Blue Lives Matter publicly denounced the effort. Hateful emails and phone calls began to flood the John Muir administration and the Seattle School Board, and then the horrifying happened: Someone made a bomb threat against the school. Even though the threat was deemed not very credible by authorities, Seattle Public Schools officially canceled the Black Men Uniting to Change the Narrative event at Muir out of extreme caution.

All of this is what made that September morning all the more powerful. The bomb-sniffing dogs found nothing and school was kept open that day. The drummers drummed and the crowd cheered every child coming through the doors of John Muir Elementary. Everyone was there in celebration, loudly proclaiming that,

yes, despite the racist and right-wing attacks, despite the official cancellation, and despite the bomb threat, the community of John Muir Elementary would not be cowed by hate and fear. Black men showed up to change the narrative around education and race. School staff wore their #BlackLivesMatter T-shirts and devoted the day's teaching to issues of racial justice, all bravely and proudly celebrating their power. In the process, this single south Seattle elementary school galvanized a growing citywide movement to make Black lives matter in Seattle schools.

Organizing Across the District

Inspired by that bold action, members of Social Equity Educators (SEE), a rank-and-file organization of union educators, invited a few John Muir staff to a meeting to offer support and learn more about their efforts. The Muir educators' story explaining how and why they organized for Black lives moved everyone in attendance, and SEE members began discussing taking the action citywide.

Everyone agreed that there were potential pitfalls of doing a citywide Black students' lives matter event. The John Muir teachers had a race and equity team and dedicated professional development time the previous year to discuss institutional racism, and they had collectively come to the decision as an entire school to support the action and wear the shirts. What would it mean at a different school if some teachers wore the shirts and taught anti-racist lessons, and others didn't? What if only a few dozen teachers across Seattle wore the shirts—would that send the wrong message? What if other schools received threats? What if those threats materialized?

These and other considerations fueled an important discussion and debate among SEE members, and highlighted the need to educate our communities about why this action was urgently needed. However, with the videos of police killing Philando Castile and Alton Sterling fresh in the minds of SEE members, the group decided that to not publicly declare that Black lives matter would be a message in and of itself.

And it wasn't just about the police murder of Black people that motivated SEE to organize an action across the school system. It was also because of the institutional racism infecting Seattle's public schools. Seattle has an alarming pattern of segregation both between and within schools, with intensely tracked advanced classes overwhelmingly populated with white students. Moreover, the Department of Education's 2013 investigation found that Seattle Public Schools suspended Black students at about four times the rate of white students for the same infractions.

SEE members decided that on Oct. 19, 2016, they would all wear Black Lives Matter shirts to school and voted to create a second T-shirt design that included "#SayHerName." The African American Policy Forum created this hashtag in the wake of Sandra Bland's death while in the custody of Waller County (Texas) police, to raise awareness about police violence against women, to raise awareness about police violence against Black women, and to raise awareness about police violence particularly against Black queer women and Black transgender women.

As part of this action, SEE also developed a three-point policy proposal that would serve as an ongoing campaign to support Black Lives Matter in schools and aid in the struggle against institutional racism:

- Support ethnic studies in all schools.
- Replace zero-tolerance discipline with restorative justice practices.
- De-track classes within the schools to undo the racial segregation that is reinforced by tracking.

In addition, SEE voted to bring a resolution to the Seattle Education Association (SEA), the union representing Seattle's educators, to publicly declare support for the action of the John Muir teachers and community, and to call on all teachers across the district to actively support the Oct. 19 action.

At the September SEA Representative Assembly, SEE member Sarah Arvey, a white special education teacher, brought forward the following resolution:

Whereas the SEA promotes equity and supports anti-racist work in our schools; and,

Whereas we want to act in solidarity with our members and the community at John Muir who received threats based on their decision to wear Black Lives Matter T-shirts as part of an event with "Black Men United to Change the Narrative"; and,

Whereas the SEA and SPS promote Race and Equity teams to address institutionalized racism in our schools and offer a space for dialogue among school staff; and,

Therefore be it resolved that the SEA Representative Assembly endorse and participate in an action wearing Black Lives Matter T-shirts on Wednesday, October 19, 2016, with the intent of showing solidarity, promoting anti-racist practices in our schools, and creating dialogue in our schools and communities.

SEE members expected a difficult debate at the SEA Representative Assembly, and many didn't think the resolution would pass. But they underestimated the impact of the ongoing protests against police brutality and racism that were sweeping school campuses. Inspired by San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, the Garfield High School football team captured headlines around the city and nation when every single player and coach took a knee during the national anthem—and maintained that action for the entire season. The protest spread to the girls' volleyball team, the marching band, the cheerleaders, and many other high school sports teams across Seattle. When it came time for the SEA vote, the resolution to support Black Lives Matter at School Day passed unanimously.

As word got out about the SEA Representative Assembly vote, and in reaction to the threats against John Muir Elementary earlier in the month, allies also began to step forward in support of making Black Students' Lives Matter. The Se-

attle NAACP quickly endorsed the event and lent its support. Soup for Teachers, a local parent organizing group formed to support the 2015 SEA strike, as well as the executive board of the Seattle Council Parent Teacher Student Association, also endorsed the action and joined in solidarity.

SEE helped gather representatives from these organizations for an Oct. 12 press conference to explain why parents, educators, and racial justice advocates united to declare Black lives matter at school. Predictably, news outlets repeatedly asked teachers if they thought they were politicizing the classroom by wearing BLM shirts to school. Rita Green, education chair of the Seattle NAACP, responded directly: “We’re here to support families. We’re here to support students. When Black lives matter, all lives matter.”

Arvey told reporters, “It’s important for us to know the history of racial justice and racial injustice in our country and in our world . . . in order for us to address it. When we’re silent, we close off dialogue and we close the opportunity to learn and grow from each other.” Other teachers pointed out that students were having discussions all the time in the halls, during sports practice, and outside of school about racism, police violence, and the Black Lives Matter movement. A better question to ask, teachers asserted, would be “Is school going to be relevant to the issues that our students are discussing every day?”

In an effort to build greater solidarity for Seattle educators taking part in the Black Lives Matter at School Day, one of us—Wayne—organized a national letter for professors to sign in an effort to build support for the action. After only a few days, close to 250 professors, many of them well-recognized scholars in educational research locally and nationally, had signed on. Another letter of support was signed by luminaries such as dissident scholar Noam Chomsky, former MSNBC anchor Melissa Harris-Perry, 1968 Olympic bronze medalist and activist John Carlos, Black Lives Matter co-founder Opal Tometi, noted education author Jonathan Kozol, and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Jose Antonio Vargas.

As support for Seattle’s Black Lives Matter at School action swelled, in a move that surprised many, the Seattle Public Schools administration, with no formal urging from activists or the school board, officially endorsed the event. An Oct. 8 memo read:

During our #CloseTheGaps kickoff week, Seattle Education Association is promoting October 19 as a day of solidarity to bring focus to racial equity and affirming the lives of our students—specifically our students of color.

Inspired by San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, the Garfield High School football team captured headlines around the city and nation when every single player and coach took a knee during the national anthem—and maintained that action for the entire season.

In support of this focus, members are choosing to wear Black Lives Matter T-shirts, stickers, or other symbols of their commitment to students in a coordinated effort. SEA is leading this effort and working to promote transformational conversations with staff, families, and students on this issue.

We invite you to join us in our commitment to eliminate opportunity gaps and accelerate learning for each and every student.

At that point, we in Seattle felt that we had accomplished something historic, because for perhaps the first time in Seattle's history, the teachers and the teacher union, the parents and the PTSA, students and the Seattle Public Schools administration had all reached a consensus support for a very politicized action for racial justice in education.

As the Oct. 19 Black Lives Matter at School Day approached, orders for the various Black Lives Matter T-shirts soared. John Muir set up a site where T-shirt purchases would directly benefit the school's racial justice work. SEE's online T-shirt site received some 2,000 orders for the BLM shirts, with proceeds going to support racial justice campaigns and a portion going to John Muir. Other schools created their own T-shirt designs specific to their schools. Seattle's schools were now poised for unprecedented mass action for racial justice.

Black Lives Matter at School Day

As Oct. 19 arrived, Garfield High School senior Bailey Adams was in disbelief. She told Seattle's KING 5 News, "There was a moment of like, is this really going to happen? Are teachers actually going to wear these shirts? All of my years I've been in school, this has never been talked about. Teachers have never said anything where they're going to back their students of color."

But sure enough, every school across the city had educators come to school wearing the shirts. Hundreds of teachers took advantage of the day to teach lessons and lead discussions about institutional racism. SEE and Soup for Teachers partnered to make a handout called "Teaching and Mentoring for Racial Justice" that suggested BLM resources for both teachers and parents. SEA also emailed suggested resources to teachers.

Some schools changed their reader boards to declare "Black Lives Matter." Parents at some elementary schools set up tables by the front entrance with books and resources to help other parents talk to their kids about racism. Many schools coordinated plans for teaching about Black lives, including lessons about movements for racial justice and lessons about the way racism impacts the school system today. Several teachers across the district showed the film *Stay Woke* about the origins of the Black Lives Matter movement, and held class discussions afterward. Some educators used the opportunity to discuss intersectional identities and highlighted how Black and queer women had first launched the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag.

Schools such as Chief Sealth International High School and Garfield High School put up Black Lives Matter posters/graffiti walls, which quickly filled up with

anti-racist commentary from students and educators. A teacher at Dearborn Park International Elementary built a lesson plan from a photo of Colin Kaepernick kneeling. To capture the power of the day, educators from most of the schools around the district took group photos wearing the BLM shirts and sent them to the union for publication.

During lunchtime, the Garfield faculty, staff, and students rallied on the front steps of the school. In one of the most moving and powerful moments of the day,



SHARON CHANG

Black special education teacher Janet DuBois decided she finally had to tell everyone a secret she had been quietly suffering with. In front of all the assembled school community and media she revealed that the police had killed her son several years ago—and this had happened after he had been failed by the education system and pushed out of school. Fighting through tears, DuBois said, “When our kids are failed, they have to go to alternative places and end up with their lives hanging in the balance because someone does not care.”

To cap off the extraordinary and powerful day, SEE organized a community celebration, forum, and talent showcase that evening that drew hundreds of people. The event was emceed by educator, organizer, poet, attorney, and soon-to-be Seattle mayoral candidate Nikkita Oliver. Spoken word poets, musicians, and the

Northwest Tap Connection (made up of predominantly Black youth performers) delighted and inspired the audience. Black youth activists from middle and high schools engaged in an onstage discussion about their experience of racism in school and what changes they wanted to see to make the education system truly value their lives. Seahawks Pro Bowl defensive end Michael Bennett came to the event and pledged his support of the movement, saying, “Some people believe the change has to come from the government, but I believe it has to be organic and come from the bottom.”

By the end of the day, thousands of educators had reached tens of thousands of Seattle students and parents with a message of support for Black students and opposition to anti-Black racism—with local and national media projecting the message much farther. While the educators who launched this movement were quite aware that the institutions of racism remained intact, they also knew those same institutions had been shaken.

Lessons Learned

In many ways we had a successful campaign around making Black lives matter in Seattle schools, and, from an organizing perspective, we learned several important lessons. To begin, we learned that one school can make a big difference: A single elementary school bravely took a stand that provided a spark for an already simmering citywide movement, and influenced national discussions as educators in Philadelphia, Rochester (New York), and elsewhere followed suit with similar educationally based #BlackLivesMatter actions.

We also learned that acting in the context of a broader social movement was critical. The police killings of Castile and Sterling in the summer of 2016, as part of the long-standing pattern of Black death at the hands of police, ensured that there were ongoing protests and conversations associated with #BlackLivesMatter. This broader movement created the political space and helped garner support for the actions of both John Muir Elementary specifically, and Seattle Public Schools more generally.

In addition, we learned that sometimes when the white supremacists, “alt-right,” and right-wing conservatives attack, it can make our organizing stronger and more powerful. In the case of Seattle, it was the avalanche of hateful emails and calls, the right-wing media stories, and the bomb threat against John Muir Elementary that ultimately galvanized teachers and parents across the city.

We also learned that developing a broad base of support was essential to the success of the campaign to make Black student lives matter in Seattle schools. Garnering the official support of the teacher union, the executive board of the Seattle Council PTSA, and even Seattle Public Schools, as well as gathering acts of solidarity from scholars and others nationally, helped build a protective web of political support to shield Seattle educators as they moved forward with their action.

In the end, we also learned that, with more time and resources, we could have done better organizing. For instance, we had to grapple with the fact that when the John Muir Elementary staff made the decision to wear their #BlackLivesMatter T-shirts, it was after being a part of sustained discussion and professional develop-

ment that took place over multiple years. Ideally, all schools should have had the opportunity to have similar discussions as part of their typical professional development so that when a moment like this happens, all school staff have stronger basic understandings of racial justice to guide their decision-making.

Another improvement would have been to be able to offer a clearer vision of curriculum across the district for the Black Lives Matter at School Day. Despite the strength of the handout developed by SEE and Soup for Teachers, the quality and depth of what children at different schools learned on the day of the districtwide event varied wildly from school to school. With just a little more time and resources, we could have provided teachers with a cluster of grade level-appropriate teaching activities that they could have used on that day if they wanted. In particular, this is something that might have helped teachers around the district who wanted to support the action but struggled with ways to explicitly make Black lives matter in their own classroom curriculum.

It wasn't until the end of the school year that we learned two more lessons. The first was that, despite widespread community support for the Black Lives Matter at School Day, the passive-aggressive racism of some of Seattle's notoriously liberal, white parents had been lurking all along. In a June 2017 story, local news radio station KUOW reported on a series of emails from white parents who live in the more affluent north end of Seattle. According to the story, white parents complained not just about the perceived militancy and politics of the Black Lives Matter at School Day in Seattle, but that children couldn't handle talking about racism, and that we should be color-blind because "all lives matter." Importantly, many of these parents openly questioned the existence of racial inequality in Seattle's schools.

The second lesson we learned well after the Black Lives Matter at School Day was that our action helped strengthen the political groundwork for a continued focus on racial justice in Seattle Public Schools. On July 5, 2017, the Seattle School Board unanimously passed a resolution in support of ethnic studies in Seattle Public Schools in response to a yearlong campaign from the NAACP, SEE, and other social justice groups, including formal endorsement from SEA. While this policy shift happened on the strength of the community organizing for ethnic studies specifically, Seattle's movement to make Black Lives Matter in School demonstrated to the district that there was significant public support for racial justice initiatives in Seattle schools, effectively increasing the official space for other initiatives like ethnic studies to take hold.

Putting the Shirts Back On

The school year ended with a horrific reminder of why we must continue to declare the value of Black lives when on Sunday, June 18, 2017, Seattle police shot and killed Charleena Lyles, a pregnant mother of four, in her own apartment after she called them in fear her home was being burglarized. She was shot down in a hail of bullets in front of three of her kids, two of whom attended public elementary schools in Seattle. The immediate media narrative of her death dehumanized her by focusing on the fact that the police alleged Lyles was wielding a kitchen knife,

that she had a history of mental illness, and a criminal background. This was the usual strategy of killing the person and then assassinating their character in an attempt to turn public opinion in support of the police.

But in Seattle, there were the countervailing forces of Lyles' organized family, community activists, and Seattle educators who forced a different public discussion about the value of Black lives and the callous disregard of them by unaccountable police. SEE and the SEA immediately put out a call for teachers to put their Black Lives Matter shirts back on—many of which also featured #SayHerName—for a districtwide action in solidarity with Lyles and her family on June 20. Within three days of Lyles' death, hundreds of teachers came to school wearing heartbreak, rage, and solidarity in the form of their Black Lives Matter T-shirts—with shirt sales this time going to Lyles' family.

A couple hundred educators swelled the ranks of the after-school rally that day with Lyles' family and hundreds of other supporters at the apartment complex where she had been killed. With educators from her sons' schools and all across the district rallying to Lyles' side, the press was compelled to run stories talking about her as a woman, as a parent of Seattle schoolchildren, and as a person with talents and struggles like everyone else.

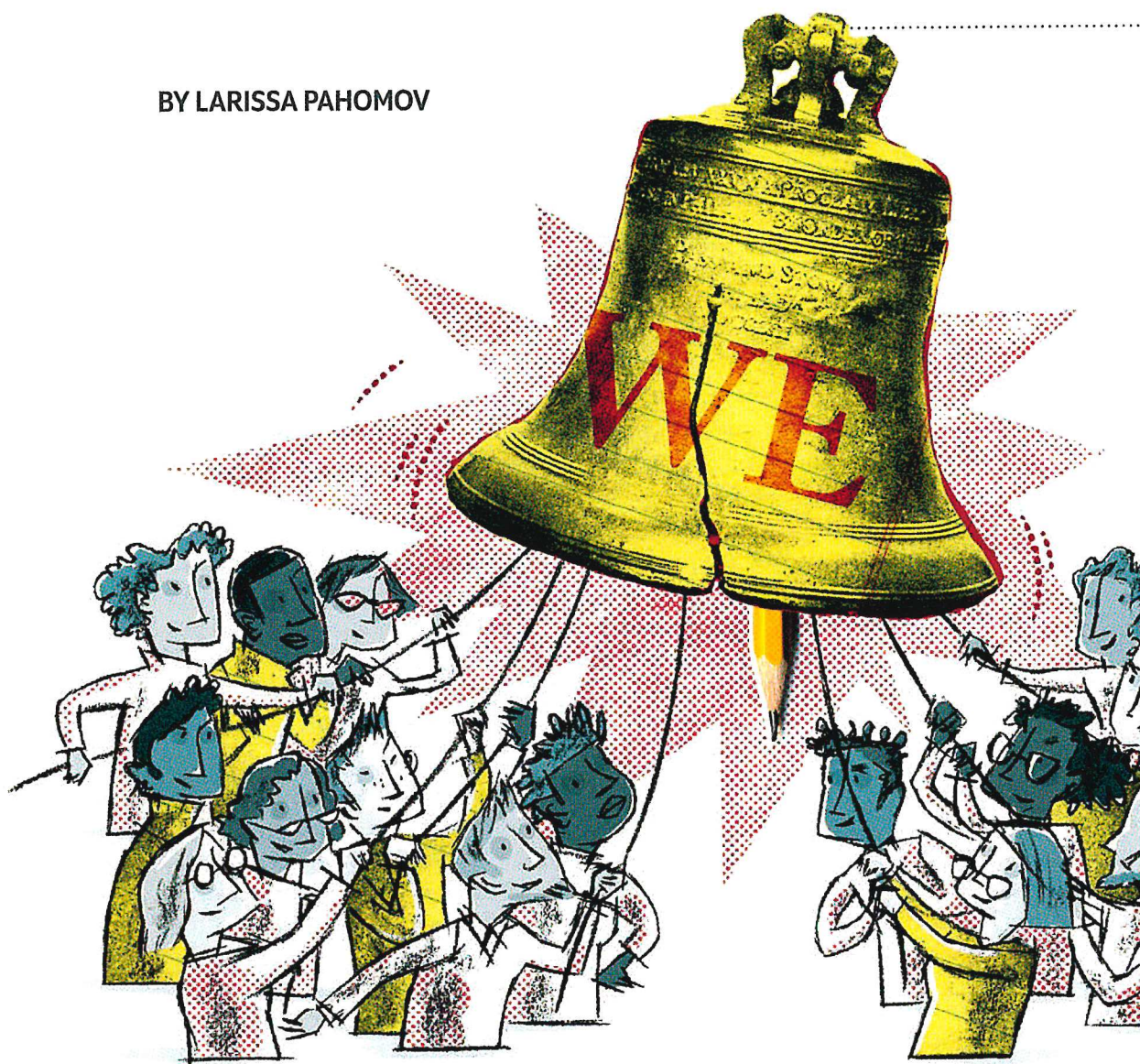
Seattle's Black Lives Matter at School Day is only a beginning. Having nearly 3,000 teachers wear T-shirts to school one day doesn't magically end anti-Black racism or white supremacy. If that were the case, then perhaps Charleena Lyles would still be alive today to drop her kids off at school, chat with other parents on the playground, and watch the children play.

But something powerful and important did happen in Seattle. At John Muir Elementary, the school staff and community stood strong against white supremacist hate, and across Seattle schools, teachers and parents found a way to stand in solidarity with Black students and their families. In the process, the public dialogue about institutionalized racism in Seattle schools was pushed forward in concrete ways. And while we have so much more work to do, in the end, what happened in Seattle showed that educators have an important role to play in the movement for Black lives. When they rise up across the country to join this movement—both inside the school and outside on the streets—institutions of racism can be challenged in the search for solidarity, healing, and justice. 📌

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Organizing a Caucus in Philadelphia, Step by Step

BY LARISSA PAHOMOV



CHRISTIANE GRAUERT

On Nov. 7, 2019, I walked into a meeting of hundreds of people I had never met before. The event was at the Church of the Advocate, a historic landmark in North Philadelphia with a deep progressive history, from hosting Black Panther conventions to ordaining the city's first female Episcopal priests. That evening, the cavernous sanctuary

bustled with energy, framed by soaring stained glass windows and murals depicting scenes of faith and justice. More than 300 educators from around the city were gathered, sharing food and stories from the school year. Children ran around the clusters of high-backed wooden chairs, and many attendees sported T-shirts with an image of the Liberty Bell and the slogan “Working Educators for a Stronger Union!”

I bumped into an old friend, and we took in the scene together. We were witnessing the culmination of a dream: a campaign launch to win leadership of our union. After six months of active planning, we were just three months away from the election where the Caucus of Working Educators would hopefully take control of our union, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT).

“I just can’t believe how far we’ve come in the last few years,” said my friend. “And to think, this all started with a handful of people meeting in a room.”

I laughed. “I can’t believe how far we’ve come in the last six weeks.” After devoting my summer to campaign planning, I had given birth to a baby boy at the end of September. This was my first event back, and the parade of new faces overwhelmed me, in the best way. In each circle, new recruits talked animatedly with organizers who’d been caucus members for months or years. We had successfully activated rank-and-file union members by reaching out, educator to educator.

Curriculum and Classroom Roots

The Caucus of Working Educators (WE) has several origins, but one of the most significant is the Teacher Action Group of Philadelphia (TAG), a grassroots organization founded in 2008. With a small core of dedicated educators from both public and charter schools, TAG quickly became a force in the city, providing political

education for teachers, both to transform their curriculum and classroom practices and to push back on neoliberal education policies, from No Child Left Behind to local charter school expansion. From the beginning, TAG organized events such as an annual curriculum fair and Inquiry-to-Action Groups, mini-courses that explored topics from mindfulness to social justice unionism. Over the years, TAG took on political projects of increasing size and scope, including organizing rallies outside the school district office in response to school closure plans in 2012, and coordinating a “Faces of the Layoffs” website when 3,000 district employees lost their jobs in 2013 to

budget cuts. These projects helped raise political awareness but reached only a small fraction of Philadelphia’s thousands of educators. TAG was, by definition, a network of activists, seeking to share a message but not build a base of members.

TAG’s approach could not have been more different from the PFT’s, whose leadership believed in a top-down business model of unionism, where members have minimal input and paid staffers refuse to give out direct phone numbers or

**We had successfully
activated rank-and-file
members of our union
by reaching out the
best way we knew how:
educator to educator.**

email addresses. Predictably, the union leadership did not embrace the activism of TAG, ignoring or rejecting requests to promote or collaborate on projects, and refusing volunteer help in organizing efforts. In the midst of this frustration, the Chicago Teachers Union strike in 2012 showed us how an urban teacher union—led by their new progressive caucus, CORE—could engage an entire city in the fight for better schools. CORE showed us that transformation of our union was possible. However, Philadelphia was still far away from what Chicago had achieved.

Most PFT members had never voted in a union election or even knew it was possible to form a caucus. After a few of us attended the first UCORE conference in Chicago, we pulled together a group of like-minded educators from around Philadelphia and officially founded WE in March 2014. Like TAG—which continued to operate—we had a mission statement and a website. But like union caucuses in other cities, we identified ourselves specifically as being “of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers” and created an official membership status, where members select the monthly donation they can afford.

From the Classroom to the (School) Board Room

TAG’s formative influence on the caucus meant that our early projects focused more on classroom practice than union matters. One of the first caucus committees was the Racial Justice Committee (“RJ”), which seeks to advance an anti-racist agenda to transform both individual educators and school policy. Inspired by the Black Lives Matter at School Day organized by Social Equity Educators in Seattle in 2016 (see Au and Hagopian, p. 209), RJ members began to think big about how the spirit of this day could be brought directly into classrooms. We decided to organize an entire Week of Action in January 2017, complete with lesson plans across subject areas, resources, readings, and daily events for educators, students, and community members. The first year’s program helped educators make huge inroads for racial justice in their school environments, where sometimes even saying the phrase “Black Lives Matter” had been taboo. School staff around the city incorporated the guiding principles of the movement into their lessons, whether it was reading a children’s book that celebrated Black women and girls or adopting restorative justice practices in their classrooms.

After that year’s success, RJ reflected on what had been achieved and weighed where to go next. It would have been easy to simply replicate the previous year’s program, but instead, committee members asked some hard questions: What would it look like to push for racial justice beyond just individual educators? How could the week advocate for more systemic change?

The answer came out of BLM week’s nationwide explosion in popularity. Sister groups around the country established their own Weeks of Action, and this network established a set of national demands, including mandating Black history and ethnic studies, ending zero tolerance, and hiring Black educators. As public school parent and organizer Tamara Anderson put it, the demands were intended to “become ongoing actions in individual school districts.” In Philadelphia, that meant constantly pushing the administration to release demographic data based

on race and provide proof it was following through on its claims of commitment to diversity. Eventually the school district released data on teachers alongside a new initiative to recruit and retain Black educators.

This success demonstrated that transforming classroom practices could jump-start larger systemic organizing. But we had questions about how we could expand our influence.

To help guide this growth, our caucus invited two special guests to facilitate our 2018 Summer Organizing Institute: veteran organizers Jane McAlevey and Bill Fletcher. McAlevey led us in conversation about our own strengths and challenges as a caucus, especially when it came to the question of how to connect with the entire membership of the PFT. She shared examples of her approach to whole-worker organizing, including preventing the closure of a public housing complex in Stamford, Connecticut. Fletcher pushed us to reflect on our commitment to racial justice and how to bring our values to the larger union membership. He emphasized that, for majority-white organizations, fighting racism was not simply a moral imperative, but one that serves members' self-interest, since racist practices affect all workers. McAlevey and Fletcher helped us zero in on a campaign that would meet all of these criteria: the abysmal physical condition of our schools.

A Campaign for School Facilities Renovation

With a critical mass of buildings built before 1970, and many more than a century old, our school buildings are in perpetual crisis. A 2018 report by the *Philadelphia*

Inquirer revealed cases of severe lead poisoning and botched asbestos cleanup that increased student and teacher exposure. For years the district would make some effort at cleanup but defer major renovations due to lack of funds, especially since the “most urgent repairs” alone were estimated to cost \$3 billion.

As educators we knew exactly what effect this neglect was having, both on ourselves and our students. The call to action was clear: Fix our toxic schools! We drafted a petition

that demanded all buildings receive proper remediation for lead, asbestos, and pest control—and named viable funding sources that could help make it happen, including corporations and universities in Philadelphia that have benefited from large tax exemptions.

This petition marked the continued evolution of our organization from an activist model to an organizing one. Unlike projects like BLM Week, which involved extensive outreach but were fundamentally opt-in programs, the building conditions petition was designed to move quickly and comprehensively, collect-

Fletcher emphasized that, for majority-white organizations, fighting racism was not simply a moral imperative, but one that serves members' material self-interest, since racist practices affect all workers.

ing as many signatures of PFT members as possible during the first part of the school year. We knew that the issue was urgent, but we grappled with whether this campaign would distract from programs like the Black Lives Matter Week of Action. Could the core beliefs of WE be preserved as we shifted into a campaign with even broader reach?

The answer lay in the framing of our work. As educators began circulating the petition in fall 2018, WE's organizing core discussed how to approach the "average" PFT member—one who may not be familiar with structural critiques of our schools. In the activist model, the general expectation was that participants already had the same political analysis as the organization. Programs like Black Lives Matter Week of Action advertised our politics in the title, so the vast majority of participants were already on board with the message.

Of course, we knew that we were fighting to fix our schools for the same reasons we printed thousands of T-shirts that proclaimed "Black Lives Matter"—that it was structural racism, which valued the education of Black and Brown children less than their white counterparts, that had caused chronic underfunding of our school district. We wanted to make sure our colleagues understood this analysis as we asked them to sign on. As a majority-white union, we have many members—including more conservative Black members—who are skeptical of engagement with so-called "social justice issues." We knew this type of organizing would require us to evolve our tactics. How would we bring all our diverse membership on board effectively?

The answer was one that also came out of our classroom expertise—just ask questions. Instead of leading with statements about generational inequality and structural racism—common terminology in the caucus, but less so citywide—we developed a campaign script that asked our colleagues to describe the difficult conditions of their school buildings first, and then point out that nearby suburbs had quickly dealt with mold, asbestos, and other issues as soon as they appeared. And then, the simple question: "Why do you think that is?"

In response, we were able to see what level of political analysis our colleagues held. Some immediately demonstrated the same conclusion we had: "Well, it's racist." But even those who took the answers one step at a time would move toward a more systemic analysis:

"Well, they have more money than us."

"And why is that?"

"Their property values are higher, and they can collect more taxes."

"Yes, and how did that happen?"

"Wealthier people live there because the schools are better."

"And why do we rely so heavily on local taxes for funding our schools?"

"... Because politicians in our state don't care. Nobody's looking out for the city."

"And what's the racial makeup of these suburban districts like?"

"Overwhelmingly white."

"And do these students deserve more than the Black and Brown students in our schools? Do we not deserve buildings free of mold, or asbestos, or mice?"

We never found anyone who felt that this inequity was just—which means that, even if they did not have the exact vocabulary to express it, our citywide colleagues knew quite clearly what impact systemic racism was having on our schools. This approach produced more than 3,000 signatures, which we presented to our school board and City Council the following spring. Just a few weeks later, \$15.6 million in additional funding was announced for building repairs, and more than 20 schools got physical improvements over the summer.

Seeking Power

The conclusion of our building conditions petition rolled us directly into our campaign for leadership of the PFT. Caucus members took on the formidable task of campaigning in other schools and having the organizing conversations that form the building blocks of a high-participation union. Again, we found the best practice for organizing was the one we used in the classroom—ask questions and build common ground from the answers we received:

- If you could change one thing about this school to improve learning conditions for your students, and working conditions for you, what would it be?
- Now, what do you think it would take for our union to win those terms in our next contract?
- Does this sound like something you want to be a part of?

As we built relationships in schools across the city, the answer to that last question was almost always a resounding “Yes!” Few of our citywide colleagues had ever been asked to do anything meaningful by our union leadership, so this conversation was their first taste of what an activated union *could* be like. Our building conditions petition spoke to our own track record of wins, especially in the schools where the funding had resulted in repairs.

Broadening Our Base

When asking people to pledge their vote for us in the upcoming election, I would often finish by saying, “If all you do is vote for us and nothing else, nothing will change. This conversation is the start of a fundamentally different way of running our union.” What’s more, those conversations led to new movements within the campaign. As more paraprofessionals connected with the campaign, it was clear they had not been adequately supported by our union leadership. While paras are the second-largest bargaining unit in the district, the vast majority of them start at a full-time salary of less than \$15,000—and they are consistently treated as interchangeable and expendable. Out of frustration with these enduring conditions, the ParaPower movement was born. Spearheaded by a handful of classroom assistants from different schools, ParaPower quickly developed its own list of contract demands, gained traction on social media, and hosted a summit in the months leading up to the vote.

Moving Forward

On election day, we won 2,700 votes for our complete slate of candidates—twice as many votes as we’d won four years before, and close to 40 percent of the total vote. We had successfully brought many members into our vision of a high-participation union, but fear of change—and an entrenched incumbency who encouraged that fear in their campaign literature—still kept many members from voting for WE. As a result, we did not win any seats on the executive board. This was an intense disappointment, but not a failure, as our campaign had been built to do much more than just claim an office and a title. By engaging with members one-on-one, we activated thousands of new supporters and developed leaders in almost every district school in the city. Those contacts became more active union members over the course of our work, whether it was organizing staff walkouts over elevated asbestos levels or reaching out across bargaining units to ensure that all PFT members earn a living wage in our next contract. And all of it was done with an analysis centered on workers: We are the educators on the ground, and we know what’s best for our own students and buildings. Our organizing model has changed the landscape of our union, expanding mindsets and raising the expectations of our fellow members. As the next round of contract negotiations have already opened, we hope that our fellow members will see that a stronger union is within our reach—and that we will build it one conversation at a time. 

“If you could change one thing about this school to improve learning conditions for your students, and working conditions for you, what would it be?”

*Larissa Pahomov is a veteran teacher in the School District of Philadelphia and a founding member of the Caucus of Working Educators. A National Board Certified Teacher, she is the author of the teaching handbook *Authentic Learning in the Digital Age* and writes about both the practice and politics of working in schools.*



“It’s Not Magic. It’s Organizing!”

The powerful journey of North Carolina teachers

BY ELENI SCHIRMER

In March 2013, just months after Republicans gained a supermajority in the North Carolina legislature and won the governor’s office, state NAACP president Rev. William Barber II stood before educators at the annual convention of the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE) and delivered an electrifying keynote speech.

Barber, a civil rights leader who led the state’s “Moral Monday” movement and, later, the national Poor People’s Campaign, called on teachers to confront the conservative agenda taking apart their states through direct actions, protests, and organizing. If educators saw public education as a cornerstone of democracy, they would need to stand up and fight for it. His exhortations struck a new tone in the NCAE, an organization better known for lobbying elected officials than leading mass movements against them.

“He lit the room on fire,” remembered Durham high school teacher Bryan Proffitt. Inspired but new to the NCAE scene, Proffitt texted a veteran NCAE friend: “Bring everyone you know who wants to do *that* to the back of the room.”

The assembled teachers quickly realized they wanted—indeed, needed—to get to work. Three weeks later, they met to talk more. Shortly thereafter, they put together a workshop about organizing skills for their colleagues—how to have one-on-one conversations, map workplaces to gauge membership, assess power structures. They began study groups about the neo-liberalization of education, structural racism in education, and the role of teacher unions.

In April 2020, that scrappy group of teachers from the back of the state convention won the NCAE’s statewide leadership elections.

These teachers’ successful organizing marks an important landmark in today’s teacher union movement. Although often overlooked in popular accounts of teachers’ recent “red state revolts,” North Carolina’s progressive caucus, Organize 2020 for Racial and Social Justice, offers crucial lessons for building social justice teacher unions. Their name defined their goals and their method: to organize a fighting union that prioritized racial and social justice by 2020.

In April 2020, that scrappy group of teachers from the back of the state convention won the NCAE’s statewide leadership elections.



Caucus members Tamika Walker Kelly and Bryan Proffitt will serve as the NCAE's president and vice president, respectively; Turquoise LeJeune Parker will become North Carolina's National Education Association director. To date, they are one of the few progressive teacher union caucuses to win state-level leadership elections. In one sense, Organize 2020 has achieved its namesake: to organize a progressive, racial justice-focused teacher union by 2020. But perhaps more accurately, their success reflects the work of years of careful organizing, a patient buildup of strength, and a movement still hitting its stride.

In the past decade, North Carolina has become the extreme right's frontier. In 2010, Republicans won the state's General Assembly, as the legislature is formally known, for the first time since Reconstruction. In 2012, they took the governor's mansion and achieved a three-fifths majority in both houses of the legislature. With Tea Party and Koch brothers backing, the Republican supermajority pushed through a series of American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC)-sponsored legislation. ALEC is a right-wing corporate-backed association that drafts and advances conservative legislation. In North Carolina, ALEC legislation starved the public sector, cut social spending to the bone, and deregulated corporations and private entities. The General Assembly slashed the earned income tax credit for working families, cut Medicaid coverage, and ended federal unemployment benefits for 170,000 in a state with one the nation's highest unemployment rates.

Meanwhile, legislators rolled back corporate taxes, estate taxes, and personal income taxes to the lowest in the country. The ensuing budget shortfalls devastated public schools. Per-pupil spending plummeted. Schools lacked basic supplies. Those who stayed saw their wages decline 9.4 percent since 2009, dropping to among the lowest teacher salaries in the country. At the same time, North Carolina legislators reallocated funds to private and charter schools. In 2011, Republican legislators removed a cap on charter schools. In 2013, they created private school vouchers, drawing even more money from public school budgets. North Carolina's Republicans were turning the lights out on public education.

Building a Base, Step by Step

While public education's enemies assembled new power and strategies, the teacher union seemed frozen in place. Throughout much of the preceding decades, North Carolina had been governed by moderate Democrats, such as Jim Hunt and Mike Easley. Thanks to a strong alliance with the NCAE, these "education governors"

passed reforms that made North Carolina's public education system shine across the South, from class size reductions to teacher salary increases to prized principal training institutes. It was a stable compact: the NCAE secured teachers' bread-and-butter protections in exchange for teachers' votes and political contributions. But by the 2010s, as the right gained power, Tea Party and Koch brother-backed Republicans seized the legislature and governorship, and the NCAE's lobbying strategy crumbled—along with its influence.

Across the state, teachers increasingly saw the union as an irrelevant, even impotent, force of change. Membership dropped precipitously. But when the Chicago Teachers Union won a historic strike in 2012 against one of the country's most powerful Democrats with unprecedented levels of community support, educators around the country began to reimagine possibilities for their own unions. The Chicago strike helped many, including Proffitt, realize a "union isn't like a mythical creature. It's just a set of humans." A union could change. But how?

Weeks after the NCAE's 2013 convention, Rev. Barber began North Carolina's Moral Monday movement. Thousands gathered each week in Raleigh to demand voting rights, immigrant rights, racial justice, tax reform, and public funding for public schools. Although NCAE leadership did not participate, Proffitt and fellow educators Raquel Robinson, Jessica Benton, and Kristin Beller jumped in. They spent the summer of 2013 walking through the crowds holding up a clipboard that read "Public School Worker?" By the end of summer, they had connected with hundreds of fired-up teachers. When they ran an all-day organizing training the Saturday before school started in the fall, more than 75 people showed up. "It was really wild to do an organizing thing the Saturday before school started," explained Durham teacher and Organize 2020 leader Turquoise LeJeune Parker. "Like really wild. And I liked that." Casting aside the notion of teachers as docile rule-followers, these educators got to work. After all, the rules were dismantling their schools.

"A union isn't like a mythical creature. It's just a set of humans."

In 2013, the North Carolina legislature made additional funding cuts to public education, raised class size limits, and for the fifth year in a row denied a salary increase for teachers. This group of educators decided to organize actions to draw attention to their students' pressing needs and their poor teaching conditions. That fall, educators in 90 schools across the state led a "walk-in" campaign, in which rank-and-file teachers invited families and community members to gather before the bell and then simultaneously walk into schools en masse. The following year, the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools lifted up the tactic, and began a series of nationwide "walk-ins" by teachers and parents that galvanized labor and community coalitions across the country. The teachers weren't walking *out* on students—they were walking *in* for them.

Meanwhile, the General Assembly was doing everything possible to divide and conquer teachers. That summer, it proposed a measure offering 25 percent of teachers \$500 if they surrendered their due process and appeals rights; everyone else

would face short-term contracts and lose their career status. The NCAE immediately brought a lawsuit challenging the bill. But Proffitt and his fellow educators had a different strategy. The union's lawsuit might win, but it would do little to engage anybody, nor would it build teachers' power. Quickly, they developed a "Decline to Sign" campaign. They gathered signatures of teachers who would not accept the new contract terms, and then helped others develop local campaigns to pressure their school boards to oppose the bill. Within a few months nearly half all of the school boards in the state passed resolutions opposing the law. When the law was finally rejected, teachers got to understand it as their victory, too—not just something that lawyers or lobbyists had won *for* them. This success encouraged the educators who participated in this campaign to officially become a caucus: Organize 2020.

In 2014, a leadership change in the NCAE altered Organize 2020's relationship with the state union. The NCAE's new executive director was decidedly less friendly toward Organize 2020 and thwarted many of their efforts to utilize the union's official channels. Rather than fighting against obstinate would-be allies, the group decided to prioritize internal political education. The caucus, which at this point in time was predominantly white, organized a series of workshops around race and racism. "One of the things we say in Organize 2020," Walker Kelly explained, "is that we believe the job of the union is to defend and to transform education. If we're really going to do that, we have to talk about the institutional barriers racism creates." Prior to Organize 2020, issues of race and racism had seldom been addressed within the union. "We spent a lot of time talking about bread-and-butter issues like pay and working conditions and things like that, but we didn't really spend a lot of time talking about what does it really mean when we say want every child to have a high-quality public education?" said Walker Kelly. Approximately 51 percent of North Carolina's public school students are students of color; less than 20 percent of the teaching workforce is people of color. Organize 2020's trainings drew in many leaders of color, establishing Organize 2020 as a multiracial caucus.

These trainings empowered educators to understand the structural dimensions of racism and educational inequality. They also aimed to build educators' organizing skills, and leadership development especially, to address these problems. Leadership, Organize 2020 believed, like organizing, was a skill; it could be learned and taught. The caucus was deeply reverent of Ella Baker's organizing philosophy and legacy, especially her emphasis on building relationships and the bottom-up development of power. The caucus especially heeds the leadership definition of scholar Marshall Ganz, whose scholarship offers academic codification of much of Baker's work. Leadership, Ganz defines, is "accepting responsibility for creating the conditions that enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty." (Proffitt quipped that Organize 2020 leaders hold that definition so dear, all will eventually tattoo some portion of it on their bodies.) As LeJeune Parker explained, "So much of the work of teaching is about teaching young people about the world that we live in and we want to live in and helping them understand how they fit in there and how necessary their voices are. You have a huge role to play in this, and I

need you.” For Organize 2020 teachers, developing a sense of personal and collective agency was critical to their work as educators and unionists.

Durham Association of Education Takes the Lead

But Organize 2020 wasn’t content with political education alone; they wanted to win power to advance their vision. They decided on a strategy of building up locals; the union was, after all, “an assemblage of locals.” In 2015, Proffitt began organizing and successfully ran for president of the Durham Association of Educators (DAE). He quickly built up relationships with teachers and administration at every school, making hand and face contact with as many educators as possible. Mass meetings, which previously had eight or nine in attendance, became boisterous events of 50 or 60 people, in which key decisions and campaigns were plotted out. “People don’t hate meetings,” Proffitt explained, “they hate *bad* meetings.” DAE meetings bustled with clear structures, agendas, goals, celebrations, opportunities for discussion, organizing work plans. Rather than time to aimlessly grumble and complain, DAE meetings became key spaces for advancing the union’s campaigns. Walk into a DAE meeting and call out, “It’s not magic” and the whole room will respond, “It’s ORGANIZING!”

The local also developed a sophisticated system of building organizers and district organizers to keep tight communication between school-based organizing and union leadership. Campaign actions all became “structure tests” to gauge the strength of the organization, checkups to assess the depth and breadth of workers’ participation. (See McAlevey, p. 423.) These actions gave information about the strength of organizing at each school—where participation was high or low, leadership strongholds and gaps. This informed where they needed to build strength in the next round of organizing.

Running constant campaigns not only built the union’s internal organizing strength, it also developed their external power. Between 2015 and 2018, DAE won a series of bold campaigns to protect and defend their students, communities, and fellow workers, who were under increasing attack from conservative legislators. In 2015, they won a wage raise for classified staff, the first time in years. In 2016, when a high school student was kidnapped on his way to school by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, DAE took the lead in advocating for the student’s return. This campaign not only successfully brought the student home, it also shifted how the union related to questions of immigration reform, putting it at the center of the union’s purview. After all, teachers’ primary responsibility is to protect students.

The next year, when the Republican governor threatened more school budget cuts, Proffitt, LeJeune Parker, and fellow Organize 2020 members marched from Durham to Raleigh, demanding a meeting with Gov. Pat McCrory about the cuts. When the governor did not show up to the meeting, despite the fact that this group of teachers walked 20-plus miles in two days to meet with him, they refused to leave. Fourteen teachers were arrested. Their action not only brought attention to schools’ budget crisis, it also weakened McCrory’s credibility. That fall, he was voted out of office. Organize 2020 successfully backed candidates for Durham school

board, installing one of the most progressive school boards in the South. In 2017, when a controversial school takeover bill targeted a Durham public school to be converted to a charter, teachers organized a campaign to keep it open. A year later, they had not only defeated the bill, they had also built the school into a flourishing community school.

In 2018, when West Virginia teachers led a historic statewide strike, North Carolina teachers wondered if they could do something similar. But a successful statewide strike requires more than an email blast from a few teachers. Organize 2020 teachers knew they would need incredible unity and strong organizing, especially in a right-to-work state with minimal union protections. The teachers understood two factors behind West Virginia and the other states' successes: One school district led the way for the rest, and enough teachers requested personal days that superintendents had no choice but to close schools. "Durham was our Mingo County," Proffitt explained, referring to the pivotal West Virginia county in coal miners' 1920 bitter struggle to unionize. The well-organized Durham local sprang into action. Within weeks, enough teachers requested personal days that the school board closed the schools. Soon, 42 school districts across the state followed suit.

On May 16, 2018, 30,000 North Carolina teachers participated in the statewide day of action.

In previous years, the NCAE held an annual lobbying day in Raleigh. A few hundred teachers would show up and politely request meetings with legislators to plea for their issues. This year was different. Organize 2020 sought to build teachers' power, not to bow down to the legislators. Instead of sending teachers into the statehouse to meet with legislators, teachers invited legislators out to the mall to speak with them. Rather than milling around for speakers and a photo op, Organize 2020 facilitated mass meetings for each county to further discuss how to push their legislators. While Organize 2020 leaders knew the conservative legislature was unlikely to actually move on their demands, they knew a win was still possible. The victory? Defeating the fear and hopelessness that prevents us from standing together to address shared conditions.

Feeling Powerful

On that May 16, Walker Kelly woke up early. She hadn't slept much the night before. Although the whole day had been carefully planned, she still was nervous—who would actually show up? But within hours, buses poured into Raleigh, 30,000 teachers streaming forth, all wearing red, in the new fashion of "RedForEd" movements. The teachers had never seen anything like it. As Proffitt described, "It was multiracial, multigenerational. It was the entire state. And everybody's in red." Proffitt, Walker Kelly, and another Organize 2020 teacher, Kristin Beller, stood at the back of the downtown mall, watching educators join the march. They wanted to get the size of the thing. When the streets had totally filled, the three of them linked hands and began walking very slowly through the center of the crowds, greeting their thousands of colleagues. At one point, Proffitt, carrying a microphone, jumped on to a ledge. "Do y'all feel powerful?" he yelled to the crowd.

“YES,” they roared back. “Do y’all feel scared?” “NO,” they repeated. “Do y’all feel powerful?” he yelled again. “YES,” they bellowed once more. In the face of uncertainty, they were finding shared purpose.

As much as anything the May 16, 2018, day of action proved the strength of the Organize 2020 caucus and sharpened their ambitions. Conditions had hardly improved over the past year, and Organize 2020 knew there was more work to do. During the 2019 NCAE state convention that spring, Organize 2020 began pushing for another day of action. They polled teachers to assess what issues they should tackle this year, and by the end of the convention, the NCAE approved a list of five demands: to increase school librarians, psychologists, social workers, counselors, and nurses in schools; to provide a \$15 minimum wage for all school personnel and a 5 percent raise for all educators, including a 5 percent cost-of-living adjustment for retirees; to reinstate retiree health benefits that had been eliminated by the 2017 legislature; to restore advanced degree compensation that been stripped by the General Assembly; and, most controversially, to expand Medicaid. Although the teachers knew they were unlikely to convince the Republican legislators of their demands, demanding them was nonetheless important. It helped people articulate connections between education and broader social policies. Those connections, Walker Kelly explained, were the point. “Educators were leading the conversations about what our state needs,” their political education deepening. “It was a beautiful thing,” she said.

May 1, 2019, furthered Organize 2020’s organizing capacity. In 2018, the caucus recruited 50 volunteers for their day of action; in 2019, they had 180. After years of building up structure tests, Organize 2020 believed it had the organizational power to win a statewide union election. In April 2020, the “TB for L” campaign—Tamika and Bryan for Leadership—won. They nearly tripled the number of voters, taking nearly two-thirds of all votes. Their victory opens the doors for new possibilities, new leadership development. Their movement is advancing.

Organize 2020’s success is one of reimagined proportions. North Carolina’s billionaire-backed conservative movement fighting to dismantle public education is one of the strongest in the nation. A victory in a right-to-work state, in which racism, segregation, poverty, and urban-rural divisions have been enabled to fester, is a triumph for progressive movements everywhere. But Organize 2020’s triumph isn’t magic—it’s organizing. 📢

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