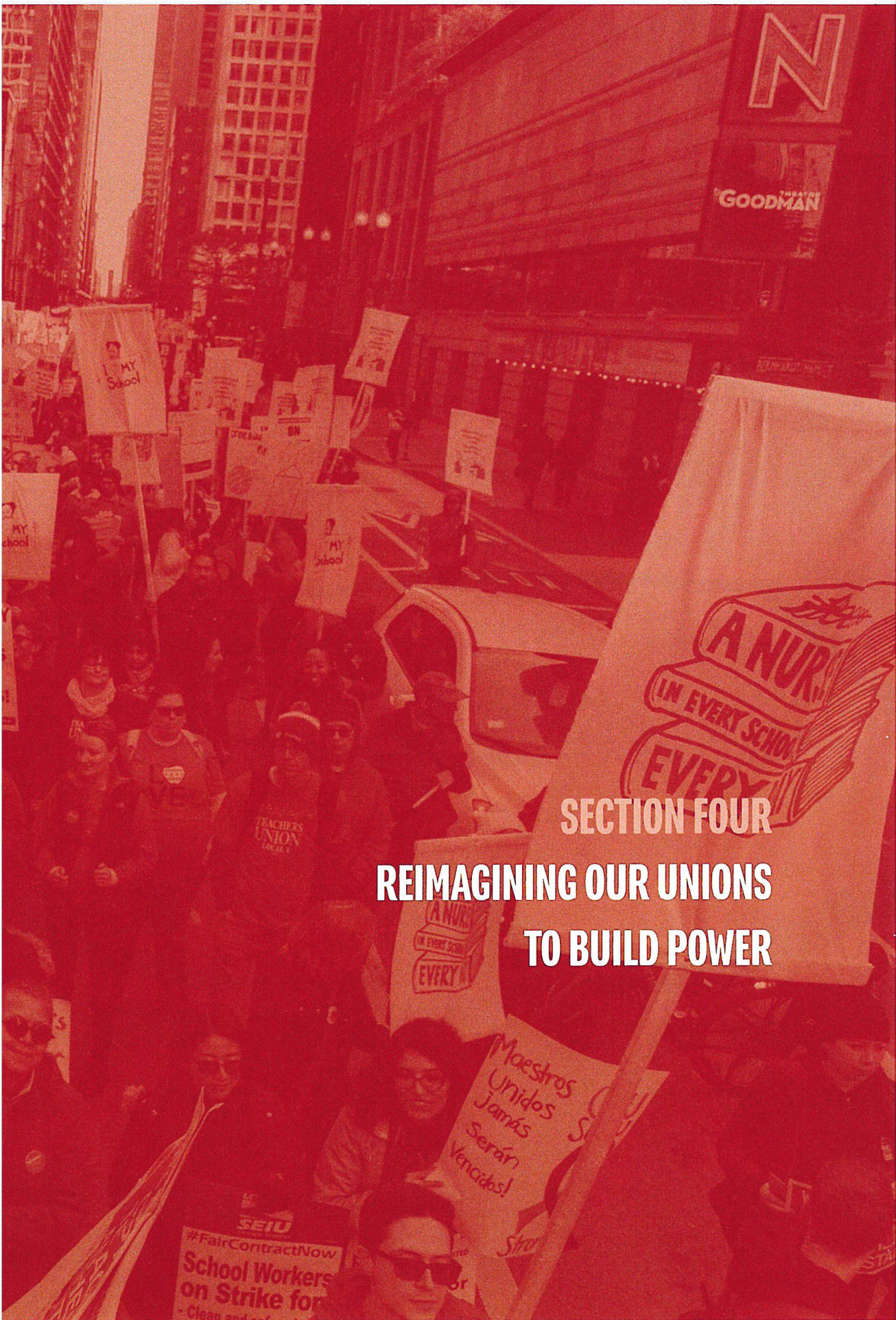




**SECTION FOUR**  
**REIMAGINING OUR UNIONS**  
**TO BUILD POWER**







# A Revitalized Teacher Union Movement

Reflections from the field

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BY BOB PETERSON



BARBARA MINER

**W**hen I was elected president of the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association (MTEA) in April of 2011, people didn't know whether to congratulate me or give me condolences. The election took place in the midst of one of the largest worker uprisings in recent U.S. history.



Unfortunately, that spring uprising, although massive and inspirational, was not strong enough to stop Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker from enacting the most draconian anti-public sector labor law in the nation.

That law, known as Act 10, coming just a year after the U.S. Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision, received support from the Koch brothers and a cabal of national right-wing funders and organizations. It was imposed on all public sector workers except the police and firefighter unions that endorsed Walker, and whose members are predominantly white and male.

Act 10 took away virtually all collective bargaining rights, including the right to arbitration. It left intact only the right to bargain base wage increases up to the cost of living. The new law prohibited "agency fees," in which all employees of a bargaining unit pay their "fair share." It also prohibited payroll deduction of dues. It imposed an unprecedented annual recertification requirement on public sector unions, requiring a 51 percent (not 50 percent plus one) vote of all eligible employees, counting anyone who does not vote as a "no." Using those criteria, Walker would never have been elected.

Immediately following Act 10, Walker and the Republican-dominated state Legislature made the largest cuts to public education of any state in the nation and gerrymandered state legislative districts to privilege conservative, white-populated areas of the state.

Having decimated labor law and defunded public education, Walker proceeded to expand statewide the private school voucher program that has wreaked havoc on Milwaukee, and enacted one of the nation's most generous income tax deductions for private school tuition.

Under these conditions, public sector union membership plummeted, staff has been reduced, and resources to lobby, organize, and influence elections have shrunk.

People familiar with Wisconsin's progressive history—in 1959, for example, we were the first state to legalize collective bargaining for public sector workers—find these events startling. And they should. If it can happen in Wisconsin, it could happen anywhere.

And it did. Following Wisconsin's lead, Tennessee abolished the right for teachers to bargain collectively, and state legislatures in Ohio, Michigan, and Iowa passed laws restricting public sector collective bargaining. In city after city, privately run charter schools started to dominate the education landscape. And in 2018 the U.S. Supreme Court in *Janus v. AFSCME* prohibited the collection of "agency fees" for all public sector unions in the nation.

Fortunately, teacher union activists across the country are revitalizing their unions and standing up to these relentless attacks. An unprecedented rise in rank-and-file militancy—from the 2012 Chicago teachers' strike through the 2018 strike wave sparked by West Virginia teachers up to strikes in Los Angeles, Oakland, Chicago, and St. Paul—demonstrate that educators are learning to fight back.

This growing militancy and push to transform the very nature of the teacher union movement may well be the most important force in our nation to defend and improve public schools and, in so doing, defend and improve our communi-



ties and what's left of our democratic institutions.

This revitalization builds on the strengths of traditional “bread-and-butter” unionism. But it recognizes that our future depends on redefining unionism from a narrow trade union model, focused almost exclusively on protecting union members, to a broader vision that sees the future of unionized workers tied directly to the interests of the entire working class and the communities, particularly communities of color, in which we live and work.

This is a sea change for teacher unions (and other unions, too). But it's not an easy one to make. It requires confronting racist attitudes and past practices that have marginalized people of color both inside and outside unions. It also means overcoming old habits and stagnant organizational structures that weigh down efforts to expand internal democracy and member engagement.

### **From Bread and Butter to Social Justice**

The MTEA is a member of the National Education Association (NEA), which has a long history of being staff-dominated. In some locals, elected presidents were (and still are) just figureheads. Allan West, a national NEA staff member, memorialized this staff-run union approach in a widely distributed 1965 speech. According to West, the executive director was the one who should be the public spokesperson, develop agendas for elected executive boards, and direct most of the union's affairs. This power structure was written into our local's constitution, and it had profound consequences. When a member of a progressive rank-and-file caucus in Milwaukee was elected president in 1991, for example, it took him six months just to get a key to the office. For nearly a decade we pushed for a full-time release president, a proposal resisted by most professional staff.

Meanwhile, by the late 1980s and into the '90s, teacher activists in Milwaukee were connecting with other rank-and-file teacher union activists through Rethinking Schools and the newly formed National Coalition of Education Activists (NCEA). In 1994, 29 teacher union activists from both the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) met at the NCEA conference in Portland, Oregon, and issued a statement: “Social Justice Unionism: A Working Draft.” (See p. 74.)

Social justice unionism is an organizing model that calls for a radical boost in internal union democracy and increased member participation. This contrasts to a business model that is so dependent on staff providing services that it disempowers members and concentrates power in the hands of a small group of elected leaders and/or paid staff. An organizing model, while still providing services to members, focuses on building union power at the school level in alliance with parents, community groups, and other social movements.

Three components of social justice unionism are like the legs of a stool. Unions need all three to be balanced and strong:

- We organize around bread-and-butter issues.
- We organize around teaching and learning issues to reclaim our profession and our classrooms.



- We organize for social justice in our community and in our curriculum.

Unfortunately, before Act 10 few public sector unions in Wisconsin adopted this model of unionism. As long as unions collected agency fees from everyone and could protect members' compensation and benefits, most members were happy.

Public sector unions paid the price for defining our unions narrowly as contract bargainers and enforcers. After Act 10, when we'd try to sign up members, many were aware that our collective bargaining rights had been severely limited. Often they responded, "Why should I join?" Others thought we didn't even exist, as our identity had been so tightly woven to the contract. Membership in public sector unions in Wisconsin plunged from 50.3 percent in 2010 to under 18.9 in 2017.

### **Transforming Our Local**

Our challenge in Milwaukee was to transform a staff-dominated, business/service-style teacher union into something quite different. The local had focused narrowly on contract bargaining and enforcement, with the staff primarily playing the role of insurance agents who would intervene on members' behalf to solve their problems—instead of helping members organize to solve their own problems. It was a codependent relationship—members didn't have to do much more than make a call to have their problems taken care of, and staff didn't have to go out to do the hard work of organizing members, except for occasional mobilizations at contract time. The importance of parent/community alliances was downplayed, and the union usually took the attitude that it was not their responsibility—but rather the administration's—to ensure quality education.

A few years before I was elected MTEA president, our local's elected leadership agreed that the three legs of social justice unionism should guide our work. But it's easier to agree to a principle than to change old habits and put new ideas into practice.

So when I stepped in as president of our local, the professional staff was hostile to the organizing, member-driven approach on which I was elected. I was excluded from most staff meetings and only saw the union newsletter after the staff had sent it to the printer. The

22-member elected executive board was split. There was a slim progressive majority, including several people who were elected at the same time as I was. A few people were allied with the old staff through friendship; others were scared of any change because of the uncertainties fomented by Act 10.

Within four months, other leaders and I initiated a campaign to "reimagine" our union to make it more democratic and participatory, based on a vision of social justice unionism. Key elements of our local's "reimagine" campaign and our subsequent work included:

**Our challenge in Milwaukee was to transform a staff-dominated, business/service-style teacher union into something quite different.**



- Building strong ties and coalitions with parent, community, and civic organizations, not only on educational issues, but also on broader issues of community concern.
- Replacing the now-banned collective bargaining with collective action. With collective bargaining limited to only base wages, we put more emphasis on organizing members to appear en masse at school board meetings, to lobby individual school board members, and to enlist parents and community members to do the same. One of our earliest victories was securing an extra \$5/hour (after the first hour) for educational assistants when they “cover” a teacher’s classroom.
- Building our union’s capacity to reclaim our profession by becoming the leading education organization in the city and consistently promoting culturally responsive, social justice teaching.
- Transforming the internal dynamics within our organization to increase member and leader participation, change the role of professional staff, overhaul our communications with and among members, and encourage members to lead our work. This included providing child care at all our monthly representative assemblies and major events and also greatly enhancing our social media presence and organizing.

To help make this work possible, within six months the elected leadership decided to release two teachers to be organizers; three months later we added two additional released teachers to head up a new teaching and learning department. Eventually we also released an educational assistant organizer and a social media organizer. (See Dingerson, p. 289.) A year after my election, we amended the constitution to shift certain powers from the staff to the elected leadership. A few months later, we bargained a staff contract that encouraged the professional staff who didn’t want to adapt to a new organizing vision to leave. All but one left. The new professional staff committed themselves to a broader vision of unionism with an emphasis on organizing.

We did this all in an increasingly hostile, anti-labor, and anti-public school environment. State budget cuts caused substantial layoffs. Our massive mobilization of members and allies to recall Walker failed because Walker outspent his Democratic opponent seven to one, and convinced vast swaths of the white working class to vote their prejudice, not their class interests. “We don’t want Wisconsin to become another Milwaukee,” Walker said.

### **Social Justice—Rooted in Alliances**

The strength of the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) strike, under the leadership of Karen Lewis, rested in large part on their members’ connections to parent and community groups. That year in two other cities—Portland, Oregon, and St. Paul, Minnesota—the unions put forth a vision of “the schools our children deserve” patterned after a groundbreaking document by the CTU. Their joint educa-



tor-community mobilizations were key factors in forcing the local school districts to settle on contracts before a strike.

In Milwaukee, our main coalition work was building Schools & Communities United, a broad coalition of nearly two dozen education and non-education groups that fights against school privatization and for concrete educational improvements within the public schools.

The coalition grew out of an earlier group, the Coalition to Stop the MPS Takeover, that—with allies on the school board and state Legislature—successfully fought a Democrats for Education Reform attempt to get rid of the democratically elected Milwaukee school board. Three years after that fight, the MTEA helped revive the coalition in order to fight the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce's legislative plan to turn Milwaukee into a New Orleans-style recovery zone.

As we organized press conferences, picket lines, and lobby days, we realized we needed a more formal organizational structure and a broader purpose. We wanted to move past reacting, being on the defensive, and appearing to be only against things. After some intense planning sessions, we renamed ourselves, created short- and long-term plans, and formalized organizational membership.

Key to the coalition's renewal was the development of a 32-page booklet, *Fulfill the Promise: The Schools and Communities Our Children Deserve*. Building on the work of the CTU, our document addressed school issues and added concerns of the broader community beyond the schoolhouse door. Specifically, we critiqued the return of the "New Jim Crow" to Milwaukee. The 19 groups issuing *Fulfill the Promise* included the NAACP, Voces de la Frontera, Centro Hispano, ACLU, Milwaukee Inner-City Congregations Allied for Hope, Parents for Public Schools, Institute for Wisconsin's Future, Wisconsin Jobs Now, 9to5, Youth Empowered in the Struggle, and AFT and NEA locals.

We released the document and eight-page summaries in English and Spanish on May 17, 2014, the 60th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. A march, program, and networking session attracted more than 500 people and put our coalition on the map.

The coalition has focused on fighting school privatization, promoting transformative community schools, and supporting progressive legislation. We are part of a national community schools movement that sees schools as hubs for social and health support, not only for the students of the school but also for their families and the surrounding community. The transformative model seeks to build strong community-school ties and help empower parents and community activists. It also requires shared leadership and a commitment to engaging, culturally relevant teaching and restorative practices instead of punitive discipline.

The coalition work is difficult. All participants have other organizational priorities, making meetings and communication a challenge. As we broaden the coalition, differences in strategies and priorities emerge. This work reminds me of the words of activist/musician Bernice Johnson Reagon, of Sweet Honey in the Rock: "If you are in a coalition and you are comfortable, that coalition is not broad enough."



Differences emerge in various ways. For example, as we've discussed how schools need to improve, some community members believe that a strong phonics emphasis will solve reading problems. Others see forced adherence to a rigid basal reading program that downplays literature as a key problem. One way we have sought to bring such divergent perspectives together is by focusing on proven practices that we can all agree on—such as developmentally appropriate practices at the early childhood level.

In line with our reimagine campaign, we've worked hard to build coalitions beyond those focused on education. Unfortunately, for years the MTEA's main coalition work was with the police and firefighter unions to get rid of a city residency requirement. This did not sit well with the communities of color we serve. In contrast, after our reimagine campaign, the MTEA has been a strong supporter of Voces de la Frontera and their youth group, Youth Empowered in the Struggle, standing with them for immigrant rights, for in-state university tuition for undocumented high school graduates, and in solidarity with a long strike by immigrant workers at Palermo's Pizza. We have supported a variety of other community issues, including raising the minimum wage, paid sick days, expanding healthcare coverage, voter rights, incarceration reform, stopping unfair hiring practices at a major federal housing project, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Our support ranges from financial aid to street protests, press conferences, lobbying, picket lines, and electoral work.

Although coalition work is essential for building mutual trust and creating sustainable social movements, its success will ultimately depend on our capacity to move beyond having a coalition of leaders of community, civic, and religious groups at the city level to building power at each school site—involving union members and parent leaders in coalition activities that directly affect their lives at the school and neighborhood levels.

### **Reclaiming Our Profession**

Another essential pathway to a revitalized teacher union movement is organizing our members to be leaders on all K–12 educational issues. Although some locals have taken on the hard issues of teacher evaluation through peer assistance and review programs, that is only the beginning.

For us, this has meant making sure new teacher orientation and mentoring are available and of high quality. It also has meant working to sustain the quality teacher evaluation and mentoring program that was in our contract before it ended under Act 10. I told my members that if there is a classroom down the hall or a school down the street that you would not send your own child to, then we have work to do.

**Organizing our members to be leaders on all K–12 educational issues is an essential pathway to a revitalized teacher union movement.**



In the past, too often union activists ignored curricular issues, dismissing them as the administration's responsibilities. We failed to make sure practicing classroom teachers were intimately involved in educational innovations and initiatives. We need to become the "go-to" organizations in our communities on issues ranging from teacher development to anti-racist education to quality assessments.

At the MTEA, this has required a change in some of our priorities and rearrangement of resources. Our two full-time release directors of teaching and learning play a key role in this work. Soon after becoming president, I proposed that we set up a nonprofit organization, the Milwaukee Center for Teaching, Learning, and Public Education. The center focuses most of its attention on teaching and learning issues, but also promotes public education among parents and the community. For several years it had a pro-public school canvassing program, funded by the school district, that goes door to door, encouraging parents to send their children to the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS).

Our teaching and learning work has focused on reclaiming our profession in three primary ways:

- We provide professional development and services to our members.
- We advocate/organize around specific demands to reclaim our classrooms and our profession.
- We partner with the MPS administration through labor/management committees to ensure maximum success of district initiatives and practices.

For years, many members viewed our union office (if they knew where it was) as a place to go if you were "in trouble" or had a question about insurance or retirement. A scattering of members attended committee meetings. Now our offices are bustling with multiple committee meetings, inservice trainings, book circles (for college credit), and individual help sessions on professional development plans or licensure issues. When the district failed to provide quality inservice training on student learning objectives that are a mandated part of the new state teacher evaluation system, we offered workshops that drew 150 teachers at a time. We had to schedule additional workshops once word spread. More teachers were convinced to join our union, too, because our teaching and learning services are open only to members.

Another example of our success in reclaiming our profession is in the area of early childhood education, where our teachers have been very active. Working with allies on the school board and in the community, we used collective action at board meetings and hearings, and our connections to parent and university partners, to convince the MPS administration and entire school board to mandate 45 minutes of uninterrupted play in 4- and 5-year-old kindergarten classes. We also won a staggered start to the school year for all kindergartens: one-third of each class attends on three separate days at the beginning of the year so that



teachers, students, and parents can build better connections from day one.

Our bilingual/English language learner committee held its meetings in the heart of the Latino community, including educators, community activists, and parents. We have taken up a broad range of issues and mobilizations, including convincing the school board to systematically expand bilingual education programs throughout the district. At the school level, union activists have worked closely with parents in two key areas: school-based canvassing around issues and pro-education candidates, and organizing to remove ineffective principals.

But we have a long way to go; at times it feels like a losing battle. Each year more teaching and planning time is stolen from teachers by new initiatives and mandates, most of which are linked to technology, tests, and standards. New teachers are learning to define teaching as data collection and more data collection. The heavy workload imposed on all teachers shrinks the time and energy they can dedicate to being union activists.

With the plethora of federal and state mandates and the data-ization of our culture, even the best-intentioned school boards and principals balk at promoting policies that support the craft of teaching.

It's clear to me that what is necessary is a national movement led by activists at the local, state, and national levels within the AFT and NEA—in alliance with parents, students, and community groups—to take back our classrooms and our profession.

### **Promoting Social Justice Teaching**

A key, but less talked about, aspect of social justice unionism is promoting social justice content in our curriculum. We need to fight for curriculum that is anti-racist, pro-justice, and that prepares our students for the civic and ecological challenges ahead.

It's important for teacher unions to promote social justice in the classroom for two main reasons: First, it educates students—the future members of society—in how to be active, critical participants in that society. Second, it educates teachers. Too many teachers don't know the real people's history of our nation. And that includes labor history. Many years ago, I interviewed the late historian Howard Zinn, who said that teachers not only need to be strong unionists, but they have to be “teachers of unionism.” (See Zinn, p. 25.) The more successful we are in promoting social justice teaching among our members, the greater will be their capacity and willingness to be active in our broader political campaigns.

To that end, we have hosted workshops and other activities. For example, our book circles have read Lisa Delpit's *Multiplication Is for White People*. Teacher advisers to Youth Empowered in the Struggle participated in a role play workshop about the U.S.-Mexican border.

Promoting social justice teaching also includes organizing against its opposite—reactionary curriculum policies and standards promoted by school boards, state textbook adoption committees, or publicly funded voucher or privately run charter schools.



### **A Final Challenge**

With the Wisconsin state Legislature dominated by right-wing Republicans waiting to use any perceived or real weakness in public schools as an excuse to accelerate their school privatization schemes, we must proceed with caution in our public criticism of and organizing around school district policies.

On the one hand, we must fight to improve our public schools by organizing our members and allies to speak out against a host of problems, including poorly rolled-out initiatives; large class sizes; the school-to-prison pipeline; lack of music, art, physical education, counselors, and librarians; restrictive curriculum mandates; and rogue principals. On the other hand, such criticism can play into the hands of the privatizers as they seek to expand privately run charters in Milwaukee, which is home to the first and one of the nation's largest publicly funded private school voucher programs.

This dilemma forces us to carefully consider our approach at the district level. We use a variety of tactics, including participation on labor/management committees, lobbying school board members, and balancing mass mobilizations with the threat of mass mobilizations. In the end, we recognize a key element in fighting privatization is to improve our public schools.

### **A Social Movement for Educational Justice**

And that's a hard thing to do in the face of the corporate shitstorm that has engulfed much of public education over the past few decades. But, just as I have been amazed at the resilience of some of my most beleaguered students, so too am I heartened by the increasing number of teacher, student, and community activists organizing for educational justice. Rank-and-file union members and growing numbers of union leaders recognize the need for new approaches to fight attacks on public schools and our profession. In addition to the work in Milwaukee, Chicago, Portland, and St. Paul, rank-and-file caucuses and local leaders in many areas of the country are having increased success moving their unions toward a social justice, member-based stance.

In Los Angeles, an activist caucus, Union Power, won leadership of United Teachers Los Angeles, the second largest teacher local in the country. The Union Power slate, led by Alex Caputo-Pearl, had an organizing vision for their union. They have worked with parents fighting school cuts and recognize the importance of teacher-community alliances. In Massachusetts, Barbara Madeloni, a leader of the University of Massachusetts edTPA boycott, was elected president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association in 2014. She ran with the Educators for a Democratic Union caucus and helped organize teachers in the struggle against high-stakes standardized testing.

On the national level, the sentiments and actions of members attending recent AFT and NEA conventions are more militant and focused on building organizing capacity internally and in alliance with other groups to fight the corporate reformers, obsessive testing, and privatization. The national "days of action" of the recently formed Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools have encouraged locals to build



community coalitions and take an activist approach to fighting privatization and promoting public school-based improvements.

Will it be enough, soon enough? Will unions be able to transform themselves to go beyond their past limitations, reclaim our profession, and participate in the broader social justice movements? Will progressive union leadership and caucuses be able to convince recalcitrant members and staff stuck in an untenable past? Those are the questions activists will answer in the next few years as we organize for social justice in our classrooms, our schools, our unions, and our communities. 

*Bob Peterson, the former president of the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association, is now a member of the Milwaukee School Board. He taught 5th grade more than 25 years at various Milwaukee public schools, and was a founding editor of Rethinking Schools.*

This is an edited and updated version of the article that appeared in the Winter 2014–15 issue of *Rethinking Schools*.

# Three Theories of Change

## Organizing, Mobilizing, and Advocacy

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BY ELENI SCHIRMER

**W**hy have unions gotten so weak, and how can they strengthen? In her book *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (Oxford, 2016), labor organizer and strategist Jane McAlevey argues that a major factor in labor's decline has been that unions have abandoned the work of organizing, relying instead on the more superficial methods of building power, namely mobilizing and advocacy. What are these three different methods of union strength, and what path toward power does each build?

To organize is to build mass support and strength among ordinary people. Organizing draws its power from working people's biggest strength: our numbers. Working people may or may not see themselves as activists or politically active or even in political agreement, but through organizing, they come together to act in common cause. The work of organizing is systematic and rigorous: It requires connecting with every single worker in a shop, every educator in a building, every building in a district. At its core, it asks people to understand their own agency and to make choices about how they will exercise it. The work of organizing is difficult; ordinary people are seldom confronted by their own agency nor asked to make choices that recognize their own power. As McAlevey notes in her first book, *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell): My Decade Fighting for the Labor Movement* (Verso, 2012), a memoir of her organizing work: "In the normal course of human events, workers don't expect much from their jobs, government, or unions, because the reality is they don't get much. The job of the organizer is to fundamentally change this." The work of organizing is difficult, but as McAlevey argues, it is essential: There are no shortcuts.

Mobilizing, by contrast, activates an already-convinced membership. Mobilizing encourages those who already support a cause or a mission to take action to defend their belief—for example, by attending a protest, wearing a button, or signing a petition. Mobilizing is a very important step for building movements, but it is not the same thing as organizing. The crucial difference between mobilizing and organizing is that mobilizing relies on the actions of people who have already been brought on board; organizing is the work bringing ever more people on board, having a stake in the direction and outcomes of the actions (mobilizing can be an important component of organizing). McAlevey distinguishes mobilizing as





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relying on the participation of a “self-selecting” group—people who have chosen to participate in something due to personal preferences or beliefs, such as environmental protection groups, the ACLU, or Planned Parenthood. Organizing, by contrast, relies on “structure-based” groups, groups determined by a predefined, often structural, relationship, such as working for the same employer, living in the same housing complex, or attending the same place of worship. Membership in a structure-based group, unlike a self-selecting group, is not a result of personal

affinity. In a structure-based group, the number of possible members—and therefore people to organize—is finite and knowable: the number of workers in a firm, residents in a housing building, or members in a church, for example. Whereas mobilizing relies on participation from a self-selecting group, organizing builds high participation among all eligible individuals.

Advocacy is the work of creating change through the actions of professionals or technical experts—lobbyists, pollsters, lawyers, communication specialists, researchers. Advocacy relies on the expertise, status, and know-how of these groups of people to make change. Advocacy usually happens in a closed-door room; ordinary people play a small to nonexistent role in its efficacy. Advocacy has become a dominant strategy for unions and liberals. But its efficiency comes at a cost; it disables the masses of ordinary people who have a stake in the issues under scrutiny by advocates.

These three forms of making change do not exist in isolation; a successful campaign may very well rely on all three strategies. Yet organizing, McAlevey argues, is the most fundamental: The base of any campaign should come from its organizational capacity above all. Yet in reality, according to McAlevey, it's often the strategy most avoided or shortchanged. After all, it is often hard, slow work that requires building connections with mass numbers of people. As a result, it's often sidestepped for quicker grabs for power—mobilizing or advocating support, rather than organizing for it.

McAlevey's framework rests on a more fundamental argument about power. In an age of massive inequality, many see power as the province of the elite—the small, powerful minority who run the courts, the banks, and the media in the U.S. and around the world. From this perspective, forging change is the process of altering who occupies those powerful institutions: voting in new leaders, appointing new judges, securing better regulators who can safeguard the system with an eye toward fairness. In McAlevey's words, this belief is little more than replacing one set of elites with another, better set of elites. It relies on advocacy and, to a certain extent, mobilizing to get the job done.

Yet exclusively focusing on the undemocratic hyper-concentration of elites obscures the power of ordinary people. Ordinary people have two major forms of power: our numbers—there are more of us than them—and our ability to withhold our participation in a system that denies us fairness, dignity, and health: They need us to keep working. Organizing, especially organizing with an eye toward building strikes, activates both forms of power. Successful labor movements and social movements often use a combination of advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing. But as McAlevey argues, organizing is the most important of those tasks—yet often the most overlooked. Her work aims to bring the movement back into labor, and winning back into the movement. 📖

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|                        | ADVOCACY                                                                                                                                                                        | MOBILIZING                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | ORGANIZING                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Theory of Power</b> | Elite. Advocacy groups tend to seek one-time wins or narrow policy changes, often through courts or backroom negotiations that do not permanently alter the relations of power. | Primarily elites. Staff or activists set goals with low to medium concession costs or, more typically, set an ambitious goal and declare a win, even when the “win” has no, or only weak, enforcement provisions. Backroom, secret deal making by paid professionals is common.                                                            | Mass, inclusive, and collective. Organizing groups transform the power structure to favor constituents and diminish the power of their opposition. Specific campaigns fit into a larger power-building strategy. They prioritize power analysis, involve ordinary people in it, and decipher the often hidden relationship between economic, social, and political power. Settlement typically comes from mass negotiations with large numbers involved. |
| <b>Strategy</b>        | Litigation; heavy spending on polling, advertising, and other paid media.                                                                                                       | Campaigns, run by professional staff, or volunteer activists with no base of actual, measurable supporters, that prioritize frames and messaging over base power. Staff-selected “authentic messengers” represent the constituency to the media and policymakers, but they have little or no real say in strategy or running the campaign. | Recruitment and involvement of specific, large numbers of people whose power is derived from their ability to withdraw labor or other cooperation from those who rely on them. Majority strikes, sustained and strategic nonviolent direct action, electoral majorities. Frames matter, but the numbers involved are sufficiently compelling to create a significant earned media strategy. Mobilizing is seen as a tactic, not a strategy.              |
| <b>People Focus</b>    | None                                                                                                                                                                            | Grassroots activists. People already committed to the cause, who show up over and over. When they burn out, new, also previously committed activists are recruited. And so on. Social media are over-relied on.                                                                                                                            | Organic leaders. The base is expanded through developing the skills of organic leaders who are key influencers of the constituency, and who can then, independent of staff, recruit new people never before involved. Individual, face-to-face interactions are key.                                                                                                                                                                                     |

*Reprinted with permission of Jane McAlevey from her book No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age (Oxford University Press, reprint edition: April 1, 2018).*

# Lessons from the Los Angeles Strike

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BY ARLENE INOUE

**F**rom Jan. 14 to 22, 2019, United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) had its first strike in 30 years, the third in our union's history. The vast majority of members, myself included, had never been on strike. I'm certain we'll remember the many sights and sounds: The 60,000 people standing in the rain, in a city where it never rains, covered by a sea of red umbrellas and ponchos; the sound of cheering students singing heartfelt songs to their teachers, as the smell of freshly baked goods, tacos, and coffee filled the air.

Even a year later, the buzz of solidarity continues throughout LA. It seemed like everyone was on the side of the 34,000 UTLA members: parents, hundreds of community organizations, the 300 unions in the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor-AFL-CIO, our state and national affiliates, all supporting our diverse membership of K-12 teachers, early and adult educators, substitutes, and dozens of health professionals. Polls showed that 80 percent of the public in LA supported the strike.

This strike was about our students: exploding class sizes, lack of nurses, librarians, counselors. Our students deserved this strike, and we decided not to be silent any longer. It was about supporting public education and taking a stand against unregulated charter schools and the disinvestment in public education. Work stoppages are risky, but our strike brought relief and joy. Members told me of feeling overwhelmed as parents and community members joined the picket line bringing gifts of food and thanking them for being teachers—a new experience for many. There was dancing and singing in the rain, as members got to know their colleagues: the teacher from across the hall, the psychiatric social worker, or substitute who joined the strike. The UTLA strike unleashed the power of the collective.

From the outside, our strike seemed to be magically synchronized. In reality it took years of work—building an infrastructure, forming crucial parent and community alliances, and engaging our rank-and-file members. Our employer, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) attempted to create fear, uncertainty, and doubt (we called it “FUD”) about striking. We had to frequently inoculate our members against FUD as we talked through their financial concerns and the exaggerated consequences threatened by the LAUSD.

Our strike was part of the “Red for Ed” movement sweeping the nation. We were preceded by the red state revolts in West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and







Arizona, and followed by the strikes in Oakland, Denver, Chicago, and Little Rock. This time the educators in our schools, with student and community support, were drawing a line in the sand and making history. We were calling out the billionaires who were profiting from tax loopholes and privatization schemes that were bankrupting our schools. And it is notable that as a predominantly female-of-color workforce in Los Angeles, we had risen up to take our place as leaders in the teacher strikes and labor movement.

As a UTLA officer, I was the first in my extended family to be active in a union. But my Japanese American roots were shaped by the alien land law, the incarceration of my family during World War II, and the model minority myth thrust upon us. While I worked as a speech therapist for a number of years, what drew me to the union was my organizing a coalition to fight militarism in the schools. And once active in the union, I was encouraged to run for UTLA office by a group of women who wanted to change our union to be more responsive. I was open to new challenges and willing to do what the union needed. I learned by stepping up and taking on new experiences, from co-leading the UTLA bargaining team, to building the infrastructure of UTLA, to organizing school chapters, itinerants, and more. But I've learned that because of structural barriers, lifting up women into union leadership needs to be intentional and include trainings, mentoring, and support. This is foundational for a member-driven union and growing the teacher union movement.

### **What We Won**

UTLA's strike shifted the narrative locally, statewide, nationally, and even internationally. We boldly fought for the schools our students deserve and the respect and recognition that public educators have been longing for. What did we win? In addition to a 6 percent salary increase, we got enforceable class size caps for the first time and a class size reduction program. We won more nurses, librarians, counselors, funding for community schools, a reduction in standardized testing, and resources for ethnic studies. We won improvements in special education loads and itinerant workspace. We won a greater voice for educators in schools targeted for charter co-location. We won an LAUSD resolution calling on the state for a charter moratorium, improvements in adult and early education, the elimination of random student searches, expansion of green space and the removal of unused bungalows (portable classrooms) on our campuses, legal support for immigrant families, and the will to fight for more state and county funding.

It has been said that a union is strong because its members are strong. And members do not become strong overnight. Because of the sheer numbers and diversity in UTLA, we methodically and strategically built up the infrastructure and confidence of our members for five years prior to striking. The answers to how we did it are described in eight lessons of the LA strike.

### **Lesson 1: Build a Rank-and-File Movement with a Progressive Vision**

UTLA had long been known as a union without a clear vision . . . a union that shifted depending on the personality and politics of the president. That changed in 2014



when members of the Progressive Educators for Action Caucus (PEAC) joined forces with other progressive caucuses within UTLA, and ran a team of seven officers and dozens of rank-and-file Board of Director candidates from across the city. Our campaign was focused and clear: We would take on privatizers such as Eli Broad and the Waltons of Walmart. We would do what's right, challenging racism and other oppressions and reaching out to parents and community members. We believed in transforming UTLA into a powerful organizing union. At a time when strikes were not taking place, we recognized that strike power is essential to build our power.

At first, our members had difficulty comprehending this mindset because it was truly a shift in the culture of UTLA. But once they heard us, hundreds of chapter chair leaders endorsed the "Union Power" slate. It was the first time that an entire team won every contested seat on the first round (seven full-time officer positions and a majority of the 48 board seats). This alone meant that we were united around a common vision and committed to working together.

## **Lesson 2: Retool the Union from the Inside Out**

As the newly elected team of officers, we recognized the need to restructure UTLA at the same time that we worked to build the confidence and trust of our members. As we moved from a service model to an organizing one, we explained what we needed: more political, communications, and data capacity; a parent organizing team; and a research department.

As word of our new mission spread, we attracted top-notch staff with organizing and campaign experience to work at UTLA. At the same time, we undertook the very difficult process of letting go of staff members who could not buy in to our new union vision. While this process was sometimes painful, we learned from allies around the country willing to share their experiences, that it would be a mistake to not clean house from the start. The talent and skills of our new staff have been a tremendous asset in building our union's capacity and power.

Together, we built an organizing culture where we engaged members in various capacities. Officers and staff made hundreds of school site visits to listen to members and to share our program and goals. It was important for us to hear directly from members and to know their concerns. In turn we invited them personally to engage in the work: to help with a petition drive or to plan a picketing action with parents. We also worked with members to understand the multiple roles they played in their communities—teacher, parent, member of a religious or civic group. We needed members to understand the web of relationships and perspectives they could bring to the union.

Initially we needed to build the confidence of our members. In our first year, we won a new contract that included our first pay raise in eight years. Then, we asked members to support a dues increase—a difficult but necessary request, to build a union that could fight and win on big issues. We negotiated transitional funding with the AFT and NEA (UTLA is a merged local). We never would have been able to build up to a strike if we did not have the infrastructure and funds to make it possible.

### **Lesson 3: Build a Strategic Plan, Together**

Since the 1970s, power, influence, and membership of unions in the United States have declined dramatically. To counter that trend we acknowledged and embraced our powerful, self-sustaining base of members.

We reached out to every sector of our membership. For example, we encouraged our itinerant members to meet with leadership both together and in subgroups (art teachers, music teachers, etc.). We asked them what their needs and priorities were. We wanted to know what the most important issues were for them, but also what they saw as the most important issues for the union to address for its members as a whole. (We wanted all of our members to not only see their own interests reflected in our contract demands, but to recognize our common interests as well.) These conversations led us to realize that in some cases we needed additional chapter chairs to provide a greater voice for itinerants. The key priorities we took from these and other conversations became part of our contract proposals. And through this process, we gained the buy-in of members across the union by inviting them to forward their ideas and step into their democratic leadership roles.

Strategic planning has been central to keeping us focused and united. It has become part of the culture of UTLA. Every year the officers and directors take a couple of days to thoroughly discuss and chart out strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats—then goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics.

We also take significant time to discuss, brainstorm, and review the strategic plan with the UTLA Board of Directors. While people may have different opinions about priorities, at the end of the day, we all agree and get behind what we have decided together.

The strategic plan operationalized our goal of moving from a predominantly service-oriented union to an organizing one. For example, we totally reorganized how the union deals with grievances. We designated a staff leader as grievance coordinator, and worked through all of the pending grievances to settle them. Then we developed a new process that centers problem-solving inside individual school buildings. Our Chapter Action Teams (CATs, see below) now work to organize around problems and find collective solutions. As a result of this work, the backlog of grievances has dropped from around 3,000 to about 300.

### **Lesson 4: Engage Your Members. Develop New Leaders**

Building school site structures was absolutely key to having power on the picket lines at every school during the strike. It was these structures that resulted in 98 percent of educators participating in the strike at 900 district schools.

First we focused on ensuring that we had a leader at every school (what we call “chapter chairs”). While in the past this role was not heavily promoted or strongly encouraged, we made it a priority. Because our union is large and geographically spread out, we established point officers and union staff for each of our eight regions, for relationship building, assistance on representation, and ongoing organizing at each school site.



Some schools hadn't had a chapter chair in years. In those cases, two of us, usually an officer and staff member, would go on a "school site blitz," knocking on classroom doors during the lunch or recess break. Many members opened their doors to us, and our conversations convinced some teachers to take on leadership roles at their school. We learned that we needed more than one person at the larger school sites, so we set up CATs to identify one leader for every 10 members. The CATs provided the structure for one-on-one conversations, and allowed communication to flow in both directions, between schools and the union.

The results of this one-to-one member engagement were visible when the strike began when an incredible number of members stepped up. "This was the first time I really wanted to get involved in the union. I felt like the union needed me," said one 18-year veteran teacher. There were also many new organic leaders who emerged, some of them new teachers with only a year or two in the school. "I thought you could either teach—be in the classroom—or organize and be a union leader," one young teacher told me. "But in the lead-up to the strike, I learned that I could be both."

### **5. Commit to Parent/Youth/Community Organizing**

Another important piece of our work was building parent/community relationships and alliances. After two years of meetings with existing educational and community-based organizations, we launched Reclaim Our Schools Los Angeles (ROSLA) in 2016. ROSLA began with four anchor organizations: the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE), Students Deserve, and UTLA. Other community organizations joined us throughout the campaign.

We shared a common political understanding of the potential power of both an education justice and a labor justice alliance. We also acknowledged that in the past UTLA had not been an honest partner. "UTLA's practices had pretty profoundly alienated organizations it should have been allied with," said one local advocate. Cesar Castrejon, an organizer with ACCE, agreed: "Historic relationships with the union have been hard. UTLA used to parachute in when they needed something from the community. And then they'd leave. It was hard to get over that history. We needed to learn how to communicate with one another, and sometimes to push back." Clearly, the union needed to rebuild trust by listening to these issues and concerns and taking them on as our own.

At the same time, we trained our members to organize parents at their school sites. While this may seem obvious and basic, many teachers are uncertain about how to do this, having been conditioned over the years to believe that their conversations with parents had to be narrowly focused on curriculum and student behavior. We used a survey to have members identify community organizations that they were involved in.

Corporate reformers and privatizers have carried out a well-financed campaign to discredit public educators and to pit us against our students, parents, and communities. But we know that nationally, parents trust their teachers and educa-

tors. An important strategy to solidify that trust was our commitment to bargain for the common good. This meant that in addition to the mandatory subjects of bargaining (salary and working conditions), we also included permissive subjects such as reducing testing and insisting on class size caps. Then we took it further by systematically asking members of our ROSLA partners to prioritize their issues. The issues they identified included having more green space on campuses, removing bungalows, creating an immigrant defense fund, and ending the racially discriminatory practice of wandering students to search for weapons.

UTLA then demanded and received an agreement with the LAUSD, to allow our parent/community members to present our common good demands at a bargaining session in 2017.

This experience was memorable for the community presenters. Ruby Gordillo is a former student at Trinity Elementary School in South LA. Her son now attends the school. When Trinity was targeted for a charter co-location, Ruby was one of the parents who joined in a protest against the co-location. From there, she attended a meeting of the local school council. Gradually, she realized that she had a role to play as a parent leader. So when UTLA invited members of ROSLA groups to present to the bargaining teams on the common good demands, Ruby stepped up to talk about co-location. Since then, she has become one of ROSLA's most active parent leaders, and even attended a national NEA conference with me to tell the story of the strike.

For the next year, we systematically brought these interests together, educating our members through meetings, chapter materials, and union communications, and holding dozens of trainings, planning meetings, and actions that engaged both union members and our grassroots and student allies. As our contract negotiations continued, leading up to the strike, it was clear that the common good demands were fundamental—that we would not compromise and sell out our allies. This allegiance to the relationships we had built together meant that, when we went on strike in January 2019, the community was on strike with us.

### **Lesson 6: Escalate Your Actions**

Throughout our yearslong restructuring of the union and building toward the strike, we knew that we had to test the effectiveness of our organizing, and the level of engagement of our members. On a regular basis we consciously planned events or actions that measured our members' commitment and willingness to take action under increasing levels of militancy and risk.

Each step was important and built on the previous one. At UTLA we had 11 so-called "structure tests"—from wearing red on Tuesday, to signing petitions, to participating in a parent flyering activity, to picketing, etc. One big test for us was a community rally one Saturday in December before our January strike. Whereas most of our rallies had been during the school day, which made parent/community attendance difficult, we used the Saturday rally as a structure test to know if our allies were really with us. That day, more than 15,000 people came out to our rally. We knew that we had the support we needed for our strike. (See McAleve, p. 423.)





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These escalating actions were also important in building leadership responsibilities. And they helped emotionally, to prepare members to go further than they might have thought possible.

Sandra Soto, an elementary school teacher, was a great example. Soto had been laid off a couple of times, so when the union called on members to wear red T-shirts to school (an early structure test), Sandra was afraid. She didn't want to do anything to draw attention to herself. But she was willing to attend a book discussion where she and others read and analyzed some of the issues facing the district. Suddenly, she told me, it made sense to her why she'd been laid off! She began to recognize the role of austerity, and the complicity of billionaires like Eli Broad and Superintendent Austin Beutner in the ongoing attacks on her school. She was determined to fight back. She became a chapter chair at her school, and helped lead some of the most creative activities during the strike. Soon she was speaking to all 800 of UTLA's chapter chairs, leading them to the streets.

### **Lesson 7: Go on Offense, Control the Narrative**

During the red state revolt, we learned the roles that social media play, both in providing information to members about our common situation, and in mobilizing people to action. We used every means of communication to get our message across: social media and our website, email blasts, phone messages, traditional media, and a paid media campaign that included billboards, benches, and an insert in the *Los Angeles Times*. Before and during the strike, we put out daily Facebook Live news to prepare our members for the strike, to answer common questions, and inoculate members against the misinformation that the district kept putting out. This work generated an exponential growth in followers, both among educators and among parents and community members. We built a massive database of



people, and coded it by school site, region, interest area, and more. This allowed us to target communications directly to our constituency.

Our communications and research staff took control of the narrative on public education in significant ways.

In 2016, we commissioned a study on the fiscal impact of charter school growth on UTLA and found that \$600 million per year is drained out of district schools by charters. Our communications staff focused on circulating information from this study showing the concrete cost to neighborhood schools: how many counselors, nurses, librarians, after-school programs were lost from schools with every stage of growth in the charter sector. This was the first time the impact to public schools from charter growth was quantified.

We called out the California Charter School Association (CCSA) for what it is—a billionaire-funded industry lobbying firm, not an educational advocate. We used CCSA's own stated plans against them, including their call for every student in California to be in a charter-like school by 2030, and their primary stated goal of attacking UTLA.

In 2018, a report commissioned by Beutner painted a picture of a school district on the brink of financial collapse. The culprits? The report—called “Hard Choices”—found LAUSD teachers were “overpaid,” that the district was spending too much on supplies, that the teacher workday was too short, and that class sizes were too low. UTLA quickly produced a rebuttal (“False Choices, Hidden Agendas”) that identified the misrepresentation of data and facts used in the LAUSD report. The union also created a two-page flyer comparing the “Hard Choices” claims to the actual facts. Teachers were incensed. The flyer became a standard educational tool.

Our communications also showed what systemic underfunding looks like, and we shared this information at every school site visit. We used an infographic illustrating that California, as the fifth richest economy in the world, was 44th nationally in per-pupil spending. We showed that LAUSD was putting 24 percent of its budget, or \$2 billion, into a reserve fund, while claiming there wasn't money to meet our demands. We showed how California compared to other states in our lack of access to nurses, on class size (we are the highest), and more.

Our organizing, research, and communications changed the debate in Los Angeles, showing that educators were working under impossible conditions, yet still giving of their time and resources for their students because they believed in them, and in public education. And we exposed the forces aligned against us—naming them and publicly shaming them.

### **Lesson 8: Build the State and National Movement. Never Forget Where Our Power Lies.**

From day one, we had the support of our state and national affiliates—the California Teachers Association (CTA) and California Federation of Teachers (CFT), the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Their commitments, of both money and people power, showed that none



of us are isolated, and our successes are interconnected. When one of us wins, we all win.

As the proportion of low-income students and students of color has risen in LA schools, funding has decreased and public educators who are predominantly female have experienced a drop in our wages and attacks to our health care and benefits. The 2018–19 Red for Ed strike wave, whether in the Republican Southern states or in the deep blue state of California, has made clear that this is a national issue of priorities and political will.

We are facing an important historical moment with opportunities and possibilities ahead. We followed up the strike with “Our New Deal for Public Schools,” a set of five principles that continue to drive our work: Nurture the Whole Child; Respect Educators; Respect Students and Parents; Fully Fund Public Schools; and Stop Privatization.

As we continue to flex our political muscle, the NEA and AFT need to continue to allocate resources to organizing and building the movement in locals across the nation, with less reliance on the typical political relationships. Strikes work, and we continue to feel widespread support—our “strike bump”—at all levels of the city, county, and state governments. We have seen increased funding, movement on housing issues, and the first statewide initiative to address property tax inequities in 40 years.

We must never forget where our power is from. It was not the politicians or the LAUSD superintendent who came from Wall Street, but the collective action of more than 60,000 educators, parents, community, and labor that forced change and won public opinion. We are building on this social movement that merges racial, social, and educational justice for our students with labor and economic justice for our members. 📢

*Arlene Inouye is UTLA secretary and co-chair of its bargaining team. She has been a speech and language specialist for 18 years in the Los Angeles Unified School District and involved in public education transformation for decades.*

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# Walk the Line

## On the ground during the historic Los Angeles teachers' strike

BY LAUREN QUINN

**T**here comes this moment when you're standing in the piss-pouring rain, huddled under the 4 inches of overhang you can fit beneath without your feet edging onto school property, when you feel yourself failing.

The morning light is gray and asthmatic through the thick rain clouds. The spokes on your drugstore umbrella have bent. Your jeans are wet and clinging to the long johns underneath. Your sneakers are soaked through for the fourth day in a row, because you live in Los Angeles and have never owned a pair of rain boots.

You've been up since 5:30 a.m., marching and chanting and trying to rally everyone. But this morning, your heart's not in it.

That's when one of your co-workers turns to you, face peeking out from her parka, and says, "We need a pep talk."

All the other heads nod.

And you see that it's not just you who's struggling this morning—everyone is tired, aching, beaten down. As union chapter chair of your school, it's your job to pep them up, remind them why they're out here, say something that will reinvigorate and inspire them.

But when you open your mouth, nothing comes out.

It's then, on the fourth day of the Los Angeles teacher strike that's being billed as historic, monumental, game-changing, that you feel wholly inadequate to the task at hand.

\* \* \*

It started eight months ago.

Really, it started 41 years ago, before you were born—when California passed Proposition 13 and slowly started to bleed its public schools of funding, stripping support staff like nurses, counselors, librarians; slashing arts and enrichment programs; and raising class sizes to some of the largest in the country.

But for you, it started in May. Your union, United Teachers Los Angeles, had been in contract negotiations with the Los Angeles Unified School District for a year. Your school didn't have a union representative, so you heard about the UTLA rally through an email blast. You grew up in a union family, your mom a teacher, your dad a firefighter. Stopping downtown for an hour after school seemed the least you could do.

When you arrived at Grand Park, a sea of red-clad teachers swarmed in the shadow of City Hall. They were holding handmade signs, chanting, playing drums, dancing. A palpable energy radiated off the crowd of 12,000. It was strength and unity, yes, but also a collective power bigger than the sum of its parts.

You wanted in.

\* \* \*

After the presidential election, I was despondent. I wanted to do something, but I didn't know what or how. I kept hearing that people had to find their place, their cause, their group—and act.

So I tried. I went to local political and community organization meetings that ran the gamut, but nothing quite jibed.

When I became my school's chapter chair and attended the UTLA leadership conference that July, I felt like I'd finally found my tribe. People of all stripes filled the conference rooms, a rarity in a city as diverse but deeply segregated as Los Angeles (and a quality distinct to the LAUSD, where teaching staff more closely resemble their students than most cities). You had old Brown Berets sitting next to wide-eyed 20-somethings fresh out of their credentialing program. You had white ladies translating the Spanish-language presentations to dudes with dreads in "Danger: Educated Black Man" shirts. The diversity wasn't labored or self-congratulatory; it was fluid, unpretentious, and united by the stone-hard conviction that our public schools were worth fighting for.

This unity of vision didn't mean we always agreed, or that subsequent meetings were always enjoyable. When the school year began, I attended area meetings in the cold cafeteria of Roosevelt High School, and the reality of union work sank in. People argued, hogged the mic, asked endless rounds of repetitive questions. After a full day of teaching, the meetings could feel downright tedious. Sometimes I'd zone out while I nibbled on Costco pizza and counted the minutes until I could go home.

Through the course of these meetings, I learned the context for the current negotiations. The fight was about more than a raise, more than even class sizes and support staff and overtesting and charter co-location. It was about saving the soul of public education.

Perhaps that sounds grandiose, but the stakes were that high. Our pro-charter school board had appointed as our new superintendent Austin Beutner, an investment banker with no prior education experience (think DeVos 2.0) who ran with a pro-privatization LA billionaire crew, fronted by Eli Broad. Beutner had brought on



as his chief of staff Rebecca Kockler, the woman responsible for dismantling public schools in New Orleans—a city where, as of this school year, there are no remaining public schools. (Kockler has since resigned.) Beutner was toying with restructuring the LAUSD using the portfolio model that has decimated other public school districts. In short, Beutner wanted to break the LAUSD and break the union.

The plan was ambitious, UTLA leadership told us, but not impossible. School districts in smaller cities—Detroit, New Orleans, and Newark, New Jersey—had been driven to near extinction by the same contingent of pro-charter reformers. Now they wanted to try their hand in the nation's second-largest school district.

We couldn't just be on the defensive, UTLA officers told us. We had to have a plan that was equally ambitious and visionary.

You want to get a room full of teachers fired up? Ask them to imagine schools with full-time nurses and librarians; where counselors and psychologist social workers have time to actually meet with students; where teachers don't have to waste days of instruction showing movies while they administer one-on-one standardized tests in the back of the classroom; where instead of random stop-and-frisk searches, restorative justice practices guide school discipline. Ask them to imagine fully funded schools where teachers can actually meet their students' needs.

A strange feeling rises when asked to imagine something so far from reality. As teachers, we spend so much time in the trenches that we sometimes forget just how bad things are. Class sizes of 40 start to seem normal. Taking home six hours of grading over the weekend does, too. We stock our own supplies of granola bars for the kids we know are always hungry. A student starts coming to class high and stops engaging with the work. We try home calls and one-on-ones and restorative conversations, but the student needs more than that. We can hear the cry for help, but there's no help to be given.

When one stops and really thinks about it all, the feeling that comes isn't one of sadness or hopelessness or even rage. It's the feeling that comes after that, the feeling of we've had enough.

Some folks might just throw up their hands and go home, or else change careers. And a lot of teachers do that. The ones who stay, though, are a special breed, possessed of a mix of dedication and grit. You can say a lot of things about school-teachers—we're unpolished, unsophisticated, exhausted—but one thing you can't do is mess with us. If the system doesn't break us—if the years of crushing workloads and the heartbreaking inability to meet our students' needs don't turn us cynical and hard—nothing will.

Certainly not the threat of weeks of no pay.

Certainly not hand-wringing over inflated budget deficits.

Certainly not an investment banker and his billionaire cronies.

Certainly not, it would turn out, the biggest rainstorm of the season.

In every area meeting, there'd be at least one moment when that feeling of fight was palpable. Some salty old teacher would go on a tirade about students sitting on stools in classrooms crammed past capacity, and people would nod and mm-hmm.

“Strike,” someone would start chanting. “Strike, strike.” People would stand, pound tables, clap their hands, stomp their feet. “Strike, strike, strike.”

The room would be electric. Our voices would vibrate off the walls. We’d sound bigger than a room of educators, bigger than all the bullshit and billionaires. We’d sound like a force, like thunder.

This superintendent doesn’t know who he’s messing with, I’d think.

\* \* \*

The lead-up to the strike lasted months. There were lunch meetings, after-school meetings, student meetings, before-school leafleting, strike authorization voting, phone banking, email writing, question fielding, planning and organizing and logisticizing. All of this was unpaid, in addition to a regular workday. It was good work, important work, but it was definitely work. Just as I had come to learn that most of teaching isn’t revelatory moments of enlightenment but rather the mundanity of unjamming copy machines and confiscating cell phones, I came to realize that a lot of striking isn’t rallying hearts and souls, but staple-gunning signs to picket sticks, and trying to secure a reliable restroom.

In a lot of ways, I’m a strange choice for a chapter chair, but no one else at my school wanted to step up. Located in East LA, we’re a small pilot school, an LAUSD model in which schools receive additional funding and autonomy in exchange for added work hours and responsibilities for teachers. The additional work meant folks were already stretched past capacity; no one was jumping at the chance to go to more after-school meetings.

So we were stuck with me. I’m good at the parts of union work that involve organization. I can write one hell of a bulleted and subheaded email, but I’m not a rile-you-up kind of person. I feel uncomfortable being the center of attention. I don’t possess natural leadership abilities, like anticipating people’s needs and giving inspirational speeches. I’m the same way in the classroom: I can write a good curriculum and blaze through a stack of essays, but I’m not the teacher you go talk about your problems with. As in teaching, as in union work, as in life, it’s the people part I struggle with.

As far as being a chapter chair, I was lucky—my school’s administration was supportive, and all the teachers and counselors were committed to striking. Because we receive extra funding, our school already has the resources other LAUSD schools lack, resources that were key demands of the contract—a full-time nurse and librarian, English language arts class sizes as low as 24, and two full-time counselors and a psychologist social worker for a student body of 400. (In contrast, 80 percent of LAUSD schools lack a full-time nurse; class sizes are as large as 48 on some secondary campuses; and the counselor-to-student ratio is 1-to-945.) Because our school has those extra resources, our teachers understand firsthand their importance. “We’re fighting so that all LAUSD students can have what you guys have here,” I told students in our pre-strike lunch meetings.

The school year crept on, the strike looming like a rainstorm on the horizon.



The backseat of my car overflowed with flyers and signs as the district pulled one tricky maneuver after another, stalling the fact-finding process and filing last-minute court injunctions.

“They’re trying to break our momentum,” UTLA leadership told us.

At times, it seemed like it was working. “Can we just get this over with?” my co-workers would ask. We had to follow every step of the bargaining process in order for the strike to be legal, but we were all frustrated.

Originally scheduled for early October, the strike was pushed back to Jan. 10, then at the last minute, Jan. 14.

That rainstorm on the horizon—it was finally here. Figuratively and literally.

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The night before the first strike day, I slept four hours. I kept waking up from nightmares in which no one showed up, or I lost all our supplies, or my phone died.

My stomach crunched and my mind raced as I drove to school in the pre-dawn dark, rain coming down in sheets. Amidst all the preparation, I’d forgotten that I was actually in charge of the picket line. I wasn’t just taking notes and sending emails anymore.

Puddles pooled on sidewalks and gutters overflowed as my co-workers started arriving. I ran through my checklist: Take attendance, distribute signs, make sure all the gates and entrances were covered. I kept trying to text the chapter chairs from the other schools on our shared campus, but no one was replying.

We must have been a sorry sight, marching in a slow circle in the pouring rain. We should start chanting, I knew, but I was too awkward and stressed to get a word out. The first few cars honked as they passed, almost pityingly.

Finally F raised his voice: “When our schools are under attack, what do we do?”

And we answered, “Stand up, fight back!”

He kept us chanting, even as our signs soaked through and turned to mush in our hands. Students and teaching assistants (who aren’t part of our union) joined us. The more rain came down, the more cars honked, a little blast of validation each time. We cheered, jumped, raised our fists.

After morning picketing, we headed downtown for the first-day march, where teachers from across the 700-square-mile district gathered in front of City Hall. A sea of red umbrellas and ponchos filled the four-block length of the park—red for UTLA, but also #RedForEd, the official color of educator resistance since the wave of wildcat strikes in 2018. The color was a symbol—we were now part of that bigger fight.

I’d never seen so many Angelenos in the rain. “We don’t do this here,” I kept saying, wondering if people in other parts of the country would grasp the significance. Teachers beat drums, banged tambourines, blew whistles and horns. Helicopters pulsed in the air above us; news vans surrounded us. We were on the national stage, and we knew it.

In every pocket of people, a chant bellowed. A voice would start: “Everywhere

we go, people want to know.” And other voices would answer “Who we are, so we tell them.” Every face you saw looked familiar, even if you didn’t know the person. “We are the teachers, the mighty, mighty teachers.” It was a face that was lit up with conviction and ready to fight. “Fighting for justice, and for education.” It was a face you knew, it was your face, and you were part of that fight.

I had no sense of how large the crowd was. I just knew I felt like an ant in a huge swarming line. Umbrellas bumped and snagged as we moved painstakingly slow, so crowded we had to stop every couple of steps.

“Wow, seeing the pictures on the news, impressive!” a friend texted. But all I could see were the shoulders in front of me.

When we came to the Second Street tunnel, we put our umbrellas down for the first time that day. I craned my neck around, finally able to see the crowd. We were massive. We filled the tunnel from side to side and as far forward and back as I could see.

Our voices boomed and echoed against the concrete walls. One person shouted into a megaphone “UT,” and we all answered “LA!” We chanted it again and again, the name of our union, but also something else, something bigger and more powerful. Our voices grew stronger with every chant.

Suddenly I didn’t feel like an ant anymore. I didn’t even really feel like me. I felt like a part of a movement.

When the rally ended, we had a couple hours to rest before afternoon picketing. I stopped at my apartment, changed my wet socks, put on a dry sweater. I lay on my bed and felt the pangs in my legs from walking, and rested just enough to be able to return to school for another round of picketing.

By the end of the day, I’d walked 10 miles. My shoes were soaked and my feet ached. My voice was hoarse from chanting. I was more tired than I could remember being.

But I’d done it. We’d done it. We had held a picket line for a day.

\* \* \*

No one warns you how a strike will take over your life.

Seven a.m. picketing, mid-morning rallies, a short rest, then more picketing until 4 p.m. By the time you’re done, your body’s toast. Your brain is fried. Your voice is shot. It’s all you can do to crawl home, peel off your wet layers, and scroll through the union emails and texts that need replies.

The scenes that remain from those first days are a blur of drudgery and exaltation: a fellow teacher blasting salsa from a massive speaker and barking into a microphone like a street hawker, “Viva la huelga! We are East LA! We are fighting for our schools, we are fighting for our community!”; doing the have-to-pee dance while waiting to use the Jack in the Box bathroom; eating pan dulce that had gone soggy from the rain; line dancing in the crosswalks during red lights, while the marching band played under a tarp, instruments wrapped in trash bags; the blast of horns from garbage trucks and public buses and delivery vans and sheriff



patrols and damn near every sedan that passed; the thick deep sleep I'd fall into during my afternoon power naps; the throb in my lower back the day my period came; the tide of red flowing from the Little Tokyo metro stop and into the street like a blood trail, all the cars honking around us; the East Area rally turning into a block party where people danced under their umbrellas to "Jump Around" and "Killing in the Name Of" and every other song on the soundtrack of 1990s middle school dances.

As chapter chair, I kept my head down and focused on what needed to get done. I organized donations and bought supplies. I sent texts and emails to keep people updated. I picked up supplies at 6 a.m. and delivered them to nearby campuses. The only thing keeping me together was the afternoon break, in which I could go home and dry off for an hour.

Luckily, other folks stepped up. F stood in the rain with no umbrella and led chants until his voice went hoarse. Then M would take over. P danced in the crosswalks until all the cars honked. R showed up even though he'd had surgery the week before. On the picket line, you got to see a different side of your co-workers, who for most of the workday stay hidden behind their classroom doors. You got to see who rolled hard, who the ride-or-dies were, and you got to do it together.

As the rain hammered on, the community rose up around us. A restaurant brought hot soup one morning. Local unions brought coffee and doughnuts. Parents brought tamales and pupusas, and the teaching assistants who weren't striking brought breakfast burritos. The neighbors carried over an outdoor heater. The raspados shop across the street gave us free coffee and let us use their bathroom. A neighborhood dude unloaded a truck bed full of bottled water. Even our students brought us food, of the endearingly teenage variety: boxes of Jack in the Box french fries.

You always hear about how people love teachers, but when you actually see them show up and demonstrate that love, especially when you're soaking wet and bone tired, it's enough to make you cry.

\* \* \*

At the end of every day, I'd lay my wet clothes on my furnace to dry, crawl into my bed, and scroll through the news coverage. Before the strike, even progressive outlets like the *Los Angeles Times* and KCRW focused their coverage on pay. Now their reporters were on the line, talking to teachers. Stories led with interviews and personal anecdotes from classrooms, followed by descriptions of lively picket lines and powerful rallies. Finally, news coverage focused on the reality of our teaching conditions, which were our students' learning conditions, which is what we were fighting to improve.

They said we were making history, but I was too close and too tired to have much perspective on the impact of what we were doing. I'd scroll through images of teachers in red ponchos and aerial shots of huge crowds, and hardly believe that I was a part of it all. It felt like being a dot in an impressionist painting.

“Do you think this is what it was like in the Civil Rights Movement?” someone asked while we were Lyfting back to campus. I wondered the same thing—whether the people making history ever know they’re making history, or if they’re just a bunch of tired, fist-raising bodies in a crowd, with a vague sense of society’s gears changing around them?

Other people reflected back to me the immensity of what we were doing. Friends from all over the country messaged and texted. Teachers across the United States posted solidarity photos. A public school from New York City “adopted” my school and donated funds for food and transportation. “We’re fighting similar forces out here,” they wrote.

Restaurants all over LA were providing free or discounted meals to striking teachers, but I was too tired to take advantage of any of them. After a day on the picket line, I was too shot to do much of anything. All I could do was ladle out some soup, answer emails, and then turn off the light by 9 p.m.

\* \* \*

When the alarm went off at 5:30 a.m. Thursday morning, I didn’t want to get out of bed. The night was black outside, and I could hear rain thundering down. But I couldn’t bail—I was in charge. I sighed, tugged on my still-damp layers and laced up my still-soggy sneakers. I didn’t bother to put on makeup or fix my bed head—there was no point.

It was the fourth day of the strike and the worst rain yet. All of our signs were beaten and wrinkled. No one chanted. No one marched. Hardly anyone spoke. We wanted to be back in our classrooms, warm and dry and with our kids—fist bumps at the door, learning objectives on the projector, pair-shares and turn-and-talks and stacks of do-nows and exit slips piled in trays near the classroom entrance.

“We’re tired,” G said. “We need a pep talk.”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I was beaten too.

“Some of us live too far to go home in the middle of the day,” S added. “We’ve been out here all week, without any place to rest up and get dry.”

I looked at their wet, exhausted faces, and realized I’d been so wrapped up in organizing the logistics of the picket line that I’d forgotten about the most important part: the people. I’d been going home every day to nap, and it was the only thing keeping me together. How could I have overlooked the fact that not everyone had that?

I hadn’t felt so inadequate since my first year teaching, another high-stakes, high-emotion situation when you struggle to keep your head above water. You do your best, but you feel yourself screwing up all the time, and feel the weight of all the people you’re letting down in the process.

What could I do in that moment? Stutter a “Shit, sorry” and kick myself for my lack of care and thought. But the right words still wouldn’t come. They needed inspiration, and I couldn’t give it to them.

Just then, a station wagon plastered in the logo for local radio station 97.9 La



Raza pulled up, music blasting from inside. A mustachioed DJ in a windbreaker jumped out. “You guys hungry?” he asked, his arms outstretched.

Before we could answer, he opened the hatchback. The entire back of the car was filled with taco fixings. “We support you! 97.9 La Raza supports you!” he exclaimed as we gathered around. The tacos were still warm and the bowls of guacamole plentiful. The DJ took pictures with us. It was the edible pep talk we needed.

When the rain let up later that afternoon, I gathered all of us together.

What did you say, you want to know. I wish I could tell you, but I was too tired and nervous to have any idea, let alone remember. I might have acknowledged how rough the day had been and how whipped we all were. I might have said that the district was waiting for this moment, to see if we’d break—if we’d roll hard for three days, then get tired and give up. Whether we’d give up on our kids.

I like to think I said that this moment was when it counted, when we had to show the district, the community, the country, and our kids that we really meant it. “We’ve come this far,” I like to think I said. “We’ve showed up every single day, like fucking soldiers, and we can’t stop now. Everyone is looking to us. We’ve become something bigger than a single school or strike, bigger than an ‘I’ and ‘you.’ We’ve truly become a ‘we,’ and I’ve never felt more a part of something important than right now, right here, with you guys.”

Maybe I said that. But probably I stood there red-faced and mumbled something about sticking together and staying strong, then left us all to go home.

\* \* \*

The next week, on the sixth day of the strike, we sat in a nearby park eating chile relleno burritos. We’d had so many donations from our adopted school and from individuals that our lunch was paid for. The rain had finally broken, and it was back to a typical 65-degree LA winter day.

We were relieved but anxious. UTLA had just announced victory—a tentative agreement with the district. It seemed the fight was almost over. “Let’s wait until we see the agreement,” R said.

So we did. We hunched over our phones while we ate, reading aloud the summary and trying to make sense of the 47-page document we were to vote on in a couple of hours.

The summary sounded good. The LAUSD had finally agreed to drop a contentious article in our contract that allowed for unequivocal raising of class sizes. Within two years’ time, every school would have a full-time nurse and librarian. The counselor-to-student ratio would be reduced to 1-to-500.

“One-to-500?!” M asked. “That’s still too high.”

“It’s the state average,” I answered. “The district probably wouldn’t offer better than that.”

“We’re the biggest school district in the state,” M replied. “We should be leading the way. I mean, what have we been striking for?”

The more we dug through the contract, the more thorns appeared. Class size reductions in most content areas would occur at a rate of one student per year for three years, leaving most teachers with only slightly less painful class sizes. Meanwhile, special education and K–3rd grade didn’t see any reductions. While we’d gained counselors, there was no additional funding for mental health services, such as psychologist social workers. “They’re the single most important thing in keeping students from dropping out,” F said.

I looked around at people’s faces. They were disappointed. “We can do better than this,” some said. “This is crumbs,” others said.

I tried to remind them who we were dealing with—a pro-charter board and a billionaire superintendent who had been hired to decimate our school district. Previous contract offers included raises contingent on additional work hours and healthcare cuts to new employees, and no offers on our other demands. The fact that we’d gotten this much was huge.

“This isn’t what we stood out in the rain for,” F said.

The more we talked, the more I understood their perspective. We’d come out more unified and forceful than even the union predicted. We were a movement. UTLA had been stoking the flames of a smoldering fire, the burn for something better that existed in all of us. Now that it had been unleashed, people didn’t want to concede. They didn’t want to settle for the status quo. They wanted that vision of fully funded schools. Or at least class sizes below 30.

“I’m voting no,” M said, her face set in stone.

“It’s gonna look so bad if we vote it down,” I said. The agreement had already been announced to the media as a victory. Would parents stand behind us if we voted it down? Would teachers start crossing the line? If that happened, the district would likely come back with a worse offer.

We felt like our hands were tied. We had to vote in four hours. I wrote down people’s questions as I headed to a last-minute meeting, but when I returned to campus to administer the vote, I only had an answer to one. People were pissed, and as the chapter chair, I was the one receiving the piss.

“We’re being forced to vote on a document we’ve barely read,” F said.

“This isn’t good enough,” M said as she filled in the bubble for “no.”

I wished I could disagree.

\* \* \*

The agreement did pass. UTLA announced it that night on Facebook Live. I watched the storm of angry-face reactions float up the screen and felt my heart sink. We’d been so united, and now we were breaking apart.

I was relieved the agreement passed, but only because I thought the scenario of it not passing was worse. I wasn’t excited about the agreement, and in all my messaging that evening, I hadn’t talked to a single person who was.

But I couldn’t dwell on it for too long. After all, I had to lesson plan. I had to be back in my classroom in less than 12 hours.



\* \* \*

I wish I could say our staff rode back into school the next day in red shirts, on a wave of victory chants, high-fiving students in the hallways and basking in pride over what we'd achieved.

As it was, we mostly kept our doors closed. We nodded at each other in the halls, greeted our students, said hello to the office staff. But the disappointment was thick.

"What happens when the revolution fails you?" someone asked in a Facebook post.

But had we been a revolution? We were a union in contract negotiations. We were going to have to compromise. We weren't going to change public education in six days.

But, watching the footage and reading the coverage, I began to zoom out of my individual perspective. In a single week, we'd shifted the narrative around education. We'd opened the public's eyes to the real conditions of our schools. We'd taken the focus off teacher pay and onto school resources; we'd connected the issue to funding and taxes at the state level; we'd demonstrated the power of organized labor; we'd inspired teachers in other cities who were experiencing the same conditions. We'd stood in the rain, danced on the picket lines, and filled the streets. Maybe we were something close to a revolution.

I think the real victory of the LA teacher strike will be the shift it has inspired. Already, coverage of the Denver, Oakland, and Virginia strikes is different. There's less talk about "greedy teachers," and more explicitly connecting school conditions to corporate tax breaks and charter growth. Even in Denver, where the main dispute is over pay, coverage is contextualized and includes teacher interviews. LA teachers created momentum for a broader movement to reinvestment in public education.

I wish that were enough for my co-workers, and I wish it were enough for our kids. The fact is, most of our students returned on Jan. 23 to the same conditions they'd left on Jan. 11.

So what do you do when you've envisioned something transformative, then been asked to settle? When you've felt a movement growing, only to have it yanked from your fingers? When you've marched 49 miles in a week and messed up and let people down and kept showing up anyway?

You do what you always do.

You get up, keep teaching, and keep fighting. 🦾

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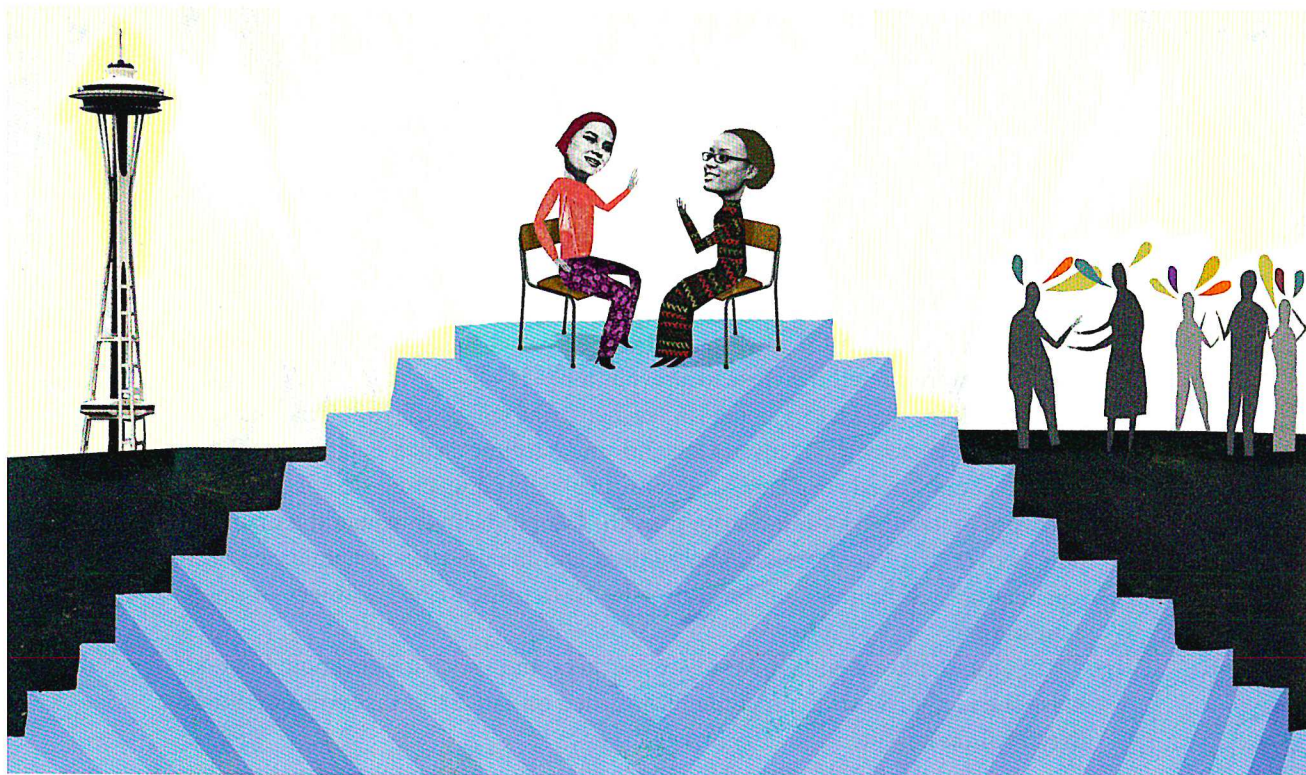
This article was originally published on Hazlitt and in the Fall 2019 *Rethinking Schools* (Vol. 34, No. 1).

# Trusted and Respected

## Seattle's site-based organizing

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BY JOHN DONAGHY



KATHERINE STREETER

**“S**hannon—but she doesn’t like the union,” said a 3rd-grade teacher, then a 4th-grade teacher, and then eight more teachers over the course of the day we spent at an elementary school in North Seattle in spring 2014. My partner, a board member of the Seattle Education Association (SEA), and I were on a union listening tour. The question we’d posed to each teacher, after first asking how their year was going and about our upcoming bargaining, was “Who’s trusted and respected here in the building?”

SEA was then two years into an effort to reorganize. We’d visited at least 80 of the District’s 100 schools and spoken with more than half of SEA’s 6,000 teachers and certificated staff, para-educators, and office administrators.



The reorganization would culminate in a seven-day strike in September 2015, led by a 40-member bargaining team of largely first-time bargainers and activists. The action won guaranteed recess time for students, removed any connection between test scores and teacher evaluations, won significant raises, and launched Racial Equity Teams in dozens of schools.

The cornerstone of the reorganization was an effort to identify natural school leaders—educators trusted and respected by their co-workers, regardless of their disposition toward the union—and invite them to engage with and shape the union’s direction.

### **New Leaders Elected**

Recognizing their union was not nearly as powerful as it could be, a new slate of SEA officers and the union’s executive director, Glenn Bafia, looked for a new approach in spring 2012. Membership participation and educator morale were low following the bruising regime of an education reformer as superintendent. The union had eaten a high-profile, though somewhat symbolic concession on teacher evaluations and student testing without much of a fight. The regular monthly meetings of building representatives were contentious and caustic, often focusing on “taking positions” on issues but with little action to back them up. Member engagement lagged well behind other locals in the state. SEA staff were buried in disciplinary hearings, grievance meetings, and evaluation conferences, without a strategy or much time to organize.

SEA’s new president, Jonathan Knapp, was a high school auto-shop teacher who’d just finished a term as vice president. Phyllis Campano, an elementary special education teacher, was the new vice president. They were both on full-time release from their teaching jobs. When I first met them, after I was assigned by the Washington Education Association (WEA) to support local organizing, the two indicated they wanted to meet one-on-one with every SEA member. Across WEA and other NEA state affiliates, local leaders were being asked to sit down with each member for a half hour or so to get to know them. I looked at my watch, pressed a button, and said, “Go!” With only four-year terms, they would need to start right away.

In Aesop’s fable, the strength of a single stick is contrasted with that of a bundle of sticks. A single stick can easily be broken, but wrap together enough of even the flimsiest sticks, and they can’t be broken. This is of course the very premise of unionism. But while Aesop’s fable holds much truth, we know as organizers that rather than members being simply scattered individuals, they have instead already grouped themselves informally around natural leaders. The work of the union, then, is to unite as many of the natural leaders as possible, who then bring along those in their circles of influence.

In unions that regularly and successfully organize unorganized workers, the identification and recruitment of natural leaders is the basis for developing effective campaigns. When the employer fights back hard against the union, either the natural leaders can assure their co-workers that the struggle is worth it, or the campaign is defeated.

The opposite approach, which is more common, puts a premium on activism and affinity for the union over actual leadership. The ticket to getting union roles is simply willingness to do something—lobby, make phone calls, come to a school board meeting—rather than any ability to bring others along. Some who get involved are in fact leaders, but many are not. When activists complain about co-worker apathy, a common refrain, it can be an indicator they simply do not have leadership. I was on a building visit in another local, and my partner there began recruiting someone we'd just met to be a building rep after she told us how big a union supporter she was—even though she also told us that she was new in the building and isolated from everyone else! We had no reason to think this person would influence any of her co-workers; if she did become rep, it was likely to be a frustrating experience for everyone.

SEA's leaders instead decided to apply a natural leaders approach. Early in the reorganization we were running phone banks for an upcoming school levy vote. Our usual turnout methods—email blasts, announcements at union meetings, etc.—were getting the usual poor turnout. One afternoon we received a call from an elementary teacher, Michael Tamayo, asking for the phone-banking details. A half-dozen or so of Michael's co-workers had named him among the most trusted and respected educators in his school. A few hours later, he showed up with eight co-workers in tow. Although the union was a bit of a vague idea to him, he cared a lot about the school levy, since it provided more resources to his low-income school and to a program that provided a path for people of color to become teachers. Jonathan and Phyllis continued to seek him out, and he became progressively more involved in SEA, especially around teacher quality and racial equity, and eventually he became SEA's president in late 2019.

With the understanding that natural leaders exist in every school, our plan was to identify and engage such leaders across Seattle's 100 schools. That seemed more doable than sitting down individually with 6,000 members! Our theory of change went something like this: "We can reboot the Seattle Education Association by relentlessly identifying natural school leaders, building relationships with them, and inviting them to lend their leadership to a new shared purpose."

### **The First Listening Tour**

Eager to help the state's largest local reinvent itself, WEA's state president and executive director joined the SEA team of staff and local officers in June 2012 for the first listening tours. We broke into teams of two to go from room to room and office to office in our target schools to seek out staff for brief one-on-one conversations. We didn't announce our visits ahead of time, lest various gatekeepers—principals, office managers, human resources—try to herd us into break rooms or otherwise restrict access.

The teams spoke individually with more than 700 educators in 20 schools over four days. While some union staff feared members would close their doors to us or even be hostile, the opposite occurred. Members were eager to talk with us. If they couldn't speak when we visited, they'd insist we come find them later in the



day. While some shared criticisms, most were curious about our visits and hopeful that the union could make a difference.

The individual visits were intended to last about 10 minutes. These were not classic one-on-ones, but a survey with an eye toward mapping important relationships in the building. We mostly asked how their year was, what the school was like, and what they thought their union should be focusing on. And then we asked, who would you say is trusted and respected here in the building?

Trust and respect are the main currency in cultivating a following. You can trust someone without respecting them, or vice versa. You might have a colleague you trust enough to share complaints about the principal, but whose teaching doesn't meet your standards. Likewise, you might admire someone's excellent lessons, but you wouldn't share a complaint with them for fear it would get back to the principal. Without a measure of both trust and respect, it's unlikely someone will have much influence with you.

When the Seattle teams returned to the union office, they wrote visit reports, and then, on large posters of each school's roster, placed a colored adhesive dot next to a person's name for each time they were named by someone as trusted and respected. Dozens of educators had five or 10 dots next to their names, and in larger schools some had more than 20! While some of those members (and with union shop in place, nearly all were members) were known to union staff and leaders, others were not. Many were wholly uninvolved in SEA.

As the team looked at the posters, it was inspiring to think of the power educators could wield if these natural leaders were united. In subsequent presentations we've done with other locals, showing leaders and staff one of these charts is enough to set them salivating.

Based on my experience in Seattle and then in other locals around the country, not all team members are immediately successful at asking the "trusted and respected" question. Sometimes they aren't fully committed to the reason for asking (which can result from a less than timely orientation). They may think that the real value of the tour is in showing members their union is active and cares about them. That's a common viewpoint, but unfortunately one that reinforces the idea that the union is a third party. Others may struggle because the question can feel like a non sequitur. It takes a bit of skill to have a 10-minute conversation with someone where you establish enough trust and credibility that you can get up from the table and say, "Great talking with you today. Before we go, who would you say are some of the folks who are really trusted and respected among the staff here at Longwood Elementary?"

In the experience of most tour leaders, members are actually happy to answer that question and recognize some esteemed co-workers. It does tend to be better not to ask them directly who they *themselves* trust and respect; that can feel too personal. But asking them who is generally trusted and respected seems to create the needed personal distance (and in fact often results in the member sharing who they personally trust and respect, saying for example, "She's such a great teacher.") The No. 1 mistake we make is not to give enough time to answer the question. In-

stead of letting the question hang out there while the person mentally goes down the building's roster (or looks at the roster we have), we rephrase the question, most typically into something like "you know, who do people go to?" That's actually a different question, one that tends to result in a skew toward naming people with more access to knowledge or resources, such as department chairs, team leaders, office secretaries, union building reps, or even the principal.

### **Combating Racism and Implicit Bias**

Evidence-based leadership identification and recruiting is an important check on implicit bias. Without it, we are likely to pick people who tend to be like us. At future decision points, SEA leaders would check the name of every potential recruit to a committee, lobbying team, or other union body against what their co-workers indicated. We weren't shy about calling each other out for seeking to elevate someone we personally liked in the absence of evidence of leadership. If none of your co-workers placed you among their most trusted and respected colleagues, it wouldn't make sense for the union to ignore their views and elevate you into a representative role. This created some delicate situations when eager volunteers or longtime activists were turned away. While this could be awkward, officers believed the benefit to the union made it worthwhile.

Officers and staff were keen to discern the leadership of educators of color. On one hand, we had a fairly objective measure, but on the other, it was an overwhelmingly white certificated workforce (paraprofessionals and office staff were much more racially mixed) naming whom they trusted and respected. Although there were in fact many educators of color who were named by their white co-workers as trusted and respected, we chose to bake an assumption of bias into our future recruitment efforts. If you ask a white educator to name colleagues they trust and respect, we assumed that they would be at least somewhat more likely to think of other white people first. So when we were recruiting elementary teachers to a committee, for example, we might build a starting list from all the educators of color who received at least three dots and all white educators who received at least five dots.

While this method supported robust recruitment of educators of color into union roles—membership of color on SEA's 40-member bargaining teams has been at least 40 percent over the last three bargains, far higher than the share of educators of color in the workforce—some wondered whether the chosen educators of color were those who were named more by their white peers than their peers of color and how that might be skewing representation. (No one argued that the leadership of an educator of color who was frequently named by white peers should be discounted, only that we needed to be sure that educators of color were represented by leaders of their choosing as well.) To some degree this concern was met by over-recruiting from schools with higher proportions of educators of color, virtually guaranteeing that the leaders were named by educators of color. SEA has also begun in recent years to enter more data into NEA's new membership database, called NEA 360. This allows the union to note exactly who each member names as those they trust and respect, and thus reports can be generated that



provide some insight into that question. In the meantime, SEA did generate one useful data point on that question: a survey about new graduation requirements asked 1,000 high school staff to name staff they trusted and respected to serve on a bargaining committee with the district. SEA was able to disaggregate responses by race and compare who educators of color and white educators each chose and fine-tune recruitment (although in that survey, at any rate, largely the same educators were chosen by both groups).

### **Intentional Leadership Recruitment**

The issue that led us to Shannon's North Seattle school in 2014 was that we'd gotten almost no signatures from there on a petition to place a class size initiative on the Washington state ballot. The union's building rep told us people were apathetic. We were puzzled, as members at other buildings were collecting signatures like crazy—the first fruits of our efforts to involve more natural leaders over the previous two years. For the first time anyone could remember, SEA was among the state's leaders in participating in a coordinated WEA action.

Members at the school told us that Shannon (not her real name) didn't like the union and had spoken against the initiative at a meeting. It would have been easy to take a pass on initiating contact with Shannon—there were 100 other schools to get signatures from. But not every school has a Shannon, trusted and respected to the virtual exclusion of anyone else. We often find three or four staff taking top billing. If we were going to get any signatures from her school, or probably much support for anything union, we needed to meet Shannon.

Vice President Phyllis Campano stopped by a few days later. As it turned out, Shannon was not anti-union, but rather simply believed the union's priority needed to be compensation, not class size. Phyllis couldn't persuade her our ballot initiative was the right priority, and we never did get many signatures from her school. But a relationship was begun that eventually led to Shannon being a member of the 2015 bargaining team, and then of SEA's executive board. In the years that followed, I can't recall a union event that Shannon attended, and there were many, where she didn't bring along a sizable group of colleagues.

After the initial round of visits in June 2012, SEA visited another 50 schools the following school year. But the follow-up with leaders was slow and not terribly successful. The officers invited identified school leaders to lobby days and other events, but had few takers. SEA's leadership team knew the union wasn't seen as very powerful, and these natural leaders were clearly reluctant to invest time and energy in an uncertain proposition. Also, many of them were already highly engaged both at school and in their personal lives.

One leader at a North Seattle high school was on our radar for several years. Although she always seemed on the edge of getting involved, she never made the leap. She led a vibrant after-school horticulture program, was science department chair, and was in training to be a principal. A few weeks *after* the strike in 2015, however, she walked into the union office and told us she'd stepped down as department chair and wanted to prioritize union activism. It took the success of the

strike for her to believe collective action by educators, and her union, held more potential to make the change she wanted to see. While we were fortunate that not all natural school leaders needed this level of proof, there is a positive feedback loop between organizational success and leadership commitment: More of one spurs more of the other.

The leadership team pivoted in the winter of 2013–14. Instead of recruiting leaders to join the union's work, which hadn't borne fruit, we set up a series of meetings that simply brought these leaders together to meet and talk about what was important to them. We approached about 75 of the newly identified leaders, most of whom had little or no union involvement, and more than 60 participated, an astonishing turnout. After a brief welcome from Jonathan and Phyllis, they rotated World Café-style in groups of four for the next hour or so, responding to some open-ended questions. The leaders were excited to have met and to have had rich conversations, and were intrigued by what this convening said about their union.

The meeting did not include an ask, which is something of a sin in organizer circles, but making an ask is what they expected us to do, and we knew we needed these new leaders to join us in figuring out what was worth asking and doing as a union. We never did get around to reconvening these groups, but they provided an important entrée to establish new relationships and signal to these leaders that there was untapped possibility in their union.

### **Time to Fight Back**

SEA's leaders correctly assessed that there was a significant lack of trust in the union and its leadership. SEA had accepted a concession on testing and evaluation in 2010 and failed to remove it in bargaining in 2013. While the practical impacts of the provision were limited, and the contract settlement was otherwise pretty typical, the contract passed by only a thin margin. Educators at Seattle's Garfield High School had organized a high-profile and successful boycott of the district's use of the standardized MAP tests that spring, but the union had failed to leverage that into a robust or successful contract fight over testing and evaluations. Members were understandably reluctant to express approval for a deal that reflected that failure. While the union had tried to organize some pushback in the summer of 2013, it was too little, too late.

In truth, the natural leaders of the workforce were largely on the sidelines as far as the union was concerned and were not responsive to calls to action, such as there were. Most immersed themselves in the work of their individual schools. Some joined Social Equity Educators (SEE), a member caucus, to push the union and Seattle Public Schools toward a more progressive agenda. When natural leaders did choose to become reps, many quickly quit or confined themselves to their buildings. As many confessed to us, they found the monthly Rep Assembly absurdly contentious, and seemingly irrelevant. Indeed, the first Rep Assembly I witnessed featured a lengthy debate over a letter to an elected official of another state. Meanwhile the union's bargaining team had just begun bargaining and virtually no time was devoted to any meaningful discussion of what was at stake.



Following the 2013 bargain, SEA's leadership team and staff conducted more school visits but also focused on following up with the hundreds of members identified as natural leaders. They found that almost to a person they were angry about education reform, cynical about the district's leadership, and, although wary of SEA, appreciative that union leaders had recognized their leadership and were reaching out to them. Finally feeling some sense that they could turn things around, union leaders were challenged in early 2014 by an announcement from the district that it was going to cut 50 positions due to an unexpected budget shortfall.

Union leaders believed the district had enough in reserves to cover the shortfall, but complaining publicly about that in board meetings hadn't stopped such cuts before. So rather than focus on getting a few dozen or even a few hundred people to a school board meeting to protest, leaders devised a strategy to create chaos in the school-by-school budgeting process then underway. It would require schools to vote down their budgets, which by contract would trigger a mediation process facilitated by a central office administrator. Even though the superintendent held final say over each school's budget, such a strategy would have the potential to involve thousands of educators right where they worked.

Successful execution of the strategy would require influential educators in each school to endorse it and validate the union's recommendation to vote no on their school budget, *even if their school was untouched by the cuts*. The SEA Rep Assembly endorsed the strategy somewhat lukewarmly, expressing doubts about the union's analysis and strategy. But SEA's leaders then began reaching out to the school leaders they had been cultivating relationships with to get their thoughts on the strategy. With many schools at a loss on how to cope with the coming cuts, they took a leap of faith and, along with many of the building reps, began recommending that schools vote down their budgets to force central office administrators to come explain themselves.

Within three weeks, nearly 50 schools voted to reject their budgets, with more reporting in each day. After the first school's mediation, and faced with the prospects of dozens more, the district called the union to say they were re-analyzing their budget for ways to avoid the cuts. In a school board meeting shortly thereafter, the district's budget director publicly thanked SEA for pointing out that there was a "fudge factor" that could cover the cuts. District administrators then privately appealed to the union for help in getting new school budgets passed, without the cuts, expressing particular bewilderment about "all these solidarity votes" where even schools without cuts had rejected their schools' budgets.

Following the budget action, SEA began recruiting its team for the upcoming bargaining. While the budget fight had garnered SEA's leadership some credibility,

**With many schools at a loss on how to cope with the coming cuts, they began recommending that schools vote down their budgets.**

they still barely won re-election later that spring. The following school year, SEA's leadership team proposed quadrupling the size of its bargaining team. We wanted as many members as possible to know someone on that team who held their trust and respect. The countless hours of relationship-building, the success of the budget fight, and the commitment to open the process to many more people led to a tremendous amount of interest from heretofore inactive leaders in joining the new team.

### **2015 Bargain and Strike**

The 2015 bargaining kicked off a year later as locals up and down the I-5 corridor had been going on one-day strikes against the Washington Legislature. Seattle chose May 19 for its one-day strike, the day *before* bargaining was to start. The march through downtown Seattle was a blocks-long warning shot to the school district; this was not the SEA they had been dealing with in recent years. While everyone from SEA's building reps to district officials expressed doubt that a 40-member team could functionally bargain, as team members walked into bargaining in their red T-shirts, still jubilant from the previous day's action, our power was evident.

Most team members were new to bargaining, and many to being active in the union. Others were seasoned bargainers, and at least five were members of the SEE caucus. SEA's leaders had made a particular effort to recruit natural leaders who were in SEE, including their candidate for vice president in the recent election. SEE members, for their part, made it clear they weren't going to drop their critique of union leadership nor back off from their own progressive advocacy, including guaranteed recess for all students, not a typical union demand (and which was immediately dismissed by the district as outside legal bargaining parameters).

The union officers knew that all on the team, even their critics, were highly credible to their co-workers, and that would lead to a cohesive and effective bargaining team. The team debated and hashed out proposals from recess to teacher quality, from racial equity for students to the pay gap between ESPs and certificated staff, and won on virtually all of them (including recess). When the district brought a late-game takeaway to the table, a raucous meeting of thousands of SEA members gave the team unanimous authority to call a strike. When talks broke down the night before school was to start, our team let the district know that we were now on strike.

Any large strike of any length is a story in itself, and Seattle's seven-day strike is no exception. Almost to a person, the WEA and NEA staff who joined in to support our strike noted how incredibly well organized each school's strike operation was, and how little was needed of them. The natural school leaders were in charge. 📺

*John Donaghy is a former middle school math teacher and president of the Highline Education Association, as well as a former organizer for SEIU. He served as executive director of the Seattle Education Association from 2013 to 2019 and now works for the NEA Center for Organizing.*



# Media Advice for Social Justice Union Leaders

BY SCOTT STEPHENS



SALLY DENG

**T**om Mooney throws back his last swallow of scotch and signals the bartender for another drink. It is a Sunday evening in the quiet lobby bar of the Hyatt Regency Hotel in downtown Los Angeles. Through a window, a hazy sun descends into the Pacific Ocean. Mooney, a vice president of the American Federation of Teachers, has to be in Boston the next day. But instead of taking the red-eye out this evening, he lingers with the unlikeliest of companions: a group of skeptical newspaper reporters who have spent the weekend talking about charter schools and education policy in a forum sponsored and attended by Eli Broad.



“This was great,” Mooney declares happily about his confab with the Fourth Estate. “We need to do this more often.”

Mooney, who would die unexpectedly within a year, grasped the notion that if you do not tell your story, someone else will tell it for you. In his role as president of the Ohio Federation of Teachers, Mooney talked with hundreds of reporters about the dangerous path the state was pursuing with for-profit charter schools and vouchers. He connected the union’s role in empowering not only his members, but also the students those members taught and their families, and improving the communities in which they lived. He was passionate and prepared. He armed

himself with reams of data and he conducted his own research. On some level, Mooney shamed and challenged the media into taking a critical look at these issues. Here are the facts. Here is the research. Why aren’t you reporting on this?

Even union leaders with Mooney’s energy, charm, and intellectual capacity can encounter difficulty when navigating the media landscape. There are a variety of reasons for this. Fewer and fewer Americans have a parent, aunt, or uncle who was a union member. The NewsGuild-CWA, the largest

**The average reporter has little if any experience with signing a union card or negotiating a contract. To some of them, a union is as foreign as an oddball religious sect.**

media union in North America, still represents a fraction of working media workers. These factors mean that the average reporter has little if any experience with signing a union card or negotiating a contract. To some of them, a union is as foreign as an oddball religious sect. More important, privateers—eyeing a huge pot of public dollars—hijacked the word “reform.” As a result, anti-union leaders like Michelle Rhee became “reformers” and teacher unions became barriers to “reform.” Just think about the words reporters use when they write about labor. Unions “demand.” Management “offers.” Unions “walk out.” Management “replaces.” At best, reporters have a vague notion that teacher unions represent educators in the workplace, negotiating contracts and filing grievances. At worst, reporters carry around the bias that teacher unions are greedy, protect dead wood, and don’t care about kids.

It barely matters that the most famous quotation attributed to former American Federation of Teachers president Albert Shanker is probably apocryphal. “When schoolchildren start paying union dues, that’s when I’ll start representing the interests of schoolchildren,” Shanker is widely quoted as saying, although multiple attempts to verify the quote have turned up dead ends. The point is it really doesn’t matter. The alleged “quotation” is an article of faith for many reporters and members of the public, a concise summation of their worst fears about teacher unions.

My perspective on these issues is unique. I worked for 30 years as a newspaper reporter, spending a significant portion of that time at the *Plain Dealer* in Clevel-



land covering education at a local, state, and national level. As a reporter, I headed the union local at my newspaper, negotiating contracts and filing grievances for reporters, copy editors, photographers, and support staff. I served six years on the Newspaper Guild-CWA's International Executive Council and worked on contract campaigns and other issues for locals in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. Later in my career, I joined the communications staff of the American Federation of Teachers, traveling and writing for AFT President Randi Weingarten and working on contract and organizing campaigns for teachers, school support workers, and hospital nurses across the country. For the past seven years I have been a public school administrator, first in Chicago and now in Ohio. I have dealt with issues ranging from curriculum to communications. I am one of the few people who has been on both sides of the bargaining table.

That unique set of experiences has convinced me that nobody is right all the time. That said, the role of teacher unions in social justice and true education reform tends to be covered poorly when it is covered at all. A 2011 study by FrameWorks Institute, a nonprofit think tank based in Washington, D.C., presents a stark and troubling view of where teacher unions stand in the eyes of the news media and, by extension, the general public. "Teachers' unions are overwhelmingly cast as the enemy, seeking to perpetuate the dysfunctional aspects of the system at the expense of the innocent student casualties," wrote researchers Moira O'Neil and Nathaniel Kendall-Taylor. "Media materials rarely covered reforms proposed by teachers' unions themselves and rarely explored reasons why teachers' unions would oppose specific reforms."

What can be done? Is the narrative that teacher unions are obstructionist impediments to reform so entrenched that it will never go away? I don't think so. In fact, I believe there are a handful of no-cost, common-sense guidelines that, if followed by union leaders, could drastically change the way teacher unions are portrayed:

1. Build relationships. Don't wait for a reporter to call you. Encourage casual, off-the-record engagements over lunch, a cup of coffee, or a beer. Pitch a story you'd like published with data. Provide names and contact information the reporter can use. Ask the reporter what they need and how you can help. Give them your personal cell phone number.
2. Acknowledge problems and detail how you plan to fix them. The *New Yorker's* exposé on the so-called New York City rubber rooms played into the worst stereotypes about teacher unions. Weingarten, who was connected to the story via her previous job as president of the United Federation of Teachers, acknowledged the problem, took steps to correct it, and switched the conversation to issues such as providing adequate professional development and supports for teachers who needed help.

3. Be a source of information rather than a purveyor of propaganda. Clichés and sloganeering turn reporters off. Sound arguments backed by data have a lot more traction. Teacher unions can and should be a valuable information source for reporters. Collective bargaining rights give them unusual access to data, documents, and other inside information. It's often easier and quicker for a reporter to obtain information from the union rather than from a large bureaucratic school system.
4. Think like a reporter. Read serious coverage in newspapers and understand what a story is. A teacher putting on a talent show in his or her class is nice, but it's not news. A teacher taking his or her students to a state capitol to grill legislators about public education funding is news and will likely attract media interest.
5. Humanize the union movement. If people think about unions at all, it's usually in the context of contracts, salaries, and benefits. The Teamsters for years have suffered from the image of a group of burly tough guys of shadowy repute. Only recently have people noticed that in reality, Teamsters are also young mothers who drive delivery trucks or senior citizens collecting tolls on a turnpike. Like nurses, teachers are generally respected and well-liked members of the community. They, rather than elected union officials, should be the face of a teacher union. Have a kindergarten teacher at your news conference to talk about the impact of class size on our youngest learners, or a paraprofessional to discuss the challenges of administering a feeding tube to a student. Sometimes, it's even better to have a supporter from the community, such as a parent or clergy member, do the talking. Doing so lends your message third-party validation and undercuts the argument that you are motivated only by self-interest. And don't forget to offer media training to your spokespeople. Union leaders are used to speaking in front of television cameras, but most folks are not. A one-day training session, including role-playing, can build confidence and make your message that much stronger.

Obstructionists? Barriers to change? Yes, there are still plenty of those stories out there. But there is also evidence that teacher unions can be portrayed as progressive agents of change when their efforts are properly marketed.

The AFT's "Reconnecting McDowell" initiative comes to mind. Recognizing that educational opportunity and economic prospects are inextricably linked, Weingarten and the AFT have been catalysts for a major initiative in McDowell County, West Virginia, among the most disadvantaged areas in the United States. Poverty and unemployment are widespread, schools are struggling, and health problems



are pervasive. In an unprecedented display of collaboration and cooperation, the AFT put together close to 40 local, state, and national groups to transform the region. The initiative touches on education, health care, housing, and other fundamental issues.

The Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers and their president at the time, John Tarka, received national acclaim for helping negotiate a five-year contract in 2010 that included performance-based pay and a teacher evaluation system that incorporated student achievement. The pact won praise in a report from the nonprofit Aspen Institute and helped the district secure a \$40 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to improve teacher effectiveness. While controversial in some labor circles, the effort was generally applauded as an unprecedented collaboration between labor and management for the good of children.

Finally, a series of statewide strikes by education workers beginning in 2018 have been widely praised in the media as bringing economic inequity issues to the forefront. Motivations for the strikes included desire for increased wages for teachers and support staff, larger school budgets, smaller classrooms, and other issues. Coverage of the first of that series in West Virginia was lauded and largely successful, and media accounts were uniformly positive. The strike—which ended when teachers returned to their classrooms a month later—inspired similar, statewide strikes in Oklahoma and Arizona. It also inspired protests by school workers in Kentucky, North Carolina, and Colorado, and led to a school bus driver strike in Georgia and a protest by adjuncts in Virginia over pay. In January of 2019, United Teachers Los Angeles went on a six-day strike. Teacher walkouts in Virginia, a longtime right-to-work state, as well as in Denver and Oakland, followed. These collective actions, often known as “Red for Ed” because striking workers wore red shirts to show solidarity and that public school budgets were in the red, captured public attention and media coverage because they featured rank-and-file educators. They were actions that seemed to rise from the bottom up rather than coming from the top down. In West Virginia, for example, it was widely reported that top AFT and National Education Association officials agreed to the strike only after pressure from local union leaders.

In Los Angeles and Chicago, striking teachers and school workers were successful in rallying community and media support by framing their action under the banner of the “Schools Our Children Deserve.” Rather than highlighting pay and benefits, these campaigns were successfully identified as fights for students and the resources they needed to be successful. More often than not, parents and students—rather than teachers and union heads—were featured in media reports. In both cases, the strategy to win was based on bargaining for the common good,

**Teachers are generally respected and well-liked members of the community. They, rather than elected union officials, should be the face of a teacher union.**

which brings demands in collective bargaining that benefit the entire community, not just union members.

“This is a historic victory for public education educators, students, and parents. Class size reduction, limits on testing, and access to nurses, counselors, and librarians will change our students’ lives forever. We won this victory through our unity, our action, and our shared sacrifice,” said Alex Caputo-Pearl, president of UTLA, after reaching a tentative agreement in January 2019. “Educators and parents reached a boiling point . . . about conditions in classrooms.”

Using the same tactics, the Chicago Teachers Union won broad support from parents, families, and community members when the union called a strike in Oc-

ttober 2019. According to a *Chicago Sun-Times*/ABC7 Chicago poll, 49 percent of voters in the city either strongly supported or somewhat supported a walkout. Even influential politicians were supportive of the CTU’s fight: At the time, five of the nation’s Democratic presidential candidates—Joe Biden, Julián Castro, Kamala Harris, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren—expressed solidarity with the CTU.

These examples provide hope that teacher unions are turning a corner in the court of public opinion. In her latest book, *Slaying Goliath*, education historian Diane Ravitch argues that the so-called education reform movement has been defeated by parents, teachers, and other

public school advocates, including teacher unions. While it’s too early to dance on that grave, it at least should put a bounce in the step of teacher unions.

Tom Mooney, as president of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers and later vice president of the AFT, understood the importance of building relationships with the news media to clarify and define the role of teacher unions in social justice and education reform. All of us should understand it as well as he. 📖

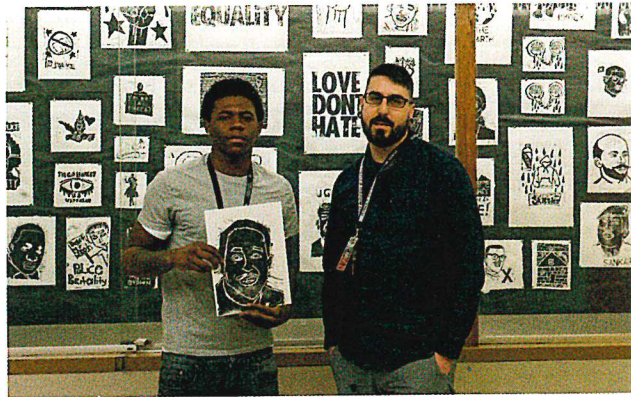
**Tom Mooney understood the importance of building relationships with the news media to clarify and define the role of teacher unions in social justice and education reform. All of us should understand it as well as he.**

*Scott Stephens is executive director of communications and engagement for the Shaker Heights City School District in Ohio. Previously, he worked at the Chicago Public Schools as executive director for strategic communications, served at the American Federation of Teachers, and worked for 30 years as a journalist, most of that time for the Cleveland Plain Dealer.*



# Using Social Media as an Organizing Tool

BY LEIGH DINGERSON



From left to right: Union members ride a bus for a citywide enrollment canvass; Black Lives Matter social justice printmaking; students paint a mural for the school's restorative practices room; students plant garden beds in front of the school.

PHOTOS: JOE BRUSKY | MTEA

**M**ost organizers would agree that there are no shortcuts in organizing. Nothing can replace face-to-face contact and relationship-building with individuals. That's true. But union locals are getting increasingly sophisticated about their use of social media to maintain connections with members, to educate and mobilize them, and yes, even to bring new members into the fold. Smart social media can help build your power.

The Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association (MTEA) has been a leader in their use of social media. And increasingly, they are sharing their strategies with progressive organizations across the state and country. This article explores some of their work.

### **Increasing Member Engagement with the Union**

The MTEA created a full-time release position for a social media organizer in 2014 as part of their larger project of reimagining their union. Fourth-grade teacher and photographer Joe Brusky was tapped for the job. He was released from his teaching duties, and the union paid his salary.

Brusky had been helping his union with social media as a volunteer, but joining the union's communications director in a full-time capacity allowed the local to quickly amplify its presence with its members.

The first effort was Facebook. The union has both a closed group and a public Facebook page. They use the members-only group as an easy way to organize around different campaigns. It allows for dialogue and discussion, and also helps the union keep its finger on the pulse of what's happening with its more than 5,000 members. The closed group also enables the union to share news with members who might not otherwise see posts in their Facebook newsfeed from the union's public page.

The public Facebook page touts the good things happening within the district and positions the union as a community partner. In an effort to counter the ubiquitous negative press about the "failing" Milwaukee Public Schools, Brusky created a "media request" form that members can fill out online, letting the local know about good work, events, or presentations happening at their schools. Teachers were quick to respond. Brusky got permission from the district administration to take pictures inside school buildings (as long as students had signed standard release forms) and began attending events across the district, photographing them, and posting his pictures on the union's public page with short descriptions of the activity. He would then share them on the members-only Facebook page. Before long, there were multiple albums of teachers and students, in their classrooms, "doing what they do," says Brusky.

As these pictures started appearing on Facebook, traffic to the site skyrocketed. Participating teachers received praise from colleagues while sharing creative projects and activities with hundreds of members. The union tracked the growth on the Facebook administrator page and was able to analyze when members were signing on, what they were "liking," what kinds of posts were effective and ineffective. It was clear that teachers loved seeing themselves and their students in action, and they loved seeing what other educators were doing. The union's public page grew from around 1,000 page likes to nearly 18,000 likes.

### **Memes as Organizing Tool**

The union started creating memes to highlight the words of leaders or members, provide commentary on public education and the education profession, and to



respond to proposed legislation or privatization attacks. Memes are popular on social media because they convey a ton of digestible information in one graphic (photo with text over it). The MTEA uses memes to highlight member testimony at school board meetings by putting short quotes from testimony over a photo of the person testifying.

Memes are often shared widely by members and spur members to act. For example, in response to Wisconsin state Sen. Alberta Darling (R-River Hills) co-authoring a bill to hand Milwaukee Public Schools' lowest-performing schools over to private charter operators in 2015, the MTEA posted a photo of Darling with text at the top saying "Senator Darling Says Please 'Stop Calling'" and in big bold text at the bottom, the phone number to Darling's legislative office. Darling's office was flooded with phone calls and emails. Other memes created by Brusky help explain complicated concepts like school privatization or the differences between a public school and a private charter school to voters.

### Seizing a Moment

One teacher realized that the union's Facebook page was the go-to place when she found a disturbing flyer on her doorstep one morning.

The flyer was from a local city charter school, announcing the opening of its enrollment window. The flyer announced that the school was offering a \$200 signing bonus for new students. Outraged, the teacher posted the flyer on the MTEA Facebook page. How could a charter school be allowed to *pay* families—presumably with their public dollars—to enroll in the school? The next day another member posted a *different* flyer from *her* neighborhood, this one from a different charter school offering an even higher cash bonus for registering.

Facebook hummed with responses. The union recognized the opportunity. Brusky suggested then-President Bob Peterson write and post a blog about the "enrollment bribes" from charter schools desperate to build their student bodies. A reporter from the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* picked up the story from Facebook and wrote it up for the front page of the newspaper. Outrage ensued.

The following month, the Milwaukee City Council passed an ordinance outlawing enrollment incentives at city charter schools. Just like that, the union's quick thinking and social media presence inspired the mainstream media to respond and led to concrete policy change.

### Connecting Through Twitter and Instagram

The MTEA uses Twitter to share content easily, not just with its members, but more widely. Its Twitter account has nearly 3,000 followers, including local journalists and national education advocates. Well-written tweets—as we've learned in the age of Donald Trump—can spread like wildfire and direct readers' eyes to news stories, photographs, or ideas. Author Diane Ravitch often retweets posts from the MTEA, and occasionally writes a blog piece about the information she has gathered from the feed. When the union used Twitter to ask members to respond to a *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* editorial, the response was robust enough that the newspaper

subsequently published a news story that included many of the points that union members made in their tweets.

The MTEA's Instagram posts mostly mirror its Facebook page, but they add lots of relevant hashtags to posts to increase visibility and reach new audiences.

"It's important to know which audiences are using which platforms," Brusky notes. "A lot of our younger union members and supporters have moved to Instagram, so we keep that platform pretty active."

Since Brusky posts many photos of students and teachers on Instagram, many younger Instagram users see the content and often follow the account. A video Brusky made in 2020 of Rufus King High School students responding to a racist image out of West Virginia went viral nationally, and the students from the high school played a big role in making that happen.

Both Instagram and Facebook can also sync advertisements, a feature the MTEA has used during campaigns, including electoral campaigns. During the 2019 school board races, the union ran ads supporting a slate of five candidates in different targeted ZIP codes using photos of the candidates acquired over the years. The photos of candidates testifying at public hearings or participating in a march or rally were more dynamic and informative for members than a candidate's official photo. The entire slate won.

### **Mobilizing and Building a Database**

When the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools organized a series of national "Walk-Ins" in 2016 and 2017, the MTEA used its members-only Facebook group to track building-by-building organizing for the events. The walk-ins were nationally coordinated days of action when teachers and parents rallied outside their school before the first bell rang. Each local union planned a set of relevant messages, reflecting the education issues current in their cities at the time—whether it was opposition to charter co-locations, fighting budget cuts, or simply supporting public schools. A short rally would be held, and then teachers and students would enter the school together to begin the day. Parents would be invited in as well, for coffee and snacks, and to talk about next steps in organizing campaigns. Union members participating in the walk-ins were given a list of social media instructions for their walk-in. This included relevant hashtags, talking points, and directions on how to take and post a good group photo on social media (in front of the name of the school, with the photo cropped tightly around members).

In Milwaukee, the walk-ins targeted the state Legislature's attempt to take over several "low-performing" schools. As teachers at a school agreed to host a walk-in, they would call that information in to the union offices. Each day, the union would post a graphic listing the schools signed up to participate on the union's Facebook page and the "Stop the Takeover of MPS" campaign Facebook page. "It didn't take too long before members were calling and asking why *their* school wasn't on the list," Brusky remembers. "You have to decide as a building to participate," he would tell them. Within a day or two, the school would call back and ask to be added. Every day a new graphic would be posted with the new schools added to the list



of participating schools. The growing list on the Facebook page created buzz and a sense of momentum for the upcoming actions and spurred school-based organizing that might have otherwise not happened.

### **Building a Database**

The MTEA, like most unions, has begun to build an extensive database of both members and community supporters. The database helps the union keep track of individual member interests, as well as what types of actions they are likely to engage in—whether phone banks or demonstrations or others. The union uses the platform Action Network to build these lists.

In the summer of 2014, Republican state legislators passed a plan to begin to dismantle the Milwaukee Public Schools. The union’s communications team immediately branded the legislation called the Opportunity Schools Partnership Program as a “takeover.” Before long even the local media called it the “takeover bill.” The legislation empowered the county executive to appoint a “takeover commissioner” who would choose schools to hand over to charter school companies. The law required these takeovers to begin in the 2016–17 school year.

The union fought back, creating School Defense Committees” and mobilizing their members and parents to sign online or paper petitions. (See Mizialko, p. 320.) Brusky visited schools every week, coordinating his visits with the school’s union building representative. The petition was a tear-off card in which the petition collector kept the signer’s name and contact info while giving the signer the remainder of the card, which had relevant information and key dates to keep them involved with the campaign. The online petition was through the Action Network, which collected nearly 7,000 signatures. Brusky took photos of the parents with their children during these one-on-one petition signings and shared them on social media. Parents would tag themselves in the photos and share on their Facebook timelines, widening the reach and increasing the personal connection to the campaign. In other words, social media enhanced the one-on-one organizing—it didn’t replace it. The MTEA held walk-ins around the district, and every attendee was entered into the Action Network database. The names gathered from the petition and walk-ins were later used to alert the community to future events, and also to help organize to defeat a military voucher school from locating in Milwaukee’s Riverwest neighborhood.

### **Keeping an Eye on Decision Makers**

Shortly after Joe Brusky began as the MTEA’s full-time social media coordinator, he began attending Milwaukee Board of School Directors meetings and livestreaming them with his cellphone to the union’s Facebook page.

Predictably, the school board and MPS administration were wary of the union’s effort (Milwaukee board meetings were not regularly televised live). They started throwing obstacles in the way, telling Brusky he couldn’t sit in the first row (which was for media only), or that he couldn’t set his phone on a tripod. One incident, later covered by National Public Radio, caught then-Superintendent Dari-

enne Driver's chief of staff giving Brusky the finger during a heated night of public testimony from teachers. His actions were caught on the union's social media and posted online. The official was immediately removed from his position following the incident. One by one, the union asserted its right to set up at the meetings

**“The [Facebook] livestream of [Milwaukee school] board meetings has really helped hold the board accountable. The board is hearing from our members on a regular basis, and our members are in a much better position to weigh in on policy debates and actions, whether they’re in the room or not.”**

and to record the proceedings. One by one, the barriers fell. Within a few months Brusky was offered a dedicated spot to set up his tripod.

With some regular publicity about the livestream, teachers around the city began tuning in. Hundreds of them. Real-time responses and comments began to flow on the Facebook livestream, and communications directly between educators and board members let the board know that teachers were paying attention.

“The livestream of board meetings has really helped hold the board accountable,” says Brusky. “The board is hearing from our members on a

regular basis, and our members are in a much better position to weigh in on policy debates and actions, whether they’re in the room or not.”

### **Building Solidarity Across Districts**

When teachers in Los Angeles and Oakland went on strike in early 2019, the MTEA “lent” Joe Brusky to the union locals in those cities to document the strikes with his camera, and to help with social media. It also helped spearhead and formalize the concept of “art builds” for progressive events, both in Milwaukee for March for Our Lives and other progressive causes, and nationally. (See Brusky/Cosier, p. 296.)

When teachers in Little Rock, Arkansas, went on strike in October 2019, Brusky didn't travel to Little Rock, but he organized a photo shoot with MTEA leaders at their monthly assembly holding an Overpass Light Brigade message of support for the strikers. Brusky is a core member of the OLB and has often incorporated their lighted messages into campaigns or actions. The Little Rock photo was posted on the MTEA's Facebook page. It ended up being shared 1,200 times on Facebook and was viewed by more people in Little Rock than in Milwaukee! The site's metrics showed that it had a reach of 128,000 hits and hundreds of comments offering solidarity and encouragement to the Little Rock teachers.

### **Cost-Benefit? It's Been Worth It**

Brusky's full-time release position costs money, of course. The decision to create the position was not an easy one for the union, particularly after they'd lost bar-



gaining rights and were threatened with losing members.

Many locals will not have the budgetary resources to include a full-time released social media organizer. Before Brusky was hired at the MTEA, the union had created a committee of social media-savvy members to help compile articles, memes, and links to later post on the public Facebook page. This helped spread the work among many shoulders. But the full-time release position has paid off. “Most of the time, I’m out in buildings, taking pictures, helping members see themselves as part of something larger,” says Brusky. He is also signing up new members.

Brusky puts together a report each year for the union’s executive board, providing an overview of all the social media initiatives and some of the metrics gleaned from them. He’s able to show how frequently teachers are visiting the Facebook page and which posts are garnering the most response. The report demonstrates the effectiveness with cold, hard numbers and new member sign-ups.

The smart utilization of social media has helped union locals all across the country expand the engagement of individual teachers, mobilize educators and community members, and speak truth to power. Who knows where the next decade will take us when it comes to digital communications? 📱

*Leigh Dingerson is a former community organizer, and currently a freelance writer and researcher on community and labor struggles for education justice. She is the author, most recently, of “Building the Power to Reclaim Our Schools,” a case study on the 2019 Los Angeles teachers’ strike.*

*Joe Brusky’s photos often appear in Rethinking Schools and other newspapers and magazines around the country. He has facilitated union social media workshops at numerous conferences around the country, including sessions for Labor Notes and the National Education Association.*







# Before the March, Before the Strike: The Art Build

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BY JOE BRUSKY AND KIM COSIER

**“N**ow I get it,” said Keisha, a 5th-grade teacher from Oakland, California. “It’s an art party with a mission!” Several high school students laughed and nodded in agreement as we all worked together to paint a design that had been traced onto a 24-foot parachute banner. In Oakland, as in other places that have employed artistic activism as an organizing tool, hundreds of teachers, staff, students, and family members happily pitched in—and made friends in the process—in the run-up to the February 2019 Oakland teacher strike. Together, we created “600 picket signs, 1,000 patches, five parachute banners (24 feet wide), 40 to 50 smaller banners, numerous T-shirts, and 500-plus posters” in three days in Oakland, according to our collaborator Nicolas Lampert.

Art builds are about visualizing a political message, but they are also community-embracing events that provide spaces for movement building for social justice. Artists and non-artists alike are able to take part because there are lots of activities that can be done without art experience.

## **A Space for Art and Justice**

In Oakland the union hall and its parking garage were humming with energy during the three-day build in January 2019. To get started, everything was first covered in tarps, and then workstations were set up throughout the spaces. The main office on the second floor was transformed into a print shop, with artists at screen-printing stations churning out thousands of prints. Volunteer “runners” grabbed the fresh prints and hung them to dry on clotheslines that zigzagged across the conference room. When the prints were dry, other runners rushed them downstairs, where volunteers hand-colored them. The copy room/workspace was filled with the sounds of friendly chatter and tearing fabric as another team worked on prepping muslin for screen prints. Another room was set aside for a team of volunteers to project and trace banner designs on fabric to be painted by others. A wide hallway was designated as a kind of food court. Local vendors occupied spaces between tables filled with snacks and drinks people were sharing.





JOE BRUSKY | MTEA

Downstairs, the party continued as volunteers and organizers worked in a parking garage that had been cleared for the build. Rows and rows of folding tables held multiple 4-foot by 10- to 20-foot banners that were being painted by a host of volunteers, including young children and retirees. A dad with a baby strapped to his chest chatted with a neighbor, who happened by and couldn't resist joining the fun. Dried screen prints brought down from above were hand-colored by more people on other tables and, when complete, were run to another set of clotheslines to dry.

On the other side of the cavernous space, another crew was painting and assembling the wooden frames for picket signs. Two large children's play parachutes were laid out in opposite corners of the garage, and groups of volunteers were hunched over or sitting on the ground happily painting together, sharing stories about their schools and how they came to learn about the art build. A local journalist arrived and scribbled notes as a teacher explained why she was planning to strike, as she helped paint the parachute.



As they were completed, signs, patches, and hand-painted banners were hung inside and outside the building. Surrounded by artwork, Keith Brown, president of the Oakland Education Association, held a livestreamed press conference to announce that a strike vote would take place within days. There were also chant building, drumming, and movement workshops, live music from a high school jazz band, food from local vendors, and lots and lots of momentum built for the cause. It truly was an art party with a mission.

Joe Brusky (this article's co-author) and other photographers and social media-savvy members documented and shared work as it happened, which served to recruit more help as people began to see the party online. This documentation and sharing continued once the work hit the streets. Such still and moving images of teacher uprisings have helped make union activism recognizable, memorable, and successful. They are impactful not only because of a sea of teachers dressed in Red for Ed, but also through the banners, picket signs, painted parachutes, and other artwork that get featured on social media posts and in broadcast and print news sources.

### **Art Build Workers Collective**

We are part of a collective called the Art Build Workers. We have been traveling around the country helping to organize multiday art builds that help unions build movements and amplify their messages through visual art, media, and archiving. From Los Angeles to Little Rock, Arkansas, art builds have changed the way demonstrations look, amplified the movement's social media presence, and helped create spaces for movements to build community and generate a powerful sense of solidarity and shared purpose.

Back home in Milwaukee we collaborate with groups working on issues including gun violence, climate, sexual assault, and immigration. One of our early and regular collaborating partners is the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association (MTEA). The MTEA was at our very first build in 2016, which was sparked by a visit from

### **Meet Our Collective**

The Art Build Workers collective includes Joe Brusky, who focuses on photography, video, and social media; Jeanette Arellano, Kim Cosier, and Josie Osborne, who specialize in banners, design, and art education; Nicolas Lampert and Paul Kjelland, who work on design, printmaking, and archives; and Claudio Martinez, who does graphic design and banners. We work locally with a variety of partners including Voces de la Frontera, an immigrant rights powerhouse in Milwaukee; the People's Climate Coalition, which includes Extinction Rebellion Milwaukee, Youth Climate Action Team, Sunrise Milwaukee, and 350 Milwaukee; and Peace Action Center. We've also partnered with gun violence organizers from Moms Demand Action and March for Our Lives, as well as organizers on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee who focus on ending rape culture. Youth from our local ACLU chapter have partnered with us as well.

activist David Solnit, a veteran artist/activist and art build coordinator. Success with early MTEA campaigns caught the attention of Nate Gunderson, a visionary organizer who works at the National Education Association (NEA). Nate saw the power of the work created at MTEA art builds and was excited about the ways it was deployed in demonstrations in Milwaukee. He invited us to do a build with union members in Minneapolis/St. Paul, and we have been partnering with the NEA and union locals across the country ever since.

Art builds create visual tools that are used to amplify intersectional messages, which link various social issues to more traditional concerns of education activists. The role of the image in this movement is more important than ever before, because news is increasingly shared through platforms that limit word count and rely on photographs, images, and videos. Art builds create opportunities for activists and artists to work together to imagine a more just world.

### **Advanced Planning Vital**

A good art party with a mission requires planning. Ahead of a build, union leadership and artists/designers work together to prepare. Among the preparations:

- Slogans are developed and refined collaboratively.
- A call for images using the slogans is shared widely, with a date for submission that allows time for prepping designs.
- Local artists as well as ones from around the country are invited to participate.
- Supplies must be ordered (or donations accepted) ahead of time, including bolts of muslin fabric (we have also painted on sheets that were found at thrift stores), paint, ink, silk screen printing tools, brushes and rollers, buckets, clothesline and clothespins, plastic tarps, tape, rags (lots of rags), and more. A clean-out sink (such as a janitor's slop sink) is very helpful, but a hose and a drain can do in a pinch.
- An invitation to join the build should be designed with a clear indication that no art experience is required and that all ages are welcome. (Depending on how you want children to participate, it can be helpful to plan a children's area and activities.)
- A plan for how to feed and hydrate the volunteers should be made.
- A plan should be in place for inviting the press and coordinating social media shares to generate a buzz for the build and for the action you are working toward.

For big builds, it is a good idea to form a planning committee that can coordinate tasks before, during, and after the build. Such planning has ensured successful events that have resulted in building movement momentum, visualizing and amplify messaging, and creating solidarity and excitement among members and their supporters. (For more tips, see [artbuildworkers.com](http://artbuildworkers.com).) Some builds have



been huge, such as in Los Angeles, Oakland, and Chicago, while others have been smaller, but no less impactful. Smaller builds can even be organized by energetic and hardworking individuals.

In Little Rock, for example, art teacher Amanda Mamula organized multiple art builds after learning our organizing techniques at the NEA's conferences on racial and social justice and representative assemblies in Minneapolis (in 2018) and Houston (in 2019). Amanda said: "I knew Arkansas was having a big 'Red for Ed Rally' in October 2018. . . . I wanted Little Rock's presence to be noted at the rally, since it was in our backyard, and I wanted to look professional and organized like your group." Amanda has gone on to organize many more art builds as the fight continues in Arkansas. In an email, she wrote: "Art builds are the perfect mix of my organizing skills and . . . my art and political science degrees. My time painting with your group is my favorite memory of Minneapolis that summer. You reinvigorated my social justice warrior and showed me a new way through art."

From Los Angeles to Little Rock, art builds have changed the way demonstrations look, amplified the movement's social media presence, and helped create spaces for movements to build community and generate a powerful sense of solidarity and shared purpose. Increasingly, teacher unions are using art and art builds as tools for social justice. 

*Kim Cosier is a teacher educator, activist, and artist who lives in Milwaukee with her wife and collaborator, Josie Osborne.*

*Joe Brusky is a 4th-grade teacher in Milwaukee Public Schools on a full-time release from his classroom to do organizing and social media for his union, the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association. He's also a photographer and activist as a core member of the Overpass Light Brigade and the Art Build Workers. His photos documenting movements for justice, including teacher strikes in LA, Oakland, and Chicago, as well as two trips to the Standing Rock resistance camp in 2016, have gone far and wide.*

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