

# Organizing a Caucus in Philadelphia, Step by Step

BY LARISSA PAHOMOV



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

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

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

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

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

### **Curriculum and Classroom Roots**

The Caucus of Working Educators (WE) has several origins, but one of the most significant is the Teacher Action Group of Philadelphia (TAG), a grassroots organization founded in 2008. With a small core of dedicated educators from both public and charter schools, TAG quickly became a force in the city, providing political education for teachers, both to transform their curriculum and classroom practices and to push back on neoliberal education policies, from No Child Left Behind to local charter school expansion. From the beginning, TAG organized events such as an annual curriculum fair and Inquiry-to-Action Groups, mini-courses that explored topics from mindfulness to social justice unionism. Over the years, TAG took on political projects of increasing size and scope, including organizing rallies outside the school district office in response to school closure plans in 2012, and coordinating a “Faces of the Layoffs” website when 3,000 district employees lost their jobs in 2013 to

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

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

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

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

### **From the Classroom to the (School) Board Room**

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **A Campaign for School Facilities Renovation**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, they have more money than us."

"And why is that?"

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

"Yes, and how did that happen?"

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

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

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

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

"Overwhelmingly white."

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

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

### Seeking Power

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

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

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

### Broadening Our Base

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

### Moving Forward

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

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