

New Teachers Energize Their Union!

BY GABRIEL TANGLAO



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

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

Years later when I started teaching in Bergenfield, New Jersey, my first impressions of the local union were less inspiring. The hurricane of paperwork, meetings, lesson plans, and dozens of new colleagues converged into an overwhelming stream of information. It felt like drinking water from a fire hose. I remembered sitting uncomfortably in the dense August air of the auditorium for orientation.

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that we are powerful together."**

A captive audience of new and returning teachers was enduring a long lineup of white, male, suit-wearing authority figures. "What a waste of time! These are the same PowerPoints they used last year," complained a veteran teacher loudly from the back row.

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

Jasmin had a quick wit and a wealth of knowledge that made her an engaging person and a great teacher. It must have been fate that we shared a classroom, and taught different sections of the same financial literacy course. I remember being motivated by her relentless commitment. Jasmin spent countless hours planning, preparing, and modifying lessons for her modern world history class. She also served as advisor to the Genders & Sexualities Alliance and Academic Decathlon, and she rarely missed an after-school game. As we grew close, I learned about how influential Jasmin's family was in shaping her character. Her mother, like mine, was also a proud union member.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Despite all of the time and effort, we were able to help elect only one candidate of color. This did not shift the balance of power, or change the racial dynamic in a

substantive way. This “L” was not a loss, but a lesson: The strategic vision of transformational change takes time, and could take years of sustained collective action. We were also reminded that the power is in the people, not in the position. Organizing to support the campaigns of school board candidates of color led to deeper connections with the community.

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

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

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