

Pre-Attendance Assignments



2022-23

Building Effective Worksite Leadership Systems

UniServ Directors are responsible for supporting the growth and development of strong local affiliates. Strong affiliates have a high ratio of engaged leaders to rank and file members and structures that allow for rapid response, relationship development and collective action. This NEA Center for Organizing training is designed to build participants' skills around leadership identification and development. They will learn how to establish differentiated and innovative structures that can increase member engagement and union presence within and across worksites.

Director

Tom Israel

tisrael@nea.org

Academy Coordinator

Ellen Holmes

eholmes@nea.org

Academy Logistics

Karla Medina

kmedina@nea.org

Why pre-attendance reading?

The resources compiled here are short, relevant, and intended to help you shift from the day-to-day cognitive load of work to the thinking you will use as a learner at the academy. We rely on a number of popular education strategies that involve the use of texts and scenarios for group work. Many participants find it difficult to do a “first read” in the classroom so we have provided those items here in case you would like to review them.

Read and Reflect: (Please Do Before Arriving)

Please take the time before arriving to read our community agreements on pages 3-4. We will engage you in a discussion at the very start of our time together around these agreements and your commitment to them.

Resources for Group Work: (Please Do Before Arriving)

The resources on pages 5-9 and 20-73 are for group work. They will require some familiarity with each article or "case" but not memorization of every one of the details. You should set aside some time to read and review these prior to coming especially if you are not comfortable doing a “first read” amongst others. Everyone will need to focus on the scenarios found on pages 64-73.

In the email accompanying this pre-attendance package you have been assigned ONE of the one of the articles found on pages 20-62. You can skim the others, but know the one you are assigned.

Resources You Need to Bring: (Please Have ONE Electronic Copy that can be shared via email)

The intention of this two and half-day event is to provide ample time to focus on your actual work. To do that well, we are asking you to bring one work-related item.

would like to discuss. We are going to explore a coaching protocol around this. See the next page for criteria that help you define a problem of practice.

Articles for Thinking: (Optional Food for Thought)

The resources included on pages 10-19, 47-48, and 74-81 are primarily designed to help frame “why” we are offering this academy. We may reference them in our work together. They may cause you to generate questions that you will want to explore while we are together. Consider these options to read prior to attending.

Community Agreements for Our Time

Awareness and Self-Knowledge

This requires self-knowledge and self-awareness. Self-knowledge allows you to see what causes you pain and conflict and enables you to embrace your contradictions and inconsistencies. It allows the space to work on things about yourself that you are not happy with. In turn, self-knowledge helps to prevent you from projecting your negative aspects onto other people. Bringing your best self also requires that you have a positive attitude, are willing to deeply explore your perspectives and remain open to the perspectives and experiences of others.

Listening for Understanding

Be an active listener. Active listening involves paying full and careful attention to the other person, looking him or her in the eye, avoiding interruptions, reflecting your understanding, clarifying information, summarizing the other person's perspectives and sharing your own. Remember that most people need time to open up and might not be willing to immediately share their personal stories, hopes, fears and/or concerns.

Being Gracious

Being kind is a vital way of bringing meaning to our own lives, as well as the lives of others. Kindness is about caring genuinely for others around you, wanting the best for them and recognizing in them the same wants, needs, aspirations and even fears that you may have. Being kind and generous allows us to communicate better with others, to be more self-compassionate and to be a positive force in other people's lives. We are gracious when we accept and genuinely work to use the pronouns that others ask us to use. Being gracious includes following the COVID protocols that are in place to protect the health of this learning community.

Staying Engaged

Staying engaged requires you to be morally, emotionally, intellectually and socially involved in the conversation. Staying engaged means that you are listening with curiosity and willing to deepen your understanding. Staying engaged might also require you to sustain the conversation even when it gets uncomfortable or diverted. This means a commitment to keeping your electronic communications to a minimum with folks not present in this learning community. This also means being present for all portions of the learning agenda.

Being Open and Suspending Judgment

Listening with an open mind includes being receptive to the influence of others. You can suspend judgment by becoming aware of preconceived notions and listening to everything someone has to say before jumping to conclusions. Most importantly, suspending judgment also means listening to what the speaker has to say for understanding, not just to determine whether the speaker is right or wrong. This means that we recognize each of us will make mistakes and that we have the capacity to grow. We should expect imperfections.

Saying "I" - tell your truth

Speaking your truth in authentic and courageous conversations about race and other issues where experiences/perspectives may differ widely from yours requires a willingness to take risks. It means that you will be absolutely honest and candid about your own thoughts, feelings, experiences and opinions and not just saying what you perceive others want to hear. Speaking your truth will require you to speak from the "first person" and use "I" statements.

Seeking Discomfort

Leaning in to discomfort will require you to let go of understandings and stereotypes that you may be holding onto in order to move forward. Leaning in means that you will avoid pre-judgment and be open to the kernel of wisdom in each individual's experiences. Leaning in to discomfort will require you to sit through moments of embarrassment, confusion, anxiety, and/or fear.

Reaching Empathy

Empathy and compassion allow you to understand the other person's point of view. When you are empathetic, you are more understanding, patient and kind. Expanding your capacity to feel empathy will also allow others to enter your circle of human concern. Sharing, using, and respecting pronouns is a very simple form of empathy.

Expecting Non-Resolution and Non-Closure

Expect and accept that there may not be closure. It is not likely that you will resolve your personal understanding about race or another person's racial experience in a single conversation. The more you talk about race or other issues with another person, the more you learn and the more they will learn. Authentic and productive conversations about race and other issues where experiences/perspectives may differ widely from yours are continuous and always evolving. This means that sometimes we will have unfinished, unexplored, and shortened conversations about some concepts.

**Adapted from "Embracing equity and inclusion", Annie E. Casey Foundation*

What questions do you want to ask about any of the ideas in these agreements?

What additional agreements do you need in order to be a fully participating member of our learning community?

Can you commit to these agreements? IF not, what would it take for you to be able to commit?

Leadership in the Age of Complexity: From Hero to Host

Margaret Wheatley with Debbie Frieze ©2010

published in Resurgence Magazine, Winter 2011

For too long, too many of us have been entranced by heroes. Perhaps it's our desire to be saved, to not have to do the hard work, to rely on someone else to figure things out. Constantly we are barraged by politicians presenting themselves as heroes, the ones who will fix everything and make our problems go away. It's a seductive image, an enticing promise. And we keep believing it. Somewhere there's someone who will make it all better. Somewhere, there's someone who's visionary, inspiring, brilliant, trustworthy, and we'll all happily follow him or her. Somewhere...

Well, it is time for all the heroes to go home, as the poet William Stafford wrote. It is time for us to give up these hopes and expectations that only breed dependency and passivity, and that do not give us solutions to the challenges we face. It is time to stop waiting for someone to save us. It is time to face the truth of our situation—that we're all in this together, that we all have a voice—and figure out how to mobilize the hearts and minds of everyone in our workplaces and communities.

Why do we continue to hope for heroes? It seems we assume certain things:

- Leaders have the answers. They know what to do.
- People do what they're told. They just have to be given good plans and instructions.
- High risk requires high control. As situations grow more complex and challenging, power needs to shift to the top (with the leaders who know what to do.)

These beliefs give rise to the models of command and control revered in organizations and governments world-wide. Those at the bottom of the hierarchy submit to the greater vision and expertise of those above. Leaders promise to get us out of this mess; we willingly surrender individual autonomy in exchange for security.

The only predictable consequence of leaders attempts to wrest control of a complex, even chaotic situation, is that they create more chaos. They go into isolation with just a few key advisors, and attempt to find a simple solution (quickly) to a complex problem. And people pressure them to do just that. Everyone wants the problem to disappear; cries of "fix it!" arise from the public. Leaders scramble to look like they've taken charge and have everything in hand.

But the causes of today's problems are complex and interconnected. There are no

simple answers, and no one individual can possibly know what to do. We seem unable to acknowledge these complex realities. Instead, when the leader fails to resolve the crisis, we fire him or her, and immediately begin searching for the next (more perfect) one. We don't question our expectations of leaders, we don't question our desire for heroes.

The Illusion of Control

Heroic leadership rests on the illusion that someone *can be* in control. Yet we live in a world of complex systems whose very existence means they are inherently uncontrollable. No one is in charge of our food systems. No one is in charge of our schools. No one is in charge of the environment. No one is in charge of national security. No one is in charge! These systems are emergent phenomena—the result of thousands of small, local actions that converged to create powerful systems with properties that may bear little or no resemblance to the smaller actions that gave rise to them. These are the systems that now dominate our lives; they cannot be changed by working backwards, focusing on only a few simple causes. And certainly they cannot be changed by the boldest visions of our most heroic leaders.

If we want to be able to get these complex systems to work better, we need to abandon our reliance on the leader-as-hero and invite in the leader-as-host. We need to support those leaders who know that problems are complex, who know that in order to understand the full complexity of any issue, all parts of the system need to be invited in to participate and contribute. We, as followers, need to give our leaders time, patience, forgiveness; and we need to be willing to step up and contribute.

These leaders-as-hosts are candid enough to admit that they don't know what to do; they realize that it's sheer foolishness to rely only on them for answers. But they also know they can trust in other people's creativity and commitment to get the work done. They know that other people, no matter where they are in the organizational hierarchy, can be as motivated, diligent and creative as the leader, given the right invitation.

The Journey from Hero to Host

Leaders who journey from hero to host have seen past the negative dynamics of politics and opposition that hierarchy breeds, they've ignored the organizational charts and role descriptions that confine people's potential. Instead, they've become curious. Who's in this organization or community? What skills and capacities might they offer if they were invited into the work as full contributors? What do they know, what insights do they have that might lead to a solution to this problem?

Leaders-as-hosts know that people willingly support those things they've played a part in creating—that you can't expect people to 'buy-in' to plans and projects developed elsewhere. Leaders-as-hosts invest in meaningful conversations among people from

many parts of the system as the most productive way to engender new insights and possibilities for action. They trust that people are willing to contribute, and that most people yearn to find meaning and possibility in their lives and work. And these leaders know that hosting others is the only way to get complex, intractable problems solved.

Leaders-as-hosts don't just benevolently let go and trust that people will do good work on their own. Leaders have a great many things to attend to, but these are quite different than the work of heroes. Hosting leaders must:

- provide conditions and good group processes for people to work together.
- provide resources of time, the scarcest commodity of all.
- insist that people and the system learn from experience, frequently.
- offer unequivocal support—people know the leader is there for them.
- keep the bureaucracy at bay, creating oases (or bunkers) where people are less encumbered by senseless demands for reports and administrivia.
- play defense with other leaders who want to take back control, who are critical that people have been given too much freedom.
- reflect back to people on a regular basis how they're doing, what they're accomplishing, how far they've journeyed.
- work with people to develop relevant measures of progress to make their achievements visible.
- value conviviality and esprit de corps—not false rah-rah activities, but the spirit that arises in any group that accomplishes difficult work together.

Challenges from Superiors

It's important to note how leaders journeying from hero to host use their positional power. They have to work all levels of the hierarchy; most often, it's easier to gain support and respect from the people they lead than it is to gain it from their superiors. Most senior leaders of large hierarchies believe in their inherent superiority, as proven by the position they've attained. They don't believe that everyday people are as creative or self-motivated as are they. When participation is suggested as the means to gather insights and ideas from staff on a complex problem, senior leaders often will block such activities. They justify their opposition by stating that people would use this opportunity to take advantage of the organization; or that they would suggest ideas that have no bearing to the organization's mission; or that people would feel overly confident and overstep their roles. In truth, many senior leaders view engaging the whole system as a threat to their own power and control. They consistently choose for control, and the resultant chaos, rather than invite people in to solve difficult and complex problems.

Leaders who do know the value of full engagement, who do trust those they lead, have to constantly defend their staff from senior leaders who insist on more controls and

more bureaucracy to curtail their activities, even when those very activities are producing excellent results. Strange to say, but too many senior leaders choose control over effectiveness; they're willing to risk creating more chaos by continuing their take-charge, command and control leadership.

Re-engaging People

Those who've been held back in confining roles, who've been buried in the hierarchy, will eventually blossom and develop in the company of a hosting leader. Yet, it takes time for employees to believe that this boss is different, that this leader actually wants them to contribute. It can take 12 to 18 months in systems where people have been silenced into submission by autocratic leadership. These days, most people take a wait-and-see attitude, no longer interested in participating because past invitations weren't sincere, or didn't engage them in meaningful work. The leader needs to prove him or herself by continually insisting that work cannot be accomplished, nor problems solved without the participation of everyone. If the message is sincere and consistent, people gradually return to life; even people who have died on the job, who're just waiting until retirement, can come alive in the presence of a leader who encourages them and creates opportunities for them to contribute.

Leaders-as-hosts need to be skilled conveners. They realize that their organization or community is rich in resources, and that the easiest way to discover these is to bring diverse people together in conversations that matter. People who didn't like each other, people who discounted and ignored each other, people who felt invisible, neglected, left out—these are the people who can emerge from their boxes and labels to become interesting, engaged colleagues and citizens.

Hosting meaningful conversations isn't about getting people to like each other or feel good. It's about creating the means for problems to get solved, for teams to function well, for people to become energetic activists. Hosting Leaders create substantive change by relying on everyone's creativity, commitment and generosity. They learn from firsthand experience that these qualities are present in just about everyone and in every organization. They extend sincere invitations, ask good questions, and have the courage to support risk-taking and experimentation.

Are You a Hero?

Many of us can get caught up acting like heroes, not from power drives, but from our good intentions and desires to help. Are you acting as a hero? Here's how to know. You're acting as a hero when you believe that if you just work harder, you'll fix things; that if you just get smarter or learn a new technique, you'll be able to solve problems for others. You're acting as a hero if you take on more and more projects and causes and have less time for relationships. You're playing the hero if you believe that you can save the situation, the person, the world.

Our heroic impulses most often are born from the best of intentions. We want to help, we want to solve, we want to fix. Yet this is the illusion of specialness, that we're the only ones who can offer help, service, skills. If we don't do it, nobody will. This hero's path has only one guaranteed destination—we end up feeling lonely, exhausted and unappreciated.

It is time for all us heroes to go home because, if we do, we'll notice that we're not alone. We're surrounded by people just like us. They too want to contribute, they too have ideas, they want to be useful to others and solve their own problems.

Truth be told, they never wanted heroes to rescue them anyway.

Parts of this article are excerpts from *Walk Out Walk On: A Learning Journey Into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now*. Margaret Wheatley & Deborah Frieze. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Forthcoming April 2011.

INTRODUCTION TO ENGAGEMENT ORGANIZING

Organizing and Leadership Practices that Lead to People-Powered Change

OBJECTIVES:

- Think critically about organizing, leadership, and relational power
- Understand the basics of interdependent leadership in contrast to other leadership models
- Overview the 5 organizing practices of interdependent leadership: Story, Relationships, Structure, Strategy and Action

ORGANIZING IS:

Identifying leaders and coordinating them in leadership teams,
Building community and commitment around that leadership,
Building power from the resources of that community,
Using that power strategically to make concrete change in the world.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

"Leaders are those who take responsibility for enabling others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty"

In order to launch a new campaign, or strengthen an existing one, your job as an organizer is to identify and recruit others to work with you to build a campaign powerful enough to win change.

But what type of leader should you be, and what are you looking for in others? Sometimes we think the leader is the person everyone goes to, like this "I'm the leader!" approach.

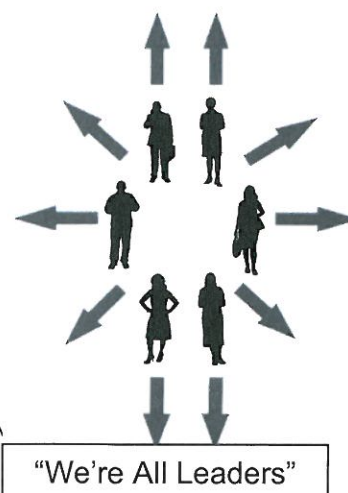
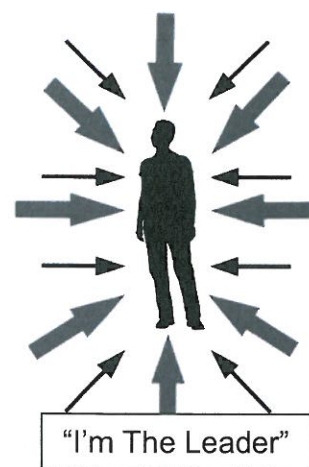
But what does it feel like to be the "leader" in the middle? What does it feel like to be the arrow that can't get through? What happens if the "leader" in the middle drops out?

Sometimes we go to the other extreme and think we don't need a "leader." We can all lead, because "we're all leaders!"

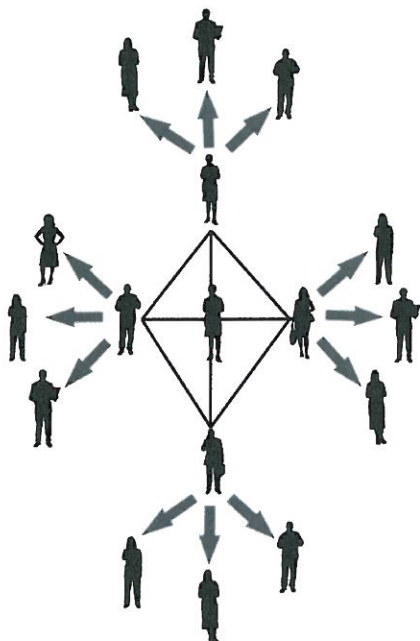
Sometimes this works. But who's responsible for coordinating everyone? And who's responsible for pushing the whole group forward when you can't reach a decision? Who takes ultimate responsibility for the outcome?

Organizers are those who ultimately are held accountable for meeting campaign goals. However, organizers are also

Originally adapted from the works of Marshall Ganz of Harvard University Modified by The N



responsible for coordinating and enabling others to take leadership. This requires delegating responsibility (rather than tasks), holding others accountable for carrying out that responsibility, and supporting them in their work.



Interdependent Leadership

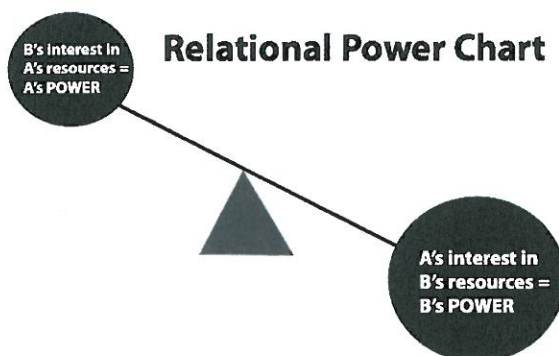
Remember, we don't yet have all the leadership we need in order to win the change we want to see. An organizer's job is to reach out and develop leaders in your community who can help you recruit and coordinate others. They may not be people others usually see as leaders, but they are people committed to change, willing to invite others to join them in the hard work of moving a campaign forward.

These leaders will be the backbone of your local campaign. You must be able to trust them to delegate responsibility to other dedicated, reliable people, and to follow through on commitments. You may be the leader in the middle, or part of a leadership team in the middle, guiding others' efforts and being held accountable for outcomes, but you will be deeply reliant on your relationships with others for success.

WHAT IS POWER?

Organizing is about turning the resources we have into the power we need to win the change we want. So what is power?

Richard Emerson argues that power is not a thing, an attribute, a quality, a characteristic or a trait -- it is a relationship. Power is the influence you have if my interest in your resources is greater than your interest in my resources: you have power over me if I need you more than you need me.



You can uncover the power relations by asking, and getting the answers to, four questions to “help track down the power”:

- What are YOUR interests? What change do you want?
- Who holds the decision-making power or resources you need to meet your interests?
- What are THEIR interests?
- How do THEY need YOU? What resources do you hold which other actors need to meet their own interests?

Our power comes from relationships with people. When we organize to build power we do so with the belief that the same people who need change can organize their own resources into the power they need to create change. Marshall Ganz says, “The unique role of organizing is to enable the people who need or want the change to be the authors of the change, because that addresses the causes of the problem (powerlessness in one form or another), not only the problem.”

So organizing is not only a commitment to identify more leaders, but also a commitment to engage those leaders in a particular type of fight: in nonviolent action to build the power to create the change we need in our lives. Organizing power begins with the choice and commitment made by the first person who wants to make something happen. Without this commitment, there are no resources with which to begin. Commitment is only observable through action. The work of organizers begins with their acceptance of their responsibility to challenge others to join them in action.

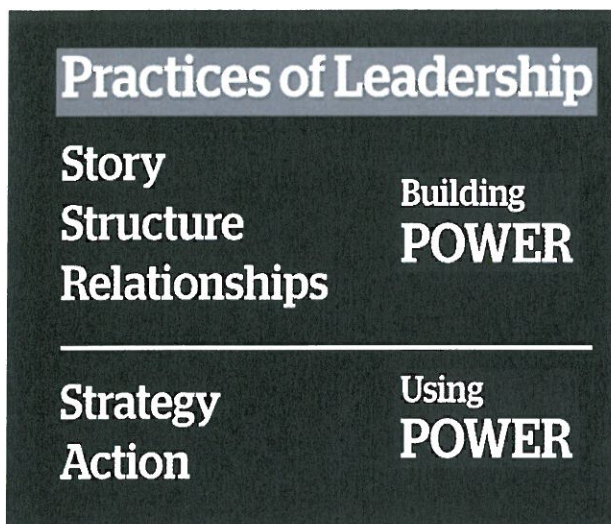
WHAT IS CHANGE?

Change is not inherently good or bad—it’s a break in routine that sends us in a new direction. We all have regular routines in our daily lives. However, sometimes those routines are inherently problematic, like sending our kids to schools that aren’t good enough for them, or working for less pay than we deserve, or putting deadly chemicals in our air and water.

It takes motivation, focused application of resources, and mobilization of others to break these routines and forge a new path forward. The purpose of organizing is to build that focus, the collective resources, and the community to make change.

The challenge of making change is to always measure its concrete impact in our lives. At the end of our campaign have we only changed policy or opinion? Or have we actually improved our schools, do we actually have safer workplaces, do we really have cleaner air, soil and water? And do we have new capacity within our community to win further change?

WHICH ORGANIZING AND LEADERSHIP PRACTICES LEAD TO CHANGE?



Building power requires learning the craft of organizing. The five practices of organizing listed below create change in individuals, in how groups operate, and in how the world looks, feels, and is. As leaders, we can use these key practices to enable others in our organizations to act together with clear purpose, active participation, understanding and initiative, and accomplish shared goals towards creating the measurable change we seek.

1. Creating Shared Story

Organizing is rooted in shared values expressed as public narrative. Public narrative is how we communicate our values through stories, bringing alive the motivation that is a necessary precondition for changing the world. Through public narrative, we tell the story of why we are called to leadership. Public Narrative has three elements:

“Story of Self” illustrates the values that move YOU to act—what calls you to leadership.

“Story of Us” illustrates the values and shared experiences embedded in our community calling us to collective action

“Story of Now” illustrates the urgent challenges to those values and clarifies why action must be taken NOW (not tomorrow, not the next day). The Story of Now also paints a picture of the hopeful vision of what we can achieve together and invites others to join us in taking specific action towards that vision immediately.

2. Creating Shared Relational Commitment

Organizing is based on relationships and creating mutual commitments to work together. It is the process of association—not simply aggregation—that makes a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Through association we can learn to recast our individual interests as common interests, allowing us to envision objectives that we can use our combined resources to achieve. And because it makes us more likely to act to assert those interests, relationship building goes far beyond delivering a message, extracting a contribution, or soliciting a vote. Relationships built as a result of one-to-one and small group meetings create the foundation for local campaign teams, and they are rooted in commitments people make to each other, not simply commitment to an idea, task, or issue.

3. Creating Shared Structure

A team leadership structure leads to effective local organizing that integrates local action with broader regional or national purpose. Volunteer efforts often flounder due to a failure to develop reliable, consistent, and creative local leaders. Structured leadership teams encourage stability, motivation, creativity, and accountability – and use volunteer time, skills, and effort

Originally adapted from the works of Marshall Ganz of Harvard University Modified by The New Organizing Institute

effectively. They create the structure within which energized volunteers can accomplish challenging work. Effective teams strive to achieve three criteria of effectiveness: meeting the change objectives of those they serve, learning how to be more effective at meeting outcomes over time, and enhancing the learning and growth of individuals on the team. Team members work to put in place five conditions that will lead to effectiveness: real team (bounded, stable and interdependent), engaging direction, enabling roles, clear ground rules, and a diverse team with the skills and talents needed to do the work.

4. Creating Shared Strategy

Although based on broad values, effective organizing campaigns learn to focus on a clear strategic objective, a way to turn those values into action and to unleash creative deliberation (for example elect a President; desegregate buses in Montgomery, Alabama; getto 100% clean electricity). Statewide campaigns locate responsibility for statewide strategy at the top (or at the center), but are able to “chunk out” strategic objectives in time (deadlines) and space (local areas) as a campaign, allowing significant local responsibility for figuring out how to achieve those objectives. Responsibility for strategizing local objectives empowers, motivates and invests local teams. This dual structure allows the movement as a whole to be relentlessly well oriented and fosters the personal motivation of volunteers to be fully engaged.

5. Creating Shared Measurable Action

Organizing outcomes must be clear, measurable, and specific if progress is to be evaluated, accountability practiced, and strategy adapted based on experience. Such measures include: volunteers recruited, money raised, people at a meeting, voters contacted, pledge cards signed, laws passed, etc. Although electoral campaigns enjoy the advantage of very clear outcome measures, any effective organizing drive must come up with the equivalent. Regular reporting of progress to goal creates opportunity for feedback, learning, and adaptation. Training is provided for all skills (holding house meetings, phone banking, canvassing, etc) to carry out the program. New media may help enable reporting, feedback, and coordination. Transparency exists as to how individuals, groups, and the campaign as a whole are doing on progress to goal.

Have you ever been part of an organization or “disorganization” described by the words on the left? The difference between that and the organization described on the right is not any particular issue, any particular demographic or any particular geography. It’s about the practice of leadership from the inside out. This training is structured around teaching these practices, and supporting you in practicing them.

DISORGANIZATION	INTERDEPENDENT LEADERSHIP CREATES	ORGANIZATION
Drift	Shared Story	Purpose
Passive	Shared Relational Commitment	Participation
Confused	Shared Structure	Understanding
Reactive	Shared Strategy	Initiative
Inaction	Shared Measurable Action	Change

Originally adapted from the works of Marshall Ganz of Harvard University Modified by The New Organizing Institute

LABOR NOTES

How to Be a Staffer in a Democratic Union

June 05, 2014 / [Alexandra Bradburyenlarge](#)



If members run the local... what exactly is the union rep's job? We asked four experienced staffers how they approach their day-to-day tasks while keeping the rank and file in the driver's seat. Photo: Jim West/[jimwestphoto.com](#).

Suppose you're a union staff rep. (Or a business agent, an internal organizer, whatever the local lingo is.) And suppose you believe in union democracy: the members should run the fight against the boss.

Where do you come in, then? What exactly is your job, and how can you do it in a way that keeps the rank and file in the driver's seat?

The obvious danger: you work for the union all day, while members have their jobs to do. It can be all too easy for members and staffers alike to start thinking "the union" means the people who have desks at the union hall: the top brass and the reps they hire. That's not only undemocratic—it's a terrible foundation for building power.

We asked four experienced staffers how they see their jobs and how they translate the idea that the members run the union into their day-to-day tasks.

GOLDEN RULE

One union tackles the problem at its root by drawing a thick line around the role staffers play.

University Professional and Technical Employees "takes member-run to the nth degree," said Vice President Lisa Kermish. She was a research administrator at the University of California before coming to work for her union.

Stewards do all UPTE's representation, even arbitrations that pit them against management attorneys. Union staff do no direct grievance handling.

Staffers don't participate in bargaining; they're not even in the room during negotiations. Nor do they participate in discussions of the union's policies or direction. Instead, their job is to recruit and train members to do these tasks.

"Our golden rule is, don't do for members what they can do for themselves," Kermish said, "and its platinum corollary is, if there isn't a member to do it, it won't get done."

Holding fast to these rules isn't always easy. What's a staffer to do when the clock is ticking on a grievable situation and no steward is willing to take it on? Sometimes the union has to call in a "super steward" from Los Angeles to handle a case an hour away in Irvine, or throw a new steward "into the deep end of the pool"—with support from staff, but never with a staffer doing the task for the steward.

The policy, Kermish said, is "based on the premise that, if we're really a member-run union, we have to do more than talk the talk."

TEAM EFFORT

Part of a union rep's job, Joe Fahey says, "is to help people do things they're not used to doing. None of the big changes that we're trying to make in the labor movement, in our workplaces, in the world, are going to happen if we don't make small changes, like in how we talk to each other and how we run meetings."

Tips and Principles for Staffers

Democracy is a lot more than elections. A democratic union is "more about voices than votes," Joe Fahey says. Who gets to speak in meetings? Who has a say in the strategy? Make room for real debate.

Members make the decisions at every step of organizing, not just the end. It's not good enough if "some well-worked-out plan has been arrived at, and then members come to a meeting to give it their stamp of approval," says Ellen David Friedman.

UPTE's "golden rule": staffers shouldn't do for members what members can do for themselves—even if that means sometimes a task goes undone.

Get members talking and working with one another, not just with you. Fahey kept grievances in a stack on his desk. When someone brought a new one, he'd say, "If it's just you, it'll go in the pile, but if you can bring back two to three people who have similar problems, it'll go to the top."

Encourage people to connect their experiences to a bigger picture. When he organized home care workers, Matthew Luskin learned nearly all had faced abuse or sexual harassment from a client. Each story might feel personal, "but they also knew it was deeply linked to sexism in the industry," he said—a pervasive atmosphere, not just one abusive guy.

Members may not expect the union to deal with racism, sexism, or the economy until you open the door. When he did, Luskin found, "people had a lot to say."

Fahey, a retired Teamster, was a union staffer for two decades. He recalls a bottling plant where different groups of workers took out their tension and mistrust on the steward.

“The workers would have a steward election and then be extremely dissatisfied with the steward, whoever it was,” he said, “and so there would be a call to get rid of that damn steward and put somebody else in their place. It just looked like an impossible setup.”

So he called a meeting and asked all the workers to consider themselves potential stewards.

They went around the circle answering the question, “What qualities do you have that would make you a good steward?” Then they went around again to answer, “What would be difficult for you about the job?”

Some said they were shy, didn’t like conflict, or had trouble understanding the contract language. A couple of people said they’d be terrified to do something the old steward used to: stand up near the end of lunch break and yell that the union meeting was going to be on Tuesday.

“By then it was sort of self-evident: there’s no perfect steward,” Fahey said. “Everybody’s going to have parts of the job they could do more easily than other parts.”

He asked the group, “Is there anybody here for whom it wouldn’t be a difficulty to yell that at the end of lunch?” Most hands went up. “So, if someone else was otherwise the best steward, is there anybody here who would help do that part of the job?” The same hands went up again.

Members reached a consensus on the most important qualities of a steward, and agreed it would take a team effort to support whoever had the job. The next steward stayed on for years.

The staffer doesn’t have to be the idea person. In this instance Fahey guided the process, but didn’t supply his own opinions on who should be steward or which qualities were important.

Especially “being a white guy in a union full of mostly Mexican women, more often than not I didn’t have the best answer to the problem facing the group,” he said. “It’s easy for a group to recognize a good idea. My role was to ask the question that led to generating the most ideas, so the group could pick the best one.”

DON’T PRE-JUDGE

Ellen David Friedman, who organized for many years with the Vermont National Education Association, agrees: be careful not to pre-judge the solution.

Whatever the problem you’re setting out to confront, she said—member apathy, division inside the union, a bad boss, a contract campaign—it’s members who need to define it and plan what to do.

“It’s not authentically democratic,” she said, “if members are simply going out with a goal, like ‘we have to get so many signatures on a petition,’ or ‘get so many people to turn out at a rally.’”

Instead, begin by finding out who’s already aware of a workplace problem, and get them talking to each other.

Your job in the conversation is “to turn what looks like just a dead end or an endless cycle of wheel-spinning or pessimism—‘we’ve tried that, it hasn’t worked, no one cares’—into a frame-able, settable goal,” David Friedman said. “With some dose of, if not optimism, at least commitment to try something.”

Encourage members to figure out who else is likely affected by the problem and how to bring them into the conversation, she said. You can help them prepare and practice what to say to their co-workers.

MESSY, SLOW, UNEXPECTED

Maybe the group agrees to do a survey. When you come back together, she said, “now instead of five people concerned, we’ve talked to 50, and wow, 88 percent of them said their problem was x.” Maybe they write up the results, go back out to check in with people again, hold a meeting.

Again you might role-play or talk through how to frame the issue. The organizer’s task is “to prepare people for having their own conversations with each other,” David Friedman said. “Those are where the democratic process is going on.”

But “it’s not as if the organizer or staff person is invisible. They have a job to do: matching power to appropriate goals,” she said. “Members who are not experienced organizers might have an idea of what they want, but it bears no relationship to what can be achieved based on existing power.”

So your role is to point out, “If we really want to do that, we need to build up our power.

“The question is always, how detached can the organizer be from controlling the outcome? Things may go in a different direction than you expected. They may take a lot longer. They may be a lot messier. But the result is authentic and powerful.”

TALK ABOUT WHY

For Chicago Teachers Union organizer Matthew Luskin, a big part of the job is to put union strategy on the table for members to discuss.

“Organizing can’t just be about getting people to do things,” he said. “It has to be about getting people to believe in *why* we’re trying to do these things.” The reformers who won leadership of CTU in 2010 believed it would be necessary to build towards a strike. They also knew many members weren’t yet thinking that way.

So organizers' job wasn't just to turn out members for this or that event. It was "winning people on the whys" of the strategy that officers were proposing. "We were engaging people in a very honest conversation," Luskin said: "here's what the challenges are, here's what the risks are, here's what we think we could win."

Organizers also talked with members about "what sorts of experiences would build people's confidence that these were strategies that could win," he said.

Members weren't just asked to wear red union T-shirts every Friday, for example. It was discussed: this will show the scared members at your school how much support the union has. Other activities aimed to prove the union could get parent support.

"I have a low tolerance for meetings where you pretend everybody can participate but really there's only one acceptable outcome," Luskin said. "I'm not saying we don't have a planned strategy we're trying to get people to agree to. I'm just saying they can say no to it."

Before and since the 2012 strike, dozens of members have gone through CTU's summer member-organizer program. There they receive much of the same training a new staff organizer would get: how to draw out a fellow member's issues and move that member to action.

They learn strategy and campaign planning, too. "It's important to push back against the ultra-professionalization of organizing work," Luskin said, "the idea that it requires a secret handshake and training that are not accessible to the rank and file.

"Are there skills and training that staff get, through experience and time? Sure. But the problem we have in the labor movement is not needing more brilliant strategists and tacticians. It's 'do we have huge numbers of people willing to take real risks to fight?'"

The point of CTU's member-organizer program isn't to boost a particular campaign. The point is how members are changed by the experience.

"We want members to come out of this able to organize their co-workers and community around a struggle in their neighborhood," he said. "We want to expand the number of fights the union can take on, and that can only happen if more members feel comfortable developing strategies themselves."



[Alexandra Bradbury](mailto:al@labornotes.org) is editor and co-director of Labor Notes. al@labornotes.org

LABOR NOTES

Indiana Teachers ‘Go Green’ To Track Member Sign-Up

April 13, 2018 / [Samantha Winslowenlarge](#) or [shrink text](#)[login](#) or [register](#) to comment



Indiana teachers have developed a new system to track member sign-up.

What will happen to public sector unions after the Supreme Court rules on the Janus v. AFSCME case this spring? Indiana teachers are already there. Slammed by a “right to work” law in 1996 and a new barrage of attacks in 2011, the teachers experienced what many unions are afraid of—a big drop in membership.

But the Indiana State Teachers Association didn’t roll over and give up after that. The union developed a tracking system called “Go Green” to help local leaders get membership back up.

It’s working. The first year of the program, the union narrowed its deficit between existing members lost to retirement and new members gained. The second year, it broke even. The third year, statewide membership increased.

This is in a legal environment that’s worse than right to work. Budget cuts in 2011 were paired with sweeping restrictions that kneecapped unions. Teachers bargain over only wages and benefits, and only between September and November of each year. Past that, impasse is declared and a third-party factfinder decides the final agreement.

Even under these circumstances, membership rates matter. “You will have a superintendent tell you, ‘You don’t even represent 50 percent of the teachers, why should I care what you are asking for?’” said ISTA representative Heidi Miller.

Case in point: the union local in Maconaquah was able to fight off a benefits cut after increasing its membership from 58 to 70 percent in two years.

MANY HANDS, LIGHT WORK

So how does it work? The heart of the “Go Green” program is getting teachers in every school involved in signing up members.

Schools below 50 percent union membership are flagged as red. Schools at 50 percent or higher are coded yellow, and those at 70 percent or higher are green. The color scheme helps officers and association reps (stewards) prioritize which schools, and even which parts of buildings, need the most help.

Miller coaches local leaders on the system. “We’ve encouraged them not to put the burden on the elected leaders, not just the association reps or officers, but to spread it throughout the membership,” she said.

Eastern Howard Education Association, which represents a small cluster of schools north of Indianapolis, was at 56 percent membership when it launched the program. “That was a little scary,” said President Shawn Carpenter.

So a handful of officers and reps formed a membership committee and divided up the list of nonmembers. Each person took a first assignment—two or three people to talk to—based on years of experience, department, and who they knew best.

They’ve kept following up and working their lists ever since. A year in, Eastern Howard’s membership is up to 70 percent.

Carpenter said this success comes from tapping into existing relationships—who’s friends with who. One-on-one conversations are key, she said: “Asking in person, it’s harder to say no.”

The committee doesn’t leave people with assignments for long. Members text each other, “How’d it go?” When someone declines to sign, they talk it over: “What was holding this person back? Is it something we can fix?” The committee builds in a second and third attempt, often sending back another member with a different relationship or approach.

Through member sign-up conversations, the Eastern Howard union discovered a unifying issue: a point system required teachers to meet a bunch of unrealistic criteria based on attendance and degrees in order to get a raise. In last year’s bargaining, the union won a pay scale instead.

LIVING WITHOUT DUES DEDUCTION

A popular line of anti-union attack by state legislators is to ban employers from deducting dues from members’ paychecks. Dues deduction is banned for Michigan teachers, for instance, and for the whole public sector in Wisconsin.

Indiana has no such law at this point—but the teachers union opted to stop payroll deduction anyway. When new members sign up, they give the union their bank or credit card information to process dues directly.

This preempts a fight with hostile legislators and keeps the union's focus on talking to teachers. It also takes control of union funds out of the hands of employers.

EARLY AND OFTEN

To create an environment where people want to join, you have to stay in constant communication, said Brad Bennett, president of the local in the Western School District.

The goal is to draw in potential members by "making them feel like they are missing out in not being in our association," Bennett said. For instance, members get updates about bargaining and about meetings with the principal to address problems.

When the Western district wanted to extend the school day without added compensation, the union packed 80 members (out of 180 district teachers) into a school board meeting and won a pay raise.

New teachers are particularly important to reach, to frame the importance of joining the union from day one. Ideally the first ask comes from someone on the membership committee who is also relatively new, "so they see other people like themselves as members," said Miller. "Are they getting ready to buy their first house or have their first child, versus a teacher who is close to retirement?"

Carpenter says her union also tries to match up each new teacher with someone from the same department who can act as a lasting bridge to the union and perhaps offer ongoing mentorship.

In larger districts, teachers set up a separate membership committee for each school. Each year there's a big beginning-of-the-school-year membership push, because the state calculates local membership percentages on September 15. Under a law passed in 2017, members in any district below 50 percent get a mailing describing how to initiate the process to decertify their union.

But the focus on building membership continues year-round. "We don't let it die after the beginning of the year," said Sue Ellen Sopher, local president for the Maconaquah district.

A version of this article appeared in [Labor Notes #468](#). Don't miss an issue, [subscribe today](#).



[Samantha Winslow](#) is co-director of Labor Notes. samantha@labornotes.org

<http://www.labornotes.org/2018/04/indiana-teachers-%E2%80%98go-green%E2%80%99-track-member-sign>

Trusted and Respected

Seattle's site-based organizing

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.

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

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,

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.

“It’s Not Magic. It’s Organizing!”

The powerful journey of North Carolina teachers

BY ELENI SCHIRMER

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

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

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

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

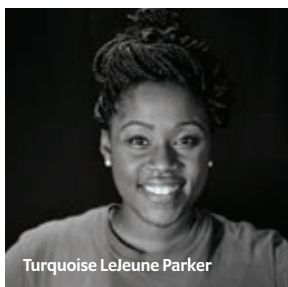
In April 2020, that scrappy group of teachers from the back of the state convention won the NCAE’s statewide leadership elections.

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

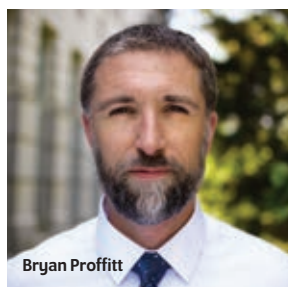
In April 2020, that scrappy group of teachers from the back of the state convention won the NCAE’s statewide leadership elections.



Tamika Walker Kelly



Turquoise LeJeune Parker



Bryan Proffitt

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

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

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

Building a Base, Step by Step

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Durham Association of Education Takes the Lead

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Feeling Powerful

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

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

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

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

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

Eleni Schirmer is a scholar, writer, and activist from Madison, Wisconsin. She is currently a PhD candidate at University of Wisconsin–Madison studying Educational Policy and Curriculum & Instruction. Her research explores the contradictory capacities of social movements—particularly teacher unions—to shape institutions, identities, and ideas.

LABOR NOTES: What Vermont Paraeducators and School Bus Drivers Learned When They Almost Went on Strike

November 09, 2018 / Emma Mulvaney-Stanak



Paraeducators and school bus drivers rebuilt a formerly passive union, changed the power dynamics in bargaining, and built towards a successful strike—and learned four key lessons along the way. Photo: Emma Mulvaney-Stanak

What do you do when your employer suddenly turns hostile? After years of relatively friendly labor relations, in 2015 the school board in rural Brandon, Vermont, shut down

negotiations and imposed its terms: higher health care costs and minimal raises.

The school board assumed that support staff would never strike. No school staff union in Vermont had ever struck on its own, without teachers. Meanwhile the sister union representing teachers agreed to a rollover contract. The teachers kept their distance from staff negotiations, not wanting to hurt their own relationship with the board.

The union of 100 paraeducators and school bus drivers was caught off guard. On top of “open hostility from the community,” said Loretta Johnson, a paraeducator and the union president at the time, internally the union was dealing with “a lot of fear and minimal member involvement.”

Another obstacle: the bargaining unit included two groups of workers, paraeducators and bus drivers, who had diverging interests. Fewer than half of the bus drivers were union members. Health insurance was the largest sticking point in negotiations, but most drivers didn’t take the district’s insurance. Meanwhile the paraeducators, who offer specialized support for students with behavioral and learning challenges, were nearly all union members.

But school support staff didn’t let these challenges stop them. This is the story of how they rebuilt a formerly passive union, changed the power dynamics in bargaining, and built towards a successful strike—and learned four key lessons along the way.

SURPRISE STRIKE VOTE

Nearly two years after bargaining began, the Rutland Northeast Education Association finally formed an organizing team that set out to mobilize members and save face in negotiations—short of striking.



A meeting on what to do about the stalled bargaining attracted a big turnout, nearly 95 percent of members. Leaders presented a routine motion to symbolically reject the imposition and move forward to bargain the next contract.

But members had had enough. They felt mistreated by the board, outraged over their frozen wages and the uncertain status of their

health care, and disrespected after months of working with no contract. Members amended the motion to call for an immediate strike. It passed with 87 percent of the vote. The yes voters included many bus drivers.

Shocked, union staff and local leaders scrambled to build the basic infrastructure for a strike. A week later, the school board caved and settled a contract, replacing the imposed terms.

- **Lesson #1: Trust democratic decision-making.** Trust members. They're not a blank slate; they can analyze risks and make complicated decisions. Local officers and union staff should avoid presenting members with a pre-scripted decision or plan. If we really want stronger unions, we must allow room for it to get messy and unpredictable.

DISUNITY WITH TEACHERS

Undeterred, the board pushed similar proposals even harder the next year. With a new state mandate requiring major changes to insurance terms and costs, every school district and union lined up contracts to expire in June 2017.

The new plans offered cheaper premiums—but for the first time, employees would face out-of-pocket expenses and high deductibles. Some expenses would be reimbursed, but for support staff already living on tight budgets, paying upfront would be tough.

This time the union tried to get organized earlier. Leaders sought out the most respected members among bus drivers and paraeducators in underrepresented schools to join the organizing team, and adjusted meeting times to accommodate members' shifts and second jobs.

Paraeducators and bus drivers showed up at school board meetings and told their personal stories of economic struggle. Photo: Emma Mulvaney-Stanak

The team tried out brand new tactics untested by Vermont-NEA. For instance, members held informational pickets on their own—without teachers. They phonebanked NEA-generated lists of likely parents and pro-education voters to talk about paraeducators and bus drivers' role in the schools and the status of bargaining. They asked parents to show up at board meetings and urge the board to settle. They also mobilized their own members to attend board meetings and tell their personal stories of economic struggle.

The organizing team decided to delay its efforts, to wait for the teachers' bargaining to catch up. If the board imposed again, unifying the two unions would build power. Sure enough, in June the board did impose again.

But when the time came to unite forces that fall, the teachers avoided merging organizing teams and declined to actively support the staff's tactics. Some teachers continued to believe the board would ultimately favor them—and even if not, that they would be better off organizing on their own.

- **Lesson #2: Solidarity takes time and conscious relationship-building.** Solidarity is not a machine that can be reliably turned on or off, nor can it be assumed. Though these teachers and support staff are in locals of the same state union, building a stronger relationship requires regular cultivation, something the RNEA is continuing to work on. Later, as they built toward a second strike deadline, the local unions began to attend each other's leadership meetings, communicate regularly, and present a more unified front to the board and superintendent. To sustain these new relationships, those practices must become everyday norms, not just what happens when either union is in crisis.

BRING THE KIDS TO THE MEETING

RNEA pushed on with its organizing. "We experienced unprecedented member attendance at meetings and solidarity actions," said Johnson, "mainly because they were extremely frustrated due to delays, bargaining dynamics and a second imposition. They were ready to be more aggressive."

To handle complicated shift schedules, RNEA began scheduling duplicate meetings—one after school and another in the evening, with pizza and a standing invitation to bring kids along. After every meeting, the union sent out updates via home emails, mailings, and handouts in school mailboxes, repeating the key points and the "asks" for how members could participate. Eventually the organizing team phoned every member and non-member.

The mailing and phone lists also included rank-and-file teachers who lived in the district. This direct communication generated some teacher support.

Bus drivers and paraeducators attended local events such as the family-oriented Harvest Festival. They called high-profile community members—faith leaders, business owners, heads of the Parent Teacher Organization—to ask for support. As a result of these calls, the union teamed up with the Vermont Workers' Center, the local nurses union, and the lieutenant governor to organize a town hall on the need for health care reform.

By Thanksgiving, the organizing team was divided. Some had felt ready to strike for months—while others still feared the risks: How long could members go without wages? Have we built enough power to win? After much deliberation, leaders agreed the full membership should decide the next step.

Members met in December. Tension filled the room as drivers and paraeducators weighed the risks. With 85 percent of the members present, the vote was 82 percent yes authorize a strike.

- **Lesson #3: Challenge assumptions.** The organizing team used time-tested tactics, but also broke the mold by taking seriously the possibility of a strike. Union staff and local leaders worked through many fears about whether a support-staff-only strike would be viable. By the second time they voted to authorize a strike, members felt ready to act.

‘WE’RE YOUR NEIGHBORS’

In the days leading up to the strike, the superintendent prepared to hire temporary replacements. The union accepted that schools would remain open. Still, members worked to make hiring scabs as difficult as possible.

They reached out to education unions within a 100-mile radius to request that substitutes refuse extra work in the Brandon area. They asked local teachers to lend support by refusing to work outside of their teaching duties.

The union knew its strongest leverage points: student transportation and special education rules. The organizing team proudly confirmed that half the bus drivers in the bargaining unit had agreed not to cross a picket line, whether they were union members or not.

Vermont has a shortage of certified bus drivers, even for private bus companies. Legally every employee must submit to a criminal background check, which takes days. The district struggled to find, train, and screen enough drivers before the strike—though it denied this publicly.

Scab drivers would be strangers to students and unfamiliar with the routes, raising safety concerns. Special education teacher caseloads would skyrocket, and students would suffer without paraeducators. The organizing team made sure to share this critical information with parents before the strike.

Union members leafleted door to door, sent letters, and phoned parents and voters. They focused on affordable health care, living wages, and the message, “We’re your neighbors,” since 80 percent of members lived within the district. These arguments resonated with people—especially when they learned that the board was looking for scabs, and that the union’s settlement proposal would cost less than one-third of one percent of the school budget.

The teachers union was finally becoming more supportive, as its own negotiations heated up. Teachers began to donate supplies for strike headquarters. They held meetings to

prepare members to identify potential grievances if they were asked to do staff work during a strike.

In the end, a federal mediator intervened. The union and the district signed a settlement two days before the strike date. Staff won a decent wage increase and a fair split on employer-employee out-of-pocket expenses, including a debit card that workers could use upfront for health expenses.

- **Lesson #4: Rural organizing presents challenges and unique strengths.** Members in small towns can be hesitant to share their stories of economic hardship with their neighbors, but direct contact with neighbors and parents proved to be the most powerful tool. Also, it's tough for the boss to replace school employees in a rural area on short notice. Keeping schools open during a strike would have meant understaffed classrooms, gaps in bus schedules, unfamiliar drivers, and special-ed staffing shortages—which could all spark public outrage.

Emma Mulvaney-Stanak is a former Vermont-NEA statewide organizer.

http://labornotes.org/2018/11/what-vermont-paraeducators-and-school-bus-drivers-learned-when-they-almost-went-strike?fbclid=IwAR2nNNr_VNH4PjsuiVwKSdb5vu1nL1QZTJQiBnqerXy8IM8xhI2hxQl4rPo



The union movement was actively involved in the struggle for marriage equality. Photo: VAHPA, 2016

Union and Community Coalitions: Stronger Together

By Amanda Tattersall

<https://commonslibrary.org/union-and-community-coalitions-stronger-together/>

Everyone knows the principle behind collective organising is that when people work together they are stronger than those working alone. But this principle also applies to organisations. Coalitions between unions and community organisations are not new. Unions in Australia have often campaigned on issues beyond wages and conditions – we fought for universal health care, for green bans to protect the urban environment and won a strong public education system. Indeed, a century ago unions were built out of working class communities, where working class neighbourhoods and local organisations such as churches, supported the development of strong unions at work.

With the onslaught of conservative power from the Howard Government, and the combined attacks upon workplace and non-workplace social concerns, from job security to public education, climate change and war, there is an increasing need for strong coalitions between unions and community organisations to create an alternative agenda that privileges social resources rather than the rule of the market and employers. Yet, while we need coalitions – creating strong, powerful, deep relationships can be a challenge. There is a lot of new research on coalitions. Below is a study of some of the key elements of successful coalitions.

Coalitions can vary, from ad hoc relationships (for instance, where a community organisation asks a union to endorse a policy position) to deeper, long-term, formal coalitions (such as the NSW Teachers Federation's public education campaign, where teachers and parents joined together to coordinate an independent inquiry into the future of public education). Coalitions differ according to several key elements, including their common concern, structure, organisational commitment, capacity and culture.

Coalitions form when different organisations choose to campaign about a particular issue, interest or value that they have in common. The strongest coalitions develop when organisations have a shared interest in the coalition campaign. A good example is the public education's campaign for smaller class sizes. Parents have a direct interest in small class sizes because it enhances learning and the quality of education, and teachers are able to work under better class room conditions. The lesson is that alliances between organisations who have shared mutual interests are likely to be strongest, because even though the organisations are different – they have a shared concern for similar

objectives. It is important for both unions and community organisations to think about their issues openly, and to incorporating the perspectives of coalition partners to build sustainable coalitions that operate in the mutual direct interests of the participating organisations.

The structure of a coalition is important. Organisational relationships are most likely to be strong if different groups can negotiate strategies. This space for sharing ideas builds trust, which is also an essential ingredient for effective coalitions. Sometimes coalitions are 'come-one come-all' while others hand-pick organisational participants: organisations are selected because of a certain common interest or value. Importantly, all evidence shows that there's no "correct" structure – it can, and should, vary according to the needs of participants. Relationships outside coalitions are important too. If organisations want to practice coalitions, then it is important to actively cultivate relationships with different organisations (who might not immediately see the value in joining the coalition) and learn about these organisation's issues and concerns while sharing your concerns.

While there are no set rules for a coalition's structure, history shows there is one rule common to all successful coalitions: they are built by focussing on issues of common concern not conflict. Conflict has often surfaced between community organisations and unions, for instance, often environmentalists and unions are pitted against each other by employers or the Government. But while there are issues of conflict, such as over mining or timber felling, there are also grounds of common concern. Recycling and environmentally sustainable technologies are labour intensive industries which promote sustainable development. For instance, in the United States, the APOLLO Alliance is a coalition of environmental organisations and unions that promotes the development of environmental manufacturing with good unionised jobs.

Organisations are different, and organisational culture can challenge coalitions. Some community organisations use tactics such as direct action, where as unions regularly rely on people-intensive activities like rallies or strikes. Also, many community organisations work by building consensus where as unions usually operate by majority votes. Often these cultural differences can lead to tension between community organisations and unions. To work together, it is important to respect these differences. There is an important role for individuals who work to 'bridge' these barriers. People who are both union activists and community or social movement activists may provide coalitions with the ability to translate between these practices. Strong trusting honest relationships between individuals in different organisations are vital for forging lasting coalitions.

While the coalition form is important – a campaign is only successful if it can mobilise organisation members to participate in the campaign – coalitions also need organisational depth. Often 'less is more': a couple of organisations capable of providing significant commitment to a coalition is more powerful than a large list of organisations who are disinterested in the campaign, and simply sit on a letterhead. Engaging organisational members in coalition events can be hard, but is vital if a coalition is to produce a movement for change. Some coalitions oblige participants to commit resources to coalition actions, or even require participants to turn out members to rallies or events. Sometimes, a state-wide coalition may have local sub-branches to allow large numbers of people to participate.

Coalition practice is important. No organisation or movement has enough power, people or resources to win the sort of social and environmental change we need on our own. We need to work together to fight for what we believe in, and to learn from other organisations to develop a comprehensive agenda for change. Only together can we not only change the current Government, but change way we live, work and sustain the environment around us

Under new leadership, Nashville's teachers union hopes to use leverage gained after protests over pay

Jason Gonzales, Nashville Tennessean Published 10:00 p.m. CT Oct. 20, 2019

Spread throughout the warehouse-like building housing Nashville's teachers union hang photos of last school year's [teacher pay protests](https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/education/2019/05/16/nashville-teachers-absent-again-part-mnps-sick-out/3691484002/) ([/story/news/2019/05/16/nashville-teachers-absent-again-part-mnps-sick-out/3691484002/](https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/education/2019/05/16/nashville-teachers-absent-again-part-mnps-sick-out/3691484002/)).

At the time, the protests where educators marched and called out sick were led by union and non-union members. But they weren't backed by Metro Nashville Education Association leadership, the city's educators union. Now, a group that helped spearhead the city's teacher demonstrations leads the association. And it is determined not to just memorialize the protests in the South Nashville building that overlooks Metro Nashville Public Schools headquarters, but use the recent action — and future action, if necessary — to better the conditions for educators in Music City.

"I think that we came in with a pretty clear mandate from the people who voted for us to go out there and make some big changes," MNEA President Amanda Kail said. The goals so far are uncomplicated: Get teachers more involved in the union, elevate the voice of teachers, push for better working conditions, and fight for increased pay.

If they feel they are not heard, Kail said the new leadership knows what it means to take to the streets. That's a major change for a union in a state where teacher strikes are illegal ([/story/news/education/2019/03/12/tn-teachers-united-public-education-funding-school-testing-union/3131729002/](https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/education/2019/03/12/tn-teachers-united-public-education-funding-school-testing-union/3131729002/)) and Collective bargaining rights have been stripped. But Kail said teachers have leverage.

"I think we kind of shook the city up a little bit (through the protests), and that needed to happen," Kail said. "And I think that going forward when we talk to people at (Metro Nashville Public Schools), when we talk to people at the city, when we talk to the mayor, they know we have that in our back pocket."



Amanda Kail leads a protest of teachers demanding higher wages May 16 at City Hall in Nashville. (Photo: George Walker IV / The Tennessean)

Teacher pay and planning time

A goal to increase wages is central to the union. The new leadership wants to renegotiate the union's memorandum of understanding with the district to prioritize teacher step raises, or pay based on experience. But there are other issues besides pay. One sticking point for Kail and MNEA Vice President Michele Sheriff since taking over the union this summer is to ensure teachers have time to plan. As teachers recently serving in the classroom, they said it is important to ensure teachers can prepare for students. They said interim Director of Schools Adrienne Battle has been receptive to their asks. The hope is their advocacy makes the climate better for teachers and, in turn, better for students. "We want teachers to know they're not just a teacher in a classroom," Sheriff said. "They're an integral part of the district, and all the decisions that the district makes affect teachers directly."

Nashville's teachers union wins supporters

The union's recent work is being noticed. "I feel like they are going to do everything they can to help us," said Lillian Baird, a McGavock teacher and member of Sick Teachers. The Sick Teachers group led "sick-outs" during which educators missed work to advocate for more money in the budget for schools and wages. Baird said Kail and Sheriff supported Sick Teachers even when previous MNEA leaders would not. Although not every Sick Teacher member is part of the union, Baird said she gets the feeling the association's new leadership stands for all teachers.

Meanwhile, school Board Chair Anna Shepherd said she's maintained a good relationship with MNEA leaders. But she sees where Kail and Sheriff are willing to rally teachers. "After speaking with Amanda (Kail), I see how they are trying to get every school with a union representative, get active members organized and work as a change agent. I applaud that," Shepherd said.

Discontent spawns protests

Nashville teachers complained about problems with pay for years before protests in the 2018-19 school year. But the issue became center stage this past year. Teachers argued pay is causing teachers to leave and exacerbating the issue of understaffed schools throughout the district in a recruitment climate where it is tough to hire educators. Teachers organized a march, rallies and the "sick-outs." The 4.5% cost of living raise is a minor victory, educators said. They received it in this year's budget.

Kail and Sheriff want the union to play a key role in whatever comes this year and beyond. The union's committee positions are fully filled for the first time in years, Kail said. "Hopefully, we can put the systems in place where other people can come behind us, improve the union, and they can then continue to work to improve the climate and culture in the district so it is able to attract and retain great teachers," she said.

Reach Jason Gonzales (<https://www.tennessean.com/staff/33783/jason-gonzales/>) at jagonzales@tennessean.com and on Twitter [@ByJasonGonzales](https://twitter.com/ByJasonGonzales) (<https://twitter.com/ByJasonGonzales>).

Central Labor Council of Nashville and Middle Tennessee

<https://nashvilleclc.org/affiliated-organizations>

Vision Statement

We will strive to become a united, effective, adaptive, strategic, relentless, vocal, and visible 21st century organization of by and for all working people in the Middle Tennessee area.

We will work to strengthen our affiliates and deepen our movement to bring greater economic justice to our workplaces, and social justice to our communities.

We will build solidarity across organizations, industries, jurisdictions, and all lines that are used to divide working people against ourselves.

We will win victories together that would not be possible alone.

There is much that is outside our control. History is outside our control. We have inherited a political and economic landscape in the South that is increasingly hostile to regular working people. There are well-funded political and economic forces, alive and well, that explicitly want to take away the rights, privileges, and power that those who came before us, fought so hard for, and sacrificed so much for. These forces want to divide us and have us fighting each other rather than organize in our own collective self-interest. Our opposition is outside our control.

What is inside our control is how organized we are. There are tens of thousands of union families in the area. There are incredible opportunities inside our control if we can only act together. Our ability to act is called our “capacity”. Capacity is the horse that drives the cart of all victories. Capacity can be measured by the work of staff, volunteers, membership, allies, strategy and sophistication. If we can only find ways to act together, to creatively build our own capacity to act in our own self-interest, we can reshape many of the decisions that impact our lives. The decisions that impact our lives are in the workplace, in our communities, and also in politics. Our own capacity is inside our control.

The greater capacity we build together, the greater the victories we will win.

(Written by Executive Board Member Garrett Stark and adopted by the Central Labor Council of Nashville and Middle Tennessee on December 1, 2018)

Affiliated Organizations and Local Unions:

[American Federation of Government Employees \(AFGE\) Local 2022](#)

[American Federation of Government Employees \(AFGE\) Local 2400](#)

[Amalgamated Transit Union \(ATU\) Local 1235](#)

[Brotherhood of Maintenance and Way \(BMWED\) Lodge 670](#)

[Communications Workers of America \(CWA\) Local 3808](#)

[Communications Workers of America \(CWA\) Local 3879](#)

[International Association of Fire Fighters \(IAFF\) Local 140](#)

[The International Association of Heat and Frost Insulators and Allied Workers \(Insulators\) Local 86](#)

[International Association of Machinists & Aerospace Workers \(IAMAW\) Lodge 735](#)

[International Association of Machinists & Aerospace Workers \(IAMAW\) Lodge 1640](#)

[International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, \(IATSE\) Local 46](#)

[International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees \(IATSE\) Local 492](#), Studio Mechanics of TN and Northern Mississippi

[International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. \(IBEW\) Local 429](#)

[International Union of Painters and Allied Trades \(Painters\) Local 456](#)

[Ironworkers Local 846](#)

[Ironworkers Local 492](#)

[Laborers International Union of North America \(LiUNA!\) Local 386](#)

[Metro Nashville Education Association](#), NEA affiliate

National Association of Letter Carriers, (NALC) Branch 4

National Football League Players Association

Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) Local 182

Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) Local 277

Retail, Wholesale & Department Store Union (RWDSU) Local 150

[Service Employees International Union \(SEIU\) Local 205](#)

[SMART \(Sheet Metal Wokers\) Local 177](#)

Teamsters Local 480 Retirees

Unite HERE Local 2262

United Association Local 702 (Plumbers & Fitters)

United Association Local 572 (Plumbers & Pipefitters)

[United Food and Commercial Workers \(UFCW\) Local 1995](#)

United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 0342

[United Auto Workers \(UAW\) Local 0737](#)

United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 1407

[United Auto Workers \(UAW\) Local 1853](#)

[United Campus Workers \(UCW-CWA\) Local 3865](#)

United Steel Workers (USW) Local 0501

[United Steel Workers \(USW\) Local 1055](#)

United Steel Workers (USW) Local 1055 Retirees Chapter

United Steel Workers (USW) Local 1155

United Steel Workers (USW) Local 4802

United Steel Workers (USW) Local 9426

Washington-Baltimore News Guild (CWA) Local 32035

Affiliated Constituency Organizations:

A Phillip Randolph Institute (APRI)

[Middle Tennessee Jobs with Justice \(JwJ\)](#)

Organizations the CLC is also a Member of:

[Middle Tennessee Jobs with Justice \(JwJ\)](#)

[\(NOAH\) Nashville Organized for Action and Hope](#)

[ROC Music City](#)

Teachers are ‘ready to fight,’ says new Tennessee coalition inspired by strikes in other states

By [Marta W. Aldrich](#) and [Laura Faith Kebede](#)

Mar 12, 2019, 5:36pm EDT <https://tn.chalkbeat.org/2019/3/12/21107237/teachers-are-ready-to-fight-says-new-tennessee-coalition-inspired-by-strikes-in-other-states>

Weary of standardized testing and underfunded schools, and alarmed by the prospect of education vouchers and charter expansion in Tennessee, a group of teacher leaders have organized a new statewide coalition and say they are “ready to fight for the schools our students deserve.”

The coalition, called TN Teachers United, launched last week after meeting with two teachers who helped organize statewide walkouts last year in Arizona and West Virginia.

While a Tennessee walkout isn’t the goal at this point, it remains a possibility, according to the three primary organizers: Tikeila Rucker of Memphis, Amanda Kail of Nashville, and Lauren Sorensen of Knoxville.

“I won’t say that Tennessee is next, but I also won’t say that we’re not,” said Rucker, a former classroom teacher who is president of United Education Association of Shelby County, one of two organizations that represents Memphis teachers.

“I think we have to leave everything on the table,” added Kail, a teacher at Margaret Allen Middle School in Nashville, home to the state’s second largest district. “A lot of people are afraid to talk about it, but we can’t be afraid. I think we’re reaching a boiling point.”

National momentum

In the last year, teacher movements have started small in other states like West Virginia, Arizona, Kentucky, and Oklahoma — with powerful results. But it’s uncertain whether Tennessee’s coalition will be able to grow the grassroots support needed to make demands, even though the states have similar dynamics, including weakened unions, thin labor rights, and business-friendly politics that lean Republican.

Tennessee is a deep red state where teacher [strikes have been illegal](#) since 1978 when the last one occurred in Memphis. Teachers unions were further weakened in 2011 when they lost collective bargaining rights under the administration of Republican Gov. Bill Haslam.

Meanwhile, the state rolled out education reforms driven by new academic standards and measures to hold teachers and schools accountable. Those tied teacher evaluations to student test results, a shift that still angers educators who question the validity of scores under Tennessee’s [problem-plagued TNReady test](#).

Haslam also invested \$500 million in new funding in K-12 education, including teacher raises, but Tennessee’s [per-pupil funding remains one of the lowest](#) in the region and in the bottom half of the nation.

Adding fuel to the discussion is new Republican Gov. Bill Lee’s [announcement last week](#) that he wants to create a voucher program, which would divert taxpayer money to pay for private education services, and also make it easier to start new charter schools in Tennessee. Both proposals are opposed by educator groups who would rather see more investments in traditional public schools.

Bill Lee speaks with reporters in November 2018 after his election as Tennessee's 50th governor, as outgoing Gov. Bill Haslam looks on.
TN.gov

"Given our current governor and the state legislature, things look really grim," said Kail. "We're also seeing a decline in people who want to be teachers enrolling in colleges of education."

Kail and other organizers created a [Facebook group](#) and began promoting the new coalition this week by inviting educators to join and complete a questionnaire about their biggest concerns. Within a day, they had more than 200 members — and were growing by the hour. There are no plans to collect dues like a union does.

One organizer said feedback from the questionnaires will drive their next steps. "It doesn't do us any good to have hundreds and thousands of people who are upset and angry. It's only going to help if they're passionate enough to do something about it," said Sorensen, who teaches at Halls Elementary School in Knox County.

The organizers are following a blueprint used by teachers in West Virginia and Arizona who talked through their strategies during an hourlong video-conference. They convened with Tennessee leaders on Feb. 28 with the help of [Labor Notes](#), a national media and organizing project that seeks to develop grassroots labor movements.

Chris Brooks, a Labor Notes writer who helped facilitate the meeting, said Tennessee is ripe for stepping up its advocacy beyond the tactics of rank-and-file teacher organizations like the Tennessee Education Association.

"They can be conflict-averse and try to talk people out of doing things like a strike, but a strike can be the most powerful tool there is," said Brooks, a former labor organizer in Chattanooga who also previously worked for the Tennessee Education Association.

Brooks, who has assisted with teacher movements in West Virginia, Arizona, and Kentucky, believes Tennessee is next.

"Conditions for teachers are bad," he said of his home state. "Schools are underfunded. Students are over-tested. Teachers are leaving the profession in droves. When people are struggling that hard for teachers to be able to teach and students to be able to learn, I think you've got the conditions for an uprising."

But JC Bowman, executive director of the 8,000-member Professional Educators of Tennessee, cautioned against moving toward a strike.

"If you come out militant, you're going to bring out the militants on the other side," Bowman said. "Teachers would be putting their jobs on the line. You play chicken with some people, you can lose."

Splintered teachers groups

Tennessee has at least six professional and advocacy organizations for teachers, some of which represent educators in labor negotiations with local districts.

All three organizers of the new coalition are active in the largest and most powerful group, the Tennessee Education Association, also known as TEA, and have expressed frustration with its pace.

"Over the past few years, we haven't gotten results by being at the table," said Rucker.

[Beth Brown](#), a Grundy County teacher who became president of the teachers association last year, said she welcomes the energy of the new coalition and notes that the group's core beliefs appear to be aligned with those of the Tennessee Education Association.

They include a call for full state funding of public education; opposition to standardized testing as a means to label and punish schools, teachers, and students; a commitment to education equity; and opposition to vouchers in any form or funneling public money into charter schools.

Brown took issue, however, about the effectiveness of TEA's work.

"We know that, if it hadn't been for the advocacy efforts of our members during the last decade, Tennessee would already have had private school vouchers and radical charter school expansion," she said.

Teacher members of the Tennessee Education Association meet Tuesday with Rep. Harold Love of Nashville during an advocacy day at the State Capitol in Nashville. TEA encourages members to use a day of their spring breaks to lobby lawmakers on issues important to teachers. (Photo courtesy of TEA)

Coalition organizers in Tennessee say talk of a strike is building but emphasize that such discussions are premature. First, teachers must do some soul-searching on priorities and recruiting to gauge statewide support.

"The conversation now is about what really drives us. Is it funding or wages? Is it TNReady? Vouchers? Discipline? Or is it all of these things?" asked Kail. "We saw in [Los Angeles](#) how teachers tied together a bunch of things with a lot of success."

The numbers also have to be there, pulling in as many of the state's 66,000 public school teachers as possible, as well as retired teachers, parents, students, and community members.

"We should never be afraid of our own power," said Rucker.

Sorensen adds: "We've been paying attention to other states and they seem to be getting results. I'd rather not strike. I'd rather stay in my classroom and teach. But it seems like our politicians don't respond to anything else."

<https://tennesseelookout.com/2022/01/12/labor-groups-teachers-address-need-for-school-funding/>

Labor groups, teachers address need for school funding

BY: [DULCE TORRES GUZMAN](#) - JANUARY 12, 2022 5:59 AM



Lockeland Elementary School in Nashville. The Tennessee Supreme Court ruled that a measure to allow private school vouchers in only Davidson and Shelby Counties don't violate the state's home rule law. (Photo: John Partipilo)

With education being on the agenda of Tennessee lawmakers this year, organizations across the state are asking for increased funding for schools to counteract long standing issues complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Tuesday, educators, parents and labor organizations — Memphis For All, AFL-CIO, Stand Up Nashville, Nashville Organized for Action and Hope and Memphis Labor Council — held a press conference to discuss the challenges facing the state's public school systems, given that Tennessee ranks 46 out of 50 nationally in the amount invested in each student.

Tennessee uses the Basic Education Program (BEP) as the funding formula to decide how state education funds are distributed to schools, but lawmakers on both sides of the political spectrum are seeking to overhaul the 30-year-old BEP formula.

While lawmakers siding with Gov. Bill Lee sought to shift the program to a "student-based" formula, critics believe Lee is making attempts to shift state funds to provide subsidies for parents seeking to send children to private institutions.

Metro Nashville Public Schools, Shelby County Schools districts and 80 other districts are currently involved in a lawsuit against the [state](#) over the BEP and argue that the state doesn't provide enough money to meet the needs of their students, many of whom live in poverty.

The Metro Nashville Education Association surveyed 1,413 people in three languages to gauge public opinion on issues being brought up in the Legislature this month.

Without sufficient pay and with increased risks due to COVID, many of my fellow co-workers were forced to leave positions and students that they loved in search of livable wages. — **Esi Akyere Mali Arthur Snodgrass, Metro Nashville Public Schools teacher**

Notably, 98.2% did not agree with using public funds for private school facilities, 95.6% did not support giving public subsidies to families who could afford to send children to private schools and 8% said school facilities were adequately maintained.

Another 58% said education would affect how they vote for future elections.

"Right now, we really are at a crossroads in terms of what we, the state of Tennessee, as the people who make up the state, will do about this situation," said the Rev. Francisco Garcia, assistant chaplain at Vanderbilt University's St. Augustine's Episcopal Chapel and a host of the press conference.

Other speakers talked about fears that school districts across the state could face severe school faculty shortages as employees face burnout and insufficient pay.

Amanda Mgbodille, parent and substitute teacher at May Werthan Shayne Elementary School, a Nashville school, said that although teachers received a pay raise, other school faculty members are not receiving livable wages, adding that she and her family would not be able to survive on her salary alone.

“Here at my school, we definitely have staffing issues,” she said.

Another teacher said that “nearly all supply needs come out of my own pocket,” and that BEP funds were only covering a small fraction of supplies needed for instruction.

“These kinds of factors, class sizes and lack of funds, really make it difficult to meet every student’s needs,” said Julie Trudel.

With a lack of educational funding and livable wages for school faculty, labor organizations say qualified workers will leave school districts in droves and school systems will be unable to provide adequate support systems for students, such as socio-emotional learning for students facing COVID-related trauma.

“Without sufficient pay and with increased risks due to COVID, many of my fellow co-workers were forced to leave positions and students that they loved in search of livable wages,” said Esi Akyere Mali Arthur Snodgrass, an educator for Metro Nashville Public Schools.

<https://coloradosun.com/2022/07/29/denver-public-schools-staff-raises-jeffco/>



Denver, Jefferson County school districts raise hourly wages for support staff struggling to afford food and housing

Denver school district is raising hourly wages to \$20 an hour and Jeffco is moving toward \$18 an hour.

Erica Breunlin 4:30 AM MDT on Jul 29, 2022

Amid mounting public pressure, two of Colorado's largest school districts have approved 20% pay raises for school support staff, with Denver Public Schools pledging to boost pay by more than \$4 per hour for many workers this year and Jeffco Public Schools agreeing to increase compensation by \$3 per hour by September 2023.

The pay bumps were prompted, in part, by a sharp increase in cost of living that has strapped employees in both districts and strained schools' ability to fill essential roles in the classroom, cafeteria and across grounds.

DPS will invest about \$28.2 million over three years into increasing wages for about 2,800 district employees who belong to unions, according to Miguel Perretta, executive director of employee and labor relations. Those employees include paraprofessionals, who assist teachers with lessons and often help students one on one and who will begin earning \$20 per hour starting Aug. 1, up 21%. Their hourly pay will continue to increase by 50 cents each of the following two years so that they are taking home \$21 per hour starting August 2024.

Paras who aid students with special needs will have a starting wage of \$21 starting Aug. 1, up 21%. Their hourly compensation will also increase by 50 cents each of the next two years. By August 2024, starting pay for paras serving students with disabilities will be \$22 per hour.

For paraprofessionals like Carolina Galvan, who works at Valdez Elementary School in Denver, the pay raise means she will be able to save more money for her family and one day have a shot at homeownership. And with more money in their pockets, some of her coworkers will no longer have to rely on government subsidies to secure food and housing.

“Now I’m putting more money in my household,” Galvan, 34, said. “Now I’m a little bit less stressed.”



DPS has committed to paying all support staff members, including those represented by a union and those who are not part of a union, \$20 by August 2024. That includes food service employees, custodians and nonbargaining employees, many of whom are currently earning \$15.87 per hour, Perretta said. Their pay will inch up year by year — to \$18 per month in August, \$19 per hour in August of next year and finally \$20 per hour in August 2024.

Separately, the starting minimum wage for bus drivers and mechanics within the district will jump Aug. 1 from \$20.43 to \$24.40. The district is still finalizing negotiations with the Denver Association of Educational Office Professionals, which represents office support employees, Perretta said.

He noted that DPS will cover the cost of increased wages with various sources of funding, including \$4 million that stems from a central office reorganization and about \$13.4 million in projected state funding.

DPS wants to “remain market competitive,” Perretta said, adding that the higher wages will hopefully bolster recruitment and retention within support staff roles as the district — like many across the state and country — faces shortages, particularly with its workforce of bus drivers.

“It’s a huge investment to our workforce, which is well deserved,” Perretta said.

It also gives the district’s staff a sense of stability for the next few years, said Bernadette Jiron, president of the Denver Federation for Paraprofessionals and Nutrition Service Employees.

“It’s a step forward for all these people ... that they know that they’re valued and the union is here for them to make sure they get what they deserve for the next three years,” said Jiron, whose union has about 1,300 members.

She is “ecstatic” that DPS has finally listened to its employees and rewarded them with raises they have fought for since the spring, particularly as the district runs understaffed across critical support positions, including paras, food workers and bus assistants.

“I am tired of being a follower,” Jiron said she told district leaders. “I need for you guys to be a leader for these employees.”

An essential pay raise for an essential workforce



Galvan, the para at Valdez Elementary School, was among DPS staff who currently take home \$15.87 per hour and has been unable to afford a home, instead living in an apartment in Woodridge with her husband, daughter and mother. She has largely depended on her husband’s income to make ends meet, and the extra money added to her paycheck will set her up to be “a little bit more financially independent as a woman.”

She plans to build up a savings account with her increased wages so that her family can stay afloat in the event of another recession and potentially buy a house.

Questions about whether she should remain at her post as a para in DPS without adequate wages to cover her family’s expenses feel less urgent now, and there’s a sense of respect from the district that wasn’t necessarily there before.

“I’m really happy how everything got together, and we’re on the same page now,” Galvan said.

Meanwhile, the Jeffco Public Schools Board of Education has approved a contract in which hourly pay for support staff members will start at \$18 by September 2023, according to a statement released by the Jeffco Education Support Professionals Association on Wednesday.

The increase follows a board candidate forum held last fall in which Coloradans for the Common Good asked six candidates running for office to support a pay increase of \$3 per hour over the next two years.

In a statement, library para and JESPA president Lara Center called the pay raise “a historic moment” for staff.

“This is the second year that we’ve fought for and achieved well-deserved and substantial pay increases for our members,” she said.

Both JESPA, which represents about 3,800 support staff, including paras, custodians, bus drivers, secretaries and food service workers, and the Denver Federation for Paraprofessionals and Nutrition Service Employees belong to Coloradans for the Common Good. The organization is composed of congregations, unions, educational institutions, nonprofits and neighborhood organizations all focused on community issues and helped publicize the need to pay support staff more.

Coloradans for the Common Good also helped organize a rally outside DPS’s central office in downtown Denver in July, standing beside support staff members to call for higher wages with cost of living surging.

Joyce Brooks, chairperson of the organization’s steering committee, refers to them as essential workers.

“They are great support staff for our teachers to help them deliver the kind of education our children need in these school districts,” Brooks said, adding that those staff members also give the broader community insight into what’s going on in public schools.

The wage increases will help staff members and their families afford basic expenses in the face of inflation while also keeping schools running with employees who are key to students’ success, she stressed.

“I think we take them for granted too much,” Brooks said, “but teachers can’t teach, administrators can’t administer without these folks out there helping them.”

Happy Back to School! Fixed Survey Link

From: JESPA Communications Desk <jeffcoespa@coloradoea.org>

Sent: Friday, August 19, 2022 2:44 PM

Subject: RE: Happy Back to School! Fixed Survey Link

Friday, August 19th

WELCOME BACK TO SCHOOL, ESPs!

Be sure to take the Break & Lunch survey below!

Upcoming Meetings:

August 30 | **Building Rep Kickoff** @ Golden High School, 5:30PM | [Register Here](#) September 12 | **Preschool General Member Meeting** @ JCEA, 5:00PM | [Register Here](#) September 13 | **Food Service General Member Meeting** @ JCEA 4:00PM | [Register Here](#) September | 22 **Paraeducator & Parapro Meeting** @ JCEA, 5:00PM | [Register Here](#)

If you hadn't heard yet, congratulations on winning your campaign for a \$3/hour increase for ALL ESPs!

Below is a brief review of your wins this past year as a group of professionals:
all employees

Article 8 - Leaves updates

- ♦ Sick Leave bank for all ESPs
- ♦ Bereavement leave for Parapros

Article 11 - Reduction in Force updates

- ♦ Protects ESPs during school closures
- ♦ Based on seniority, removes favoritism

Preschool updates

- ♦ JCPK won a settlement worth thousands of dollars! This money will go towards back pay for PreK ESPs for any trainings attended last year where they were denied pay.

Brand New Article 16 - Food Service

- ♦ **Establishes a pilot program for healthy meals**
- ♦ Prevents demotions based on sale of junk food

Healthcare & Benefits

- ♦ District must bargain the structure and rules of the benefits advisory committee
- ♦ Bargain equitable premium contributions with the goal of affordable premiums for

Wages & Compensation - 22% average increase!

- ♦ **A historic multi-year proposal!** Never before
- ♦ has the district budgeted for ESPs beyond the upcoming school year!
- ♦ JESPA members campaigned for a **\$3/hr**
 - increase to ALL ESPs and that has been achieved: **\$2/hr for all ESPs & step increases** for eligible employees, to be implemented September of 2022 (average of 13.5% increase)
 - **\$1/hr for all ESPs & step increases** for eligible employees, implemented September of 2023 (average of 8.5%)
 - Automatic reopening of financial compensation negotiations if the district receives any additional funding.
 - The Wage Schedule Committee will meet and work on **longevity schedule improvements**.

What helped move the district to meet your demands as workers?

The JESPA members who stood strong and stood together and showed up!
Congratulations to ALL ESPs for a well-deserved win!

Not a member? [Join your union now!](#) JESPA
members aren't done yet...

We have been hearing rumbles that ESPs all across the district are not receiving their breaks and/or lunches. What does your daily break schedule look like? Fill out this form below to tell us more!

Health Insurance Update:

Thank you to those who participated in the Health Insurance Survey! The data provided will be instrumental in ensuring the Benefits Advisory Committee, once restructured, will have solid data to move forward with. JESPA members are beginning to establish a roundtable of ESPs to focus on Health Insurance and the BAC. If you are interested in participating, reach out to jeffcoespa@coloradoea.org with your interest!

When we fight, we win!

Healthy Schools Meals For All!

The JESPA Food Services Local has worked tirelessly over the past two years, shining a light on food insecurity here in Jefferson County. Zander and his Jeffco food services' worker team have raised their voices and collaborated with community allies like Coloradans for the Common Good (CCG), the Edgewater Collective, Jeffco Food Policy Council, state and local legislators, and more making **JESPA one of the leading advocates** for this measure making the ballot!

This November, Colorado voters will be asked to vote on a measure, [House Bill 1414](#) to approve a change in **high-income tax deductions**, which would create a new funding stream to provide **free, healthy meals to all students in Colorado public schools**. To pay for this statewide program wealthy taxpayers (adjusted gross incomes of more than \$300,000 per year) would be capped on the amount they could claim as deductions on their state income tax. **This ballot measure would only affect the top 3% of all income earners.**

If passed, the program would cover the costs of school meals, it would increase pay for school meal workers and provide grants for schools to purchase **Colorado grown**, raised, or processed products. It's good for local farmers and would make **Colorado less dependent** on out-of-state produce. **Buy local!!**

Please take a look at your calendars to schedule some time to volunteer for this important issue. [Volunteering opportunities can be found here](#). Talking directly with our community, neighbors, co-workers – Jeffco voters will ensure **this measure becomes a reality**.

Join us in passing the Healthy School Meals for All!

There has been no shortage of topics that JESPA members have been organizing around. Have a story? Submit to the JESPA Communications desk at commsdesk@jeffcoespa.org

Email published by JESPA
Jeffco Education Support Professionals Association
www.jeffcoespa.org
email: jeffcoespa@coloradoea.org
910 Loveland Street, Golden, Colorado 80401
(303) 279-3232

Campaign Design Opportunity 1- Eagle Nest Elementary

This is a Title 1 school with a high English Language Learner population. Because of concerns about low reading and math scores, students have very limited recess and almost no non-academic curriculum. There are 43 certified members with a 100% membership. This school is a low performing school and many types of school reform have been pushed into this school. Turnover of all staff is high. The certified building rep struggles to get people to come to meetings as they say they don't want the principal to retaliate against them for attending. The building rep attends every RA but does little on her own to solve small contract issues, relying on calling UniServ. She has been the building rep for at least 20 years and says she can't get anyone else to do the role.

There are a large number of new teachers – 14 in their first and second years of teaching. They each have mentor teachers and will need to complete three successful years at standard on the district's evaluation system before they can transfer. Many of them are not from the area and are not familiar with the culture of the students they serve. They struggle themselves to find affordable housing within Enchanted County. Teachers feel pressured to work through their lunch by the Title 1 Literacy Coach – especially new teachers. Due to the bullying, command and control nature of the administrator, teachers are not included in decision making and the leadership team reports that they are splintered between the two literacy coaches who are "principal favorites" and more senior teachers.

There is a large group – 18 - education support professionals (ESP) who work in the school. They are equally dissatisfied with the working conditions and they are just as fearful of the principal. They don't have any member willing to be the building rep and most don't know their contract rights. If there are any contract violations, either people are unaware of their rights or they are too timid to file the grievances. While the ESP group has 100% membership, they are not connected with each other well.

This school has a very strong Parent Teacher Organization and the school is used for a number of after-school and community programs. Two of the parents are connected with a community group focused on ensuring all residents know their voting rights. Two of the Support Staff are also parents of students at this school. The community loves this school and are very distressed that the principal wants to limit parent and community access to the building. Since becoming principal, the home and community coordinator position has been cut, popular evening music and art programs cut, the community garden paved over and new fees for building use by community groups have been assessed that are above what the district policy requires.

Problem Solving Scenario

You have received several voice messages about poor working conditions at Eagle Nest Elementary – but no one will leave a name or contact – all are anonymous and they even state in their message that they are afraid they will be fired if the principal finds out the union has been called. You have repeatedly checked with the building rep – who corroborates the stories, but says she is not having any issues and cannot get anyone who is willing to meet with the UniServ Director. They don't want to be seen talking to the "Union."

From the multiple messages, here is the story you have pieced together. The Literacy Coaches are personal friends with the Principal. All three of them believe that the mostly Spanish speaking community is likely full of illegal immigrants. They have openly stated this and because of this – that is

why they have to crack down on these slackers so children will be able to read and score well on the district reading tests. This school was designated a dual language immersion school – meaning that white, English speaking families can choose to have their students attend in order to learn Spanish. These are the parents and students – in the faculty’s opinion, that these three cater to.

The real problem is a contract violation. Every new teacher is approached by the literacy coaches to sit during lunch in the staff lounge and go over their data – they call it data and dine. This request has never been put in writing, and the new teachers want to keep their “noses clean” so they can transfer after three years. The senior teachers know this is happening and never eat in the staff lounge – and are never asked by the data coaches to do so. The number one complaint of the new teachers – they don’t even have a chance throughout the day to get to the bathroom as lunchtime is their only break.

Some Context:

This principal has been investigated several times for bullying Spanish speaking staff – but none of the cases were ever completed as the employees dropped them.

The coaches are bargaining unit members but not active in the union.

The contract requires a 30 Minute duty free lunch for all employees.

Campaign Opportunity 2- Gate Keeper Middle School

This is middle school with a very high Free and Reduced Lunch rate. It is in a neighborhood that people from community say is, "in decline," with a number of the single family homes now converted to multi-family rentals. There is a newly elected head building rep at this building. She attended this school when the neighborhood was still very middle class. Her first job here was as support staff in the special education program. She went to school at night to get her teaching degree and is now striving to be a principal. She has worked to fill the other possible rep positions and held elections for the two open rep seats. Five people ran for the two openings. The head rep is respected by a strong portion of the staff and feels that she gets things done. This head rep reports a strong relationship with the principal – a man with a similar background as hers - and asks that the UniServ stay away – even though the other building reps don't trust that she supports their positions when meeting with the principal.

Because of this school's free and reduced lunch rate, the district has implemented a new curriculum for schools like this, that requires a placement exam to be passed by any student wishing to take Algebra. Many of the math teachers have reported that they don't feel that they were provided enough time to give all their students a fair and equitable chance to be successful. There are a large number of African American parents who are also upset by this policy as they feel it is unfairly keeping their students from taking Algebra.

There is a group of newer teachers who eat each day in one particular teacher's room. These teachers are mostly all African American and feel that the principal has some unconscious bias issues. Most of the people in this lunch bunch are not from Tip Top District and came here because of the pay scale and benefits. This teacher who is hosting this lunch bunch is not a building rep and we don't even know how she feels about the union - but most people agree that they go to her for good advice on working with the parents in the community and the students at this school. They trust her opinion and support. The people who eat in this room believe that ALL teachers should be treated with professional respect by the principal and that it is a problem regarding the inherent racial bias of some of this principal's policies and actions. Even though they have told their head building rep, she won't bring up to the administrator because of her aspirations to be a principal.

Three members of this lunch group have determined a set of actions they could take to improve the placement test problem. They have developed a set of 10 minute meetings, a building member survey and a draft administrative complaint. They have also reached out to their colleagues in other buildings to see if this is an issue in other middle schools and if those schools want to join them in correcting this condition.

Problem Solving Scenario

A new building rep from Gate Keeper Middle school just sent you a very detailed email describing a situation that he is very concerned about.

Dear UniServ Director

I am writing to you because I have already spoken to our head rep, and I don't think she understands the situation – or she just does not want to deal with it. I have talked with Vice President Liberaling and he says I should run with any plans I can come up with to solve the problem. I thought I would run the issue by you to see what you think.

We have a policy at our school that before an eighth grader is allowed to take Algebra, they must pass an entrance exam at the end of 7th grade. As you know, Algebra is the gateway to entrance in most colleges and three additional math classes. The large number of requisite courses in this district for high school graduation, along with the number of math requirements, make it very hard to make up Algebra in high school AND take all the other “college ready” courses if Algebra is not taken in the eighth grade.

I am concerned because as an African American, I know that this policy is keeping almost all our black and brown students out of the 8th grade class. There are a number of my colleagues in the 7th grade that are telling the students to simply take pre-algebra in 8th grade because they will have a hard time passing algebra. This issue is compounded by the racially unaware no tolerance policies for attendance, homework, and tardiness put in place by our principal. I have asked our building rep to set up a meeting to discuss this, but she says she is uncomfortable discussing this topic with our principal. She says he is a good guy and just wants to do his best for “those kids.”

A number of us have been developing a plan for meeting with parents, maybe writing a letter of no confidence, or possibly attending a school board meeting to bring up these issues.

I am a new to this building rep work, but this seems like an issue we should be dealing with. What would you suggest that I do?

Sincerely,

Building Rep

Some context:

There is nothing about advancing racial justice issues in the Agreement

The district does have a Racial Equity Framework that is to be applied to all policy decision to ensure unintended consequences have been examined

There have been numerous claims of bias against this principal- but none have risen to official complaints

The neighborhood is known for having a strong activist personality

Campaign Opportunity 3- Higher Ground High School

One of the district's largest high schools has 95 employees with 35% of them in their first 5 years of teaching. There are 6 building reps and 4 of them have been in their position for as long as anyone can remember. One of them recently lost his bid for re-election as EA Vice-President. He was defeated by a new rep from this building. They hold regular monthly building meetings that are attended by about 20 of the most senior members and routinely pass out information from the state and national union. They often discuss problems – but almost never suggest or take action on solutions. The 4 long term reps routinely attend almost every event that their union offers and make full use of their professional and personal leave. These four plan their family vacation to coincide with their regular attendance at the NEA RA. The two newer reps have been engaged with their state and local union and would like to implement some new programs that would lead to more participation by rank and file in the work of the union. The long term reps see this as a way to take away the leadership that they have earned. The newer reps are also interested in getting a number of people to take action against some new, top down “rules” the new principal is putting in place. The long term reps just want to have the Union file a grievance and take care of the issues.

The long term reps say that the number one priority is that there were not large enough pay scale gains bargained into the last contract for those at the top of the scale and that there was an increase in the health insurance premium for single members. These leaders routinely ask the UniServ to come and lead their after school meetings and always include them in any member issue. There have been a number of member calls to the union help-line indicating issues with work-load, length of day, observation and evaluation, school discipline policies, and too much time out of the schedule for testing - but when the long term reps are asked, none are aware that there are any issues. Everything is fine. These reps all have a great relationship with the principal and with their UniServ.

The two new reps live in the same house. They became reps because a sizeable portion of the staff found them respectable and very credible after being participants in a program these new reps designed to help their colleagues better understand how to support LGBTQIA students. They are also co-trainers with a non-profit group that is providing race, equity and diversity training to the staff. These reps volunteer at the teen homeless shelter and want their union to be a place that seeks equity and justice for marginalized youth in the community.

Membership is at 70% with the number of non-members creeping up – especially with new and younger teachers.

Problem Solving Scenario

President Donna DeMiddle has called the Union Office looking for a UniServ Director. She starts the call by saying, “I know that I am supposed to be handling everything myself, but I really want your help with an issue. “

“There are a number of the new staff at Higher Ground High School who wants to file a grievance and they don’t have any one of their building reps that feels it is warranted. Of course, I have only heard from one of our long time reps – and I know he has his finger on the pulse. He says that a few of the new-type folks want to have some sort of uprising or file a grievance but the guys that know how things

work there – think they just need you to come calm the upstarts down. You know, explain that they have to put up with some challenges in the beginning.”

“Here’s what I am told their issue is - the Principal for the high school has asked the teachers that are still in their first three years of teaching or anyone that has a high rate of behavior issues or a below standard evaluation rating to turn in their lesson plans. Because it is mostly the new teachers who are struggling with student behavior – the principal – who is a good guy and always works with the union – just wants them to get their acts together. The members with seniority aren’t too concerned – except that two of our long time reps received poor evaluations last year – so they are going to have to do this new stuff. It’s really the newer folks who feel like this is an inequity in workload – but we all had to pay our dues when we were new, didn’t we?”

“The Principal and the Reps are also a little concerned that there is too much of this equity stuff and not enough attention to good old teaching.”

“So, they need you down there pronto to help bring the newbies into the fold. They need to understand that the role of the union is not to change the world – it is to get them a paycheck and benefits. I can't do the meeting with them because I have to be over at the middle school training. The reps can't do it because they don't want to upset the principal. I really don't know how I am supposed to do all this Union Staff work as the President. Thanks, and I know they will be happy to see you soon. “

Some context:

The state statute and district policy are silent on the issue of lesson plans.

The Agreement, in the section on "Evaluation" requires, " ... demonstration of the ability to plan," as a requisite criterion for successful teaching and it is the purview of the principal whether these plans are required to be turned in.

The other three high schools seem to have teachers doing these sorts of plans, at least nominally, without a peep from anyone.

The entire faculty gets a minimum of five planning periods per week, guaranteed, in the Agreement.

The newer teachers, who did not feel adequately prepared to teach the students in their class – have requested the training and have asked for support in crafting instruction that is equitable for all students.

Campaign Opportunity 4- Sunrise Elementary

There is a long time principal at this school – well liked. This is a heavily impacted school – high poverty, large class sizes, and high non-dominant English speakers. The staff recently unanimously voted to support an in-class breakfast program that causes them to give up 15 minutes of their contractually granted daily planning time. There is a high number of new teachers -20% in their first three years. Membership is at 80% in the certified unit. There is a new assistant principal who was a long time union leader and a National Board Certified Teacher. There is a new Head Building Rep who has been teaching for three years. She believes that it is every employee's responsibility to belong to the union. There are 3 building reps who have developed a system for doing one on ones in their building with a target of reaching all their contacts by mid-year. These leaders have surveyed their colleagues seeking input on issues and have identified three issues that colleagues want to improve – workload, coordination with special education and resource services, community connections. One of the reps is taking on the issue of helping parents understand curriculum requirements and is using her networks within the Latino community to set up meetings at local churches and the community center.

Attendance at the monthly RA from these reps is 100% and they have a 100% return from their building level colleagues on a recent Commitment to Vote campaign. This school has signed up to host a school board candidate at their next staff breakfast and invite them to see the breakfast in the classroom program. These members have increased their PAC contributions by 30%. They have sent three teams of 7 to the union led summer professional development and leadership programs. Members at this school have designed and led a number of professional learning groups based in what they determine is most useful for their students. Members at this building tend to contact their UniServ for information, resources and to “double-check” if actions they have planned make sense and are in keeping with sound practice.

The support staff in this building feel like they are invisible – especially to the classroom teachers. While the teachers are not particularly happy about the breakfast in the classroom program – it has been an enormous shift in the amount of work expected of the kitchen and office staff. The kitchen staff are expected to do more, within the same amount of hours with no down time for clean-up prior to getting ready for the early lunch wave. The office staff are in charge of delivering the breakfast to the classroom, doing lunch accountability and handling clean up – while still trying to cover phones and attend to access for the building via the front door and security sign-in. The one Support Staff building rep has a small group of members who want to do something – but they don't know who they can get to help them or join them in making a change.

Problem Solving Scenario

Velma Overly the Support Staff President wants to get some answers for her members – and potential members at Sunrise Elementary – specifically the kitchen and office staff. She is sitting in your office when you arrive in the morning and jumps right in ---

“Well, I think I have finally done it! I have found the issue that will get those non-members at Sunrise to sign-up. I am tired of having to do stuff for them when most of them are free-riders.”

“You know Sunrise, it is that huge elementary with all those before and after school programs and has both of the homeless shelters for families in its neighborhood. They also have a dual language and a Pre-K program – lots of Support Staff there along with a big lunch program. Due to all the services and rather transient family population – there is also quite a large office staff group. Anyways – I know the issue that is finally going to get them to see the value in the union!!”

“Sunrise got a federal grant to provide breakfast in the classrooms. No one is happy about it. It is a mess, teachers are losing 5 minutes off their morning planning time AND the kitchen staff have no down time between prepping and sending the breakfasts out to the classrooms and getting lunch ready – because of the size of the school, the first lunch wave for Pre-K is at 10:30. Of course – the principal will not give the kitchen staff more hours because then 5 of them would become eligible for health insurance.”

“The office staff are none too happy either – they have to deliver and pick up the breakfasts at each of the classrooms – it is a huge school and that means that it takes nearly all of them off the phones, the entry scanner and other front office issues. Mornings in that school’s office are a jungle.”

“I want the Union to lead the charge to get rid of breakfast in the classroom! I know the teachers would jump in on this issue too!”

Some context:

This neighborhood is the poorest most densely populated in the county and food insecurity is a top issue

It is true that the breakfast in the classroom program does infringe on the Certified Members contract – but not the Support Staff contract – as they are hourly and the building principal sets hours.

This is one of the hardest to staff buildings in the county, and this is the building with the lowest Support Staff membership density.

Campaign Opportunity 5- Tip Top District and the Tip Top Education Association

This is a mid-size school system consisting of 65 schools. There are about 3,700 employees that could be covered by either the Certified Employees Contract or the Support Staff Contract. There are 2,900 total members – 1,600 are certified members and 1,300 are support staff (bus drivers and custodians are represented by two other unions). There are 700 non-members in the certified unit, and 5 non-members in the support staff unit. The trend for both units has been membership declines especially in new to the profession certified employees and kitchen workers.

For the most part, most members tend to call the union staff or executive leaders directly with questions and problems instead of using their representative system. Union meetings are not well attended. Only about half of the building reps attend monthly meetings and engagement in actions is often driven by staff. On the last contract ratification vote only 28% of the members voted.

The district is facing a number of challenges. The long-term and popular Superintendent and a number of long time school board members have just changed. Their replacements are focused on raising expectations and holding educators responsible for student success. There have been substantial cuts coming from the state to support school budgets. This means that the school board is seeking a raise in property taxes. The most recent negotiations were closed and the final results contentious. There is a growing narrative from the public that the school system is only concerned in seeking higher wages and maintaining a rich benefit package. The educators in this district are some of the most well-paid employees in the community. This once, relatively middle-class and white district has transitioned in the past five years to majority non-white district with non-dominant English speakers making up the majority of K-3 students. Despite these changes in student population, the certified employees remain 95% white, mostly women and mostly English only speakers. Support staff tend to be more reflective of the county population, with large numbers of them living in the “affordable” neighborhoods.

The elected, executive leadership of the unions consists of:

President of Certified, Donna DeMiddle– a middle-aged, middle-class, suburban living, white woman that taught middle school for 22 years. She is a full-time release president. She is a native of Enchanted County and graduated from the district. She was chief negotiator for the new contract. She simply wants to return to the days when parents took responsibility for their children and sent them to school with proper values. She remembers when her UD came to her and did the work of the union that she paid for – bargained, talked to those in power and made sure her rights were protected. She has grown dissatisfied with the way that the newer union staff do their work. She would like to become a UD someday and feels she could do a better job.

Vice President of Certified, Stavon Liberaling– relatively new to the profession – 6 years of experience – high school teacher in one of the largest, poorest, most diverse schools in the city by choice. He has purposely purchased and is rehabilitating a home in the neighborhood of the school he teaches in. Stavon’s parents are immigrants and he wants to ensure that all immigrants and their children have access to the community resources they deserve. He wants the union to use its power in ways that allow members to fight the injustices that matter most to them and the community. He ran a slate with the newly elected Secretary and Treasurer who are on the newer end of the profession – both are elementary school teachers - and won

primarily because they have openly criticized the current contract bargained by the current President.

President of Support Staff Velma Overly – a long-time employee working out of the office of the districts' largest high school. Her native language is Spanish and she is known widely throughout the county's large Spanish, Catholic Church system. She is a leader in her church and she is widely respected by her members – but not the president of the certified union. She is not a full-time release like the certified president, and due to her work schedule often has to miss important organizational meetings due to the timing set by the Certified Union leadership. She wants to make sure that her members jobs are not contracted out and that they see their union as a place of connectivity. Velma a much loved and respected leader – but she does everything for her members. She has made it her life calling to serve her church community and her union. There is no vice president or other officers for the Support Staff Union – there could be, but members site limited time and that Velma does a great job for them anyways. She is a bit frightened at the thought of public actions – but knows these have been effective in other places.

Problem Solving Scenario and Context:

A salary schedule was recently settled with an 8% increase in salary, but the members did not completely understand what would be expected in return for this increase in salary. The school year was lengthened by five days as well as the school day by 40 minutes. Many of the newer members are increasingly unhappy with the district and especially with their elected union leadership. The more experienced members who remembered the previous collaborative relationship between union and district were neither as angry nor as vocal as the newer members - and they staunchly defended the district and its practices and labeled dissenters as unprofessional and not wanting the best for kids.

This local is in turmoil. The newer teachers have felt ignored by their association leaders for the last couple of years and feel that the new contract unfairly burdens younger, newer members who are trying to raise young families, work second jobs to afford mortgages and attend night courses to achieve permanent certifications. They have started calling the vice-president INSTEAD of the president and shared with him their deep unhappiness with their new work load. They want to take actions that would bring attention to their issue. Several long time members of the local, including the President feel that doing visible union actions is a negative for the profession, a feeling strongly shared and articulated by several key central office members.

The Support Staff Association is about to enter bargaining with the new superintendent and school board who have made it clear that they are looking at sub-contracting to cut costs. The President – Velma Overly is accustomed to doing most of her bargaining one on one with the superintendent and plans to approach this upcoming bargaining in the same manner. Velma has not reached out for any support or coaching about bargaining but you have heard from a number of building reps who attended the last meeting that there a lots of issues that members would like to address in bargaining and Velma seemed overwhelmed or dismissive.

The Power of Deep Organizing

BY

SAM GINDIN

Jane McAlevey's *No Shortcuts* provides a dynamic framework for building union power.

The profound defeat of the US labor movement over the past three to four decades is usually measured by the loss of things that workers once took for granted like decent wages and benefits. A less quantifiable but ultimately more decisive indicator is the retreat from possibilities. By extension, the labor movement's renewal (or reinvention) is inseparable from reversing, through effective struggle, this lowering of expectations. Jane McAlevey captured this sentiment in the title of her first book, *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell)*, a memoir based on her experiences as a labor organizer.

The underlying argument of *Raising Expectations* was that while the threat of globalization, austerity, and anti-union legislation is real, these factors can also be an excuse; the mantra of "Globalization (or whatever) made us do it!" was not of course an entirely incorrect sentiment, but it avoided asking to what extent the problem also lay with the unions themselves.

Raising Expectations was full of struggles that McAlevey was directly involved in — struggles that showed what could be done despite the overwhelming power of capital. It had a personal, chatty feel to it and had an instant and powerful impact on rank-and-file workers and labor activists, quickly and deservedly making McAlevey a hit on the labor circuit as a speaker, trainer, and strategist.

The crisis within the labor movement has had all kinds of unions scrambling to find "new" models. But leaderships that were averse to institutional risk and lacked faith in their members — or worse, feared an awakened membership — gravitated to alternatives that were no alternatives at all: corporate campaigns that substituted PR and moralizing for organizing, deals with employers that left the members aside, mergers that added size but no energy or strategy. Refusing to build working-class agency, their eventual failure should not have surprised anyone.

As the title of McAlevey's second book asserts, there are no shortcuts. In *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*, she argues that only a radical rethink of strategy — which implies a wholesale top-bottom restructuring of everything about how unions function and allocate resources; how they relate to their members, the community and employers; how they develop leadership and how they bargain; and how they understand “politics” — has any chance of rebuilding working-class power.

No Shortcuts is more academic and more conceptual than *Raising Expectations* yet remains very readable. The prime concern of both books is working-class agency and *No Shortcuts* repeatedly emphasizes the fundamental differences in how advocacy, mobilization, and organizing proper deal with worker agency.

Advocacy is the lowest form of worker participation. It “doesn’t involve ordinary people in any real way; lawyers, pollsters, researchers, and communications firms are engaged to wage the battle.” Mobilizing does bring significant numbers of people into the fight, but they are, McAlevey contends, generally the already committed activists, not the mass of the workforce and community, “because a professional staff directs, manipulates, and controls the mobilization; they see themselves, not ordinary people, as the key agents of change.”

It is the third approach, organizing proper, that McAlevey insists on because it “places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people, a mass of people never previously involved — that’s the point of organizing.” Campaigns of course matter in themselves “but they are primarily a mechanism for bringing new people into the change process and keeping them involved.” It is ordinary people who “help make the power analysis, design the strategy, and achieve the outcome. They are essential and they know it.”

No Shortcuts provides a wide variety of new examples beyond McAlevey's own direct involvement that show others independently coming to similar approaches. The rich case studies range across the private and public sector. These clarifying examples include Chicago teachers and food workers in North Carolina, comparative strategic approaches among nursing home workers in Washington and Connecticut, and a worker action center standing outside the formal labor movement, Make the Road in New York. McAlevey also offers a comradely assessment of these movements' strengths and weaknesses that broadens the discussion of what to do and how to do it.

To be clear, McAlevey makes no claim to inventing a new organizing model. Her model is inspired by the class-struggle unionism of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s and came to McAlevey through her mentors in the iconic SEIU Local 1199 New England. Her contribution lies in the adaptations made based on her own experiences and, as an obsessive organizer, pulling together the model's core elements into a tight methodology of organizing that could be passed on and emulated by others (a how-to manual to complete this trilogy seems the next logical step).

There are criticisms of McAlevey's approach, but before turning to them it is useful to summarize the basic elements of the organizing model she is encouraging:

1. Deep organizing.

Unions have been trapped in a mobilizing model that focuses on activists and workers who are already committed, when what is needed is an organizing strategy oriented to reaching the indifferent or opposed workers. Without that, unions cannot build the breadth and commitment necessary to address their powerful adversaries.

2. Full-worker organizing.

Union members (and indeed all working people) are more than “just workers.” They are simultaneously members of the community and have a range of untapped potentials as organizers in and outside the workplace. Full-worker organizing builds on those broader potentials.

3. Class perspective.

McAlevey laments the marginalization of class in progressive analysis — the dependence on selling your labor power to others in order to meet your needs — and places class at the center of her organizing. Quoting Ira Katznelson: “American urban politics has been governed by boundaries and rules that stress ethnicity, race and territoriality, rather than class, and that emphasize the distribution of goods and services, while excluding questions of production or workplace relations. The centerpiece of these rules has been the radical separation in people’s consciousness, speech and activity of the politics of work from the politics of community.” Building unity across these divisions is fundamental to building class power.

4. Organic leaders.

The development of workers into a social force capable of exercising power doesn't occur spontaneously; it needs to be built and this depends on certain workers acting as catalysts. ("All people are not alike.") Identifying such workers is one of the most important and difficult organizing tasks. These organic leaders may hold no elected position but fellow workers look to them for opinions and advice, and have confidence in following them. They carry out the crucial labor-intensive organizing tasks of one-on-one conversations about workplace and community concerns. (Among the issues raised here is how those appointed as organic leaders and those elected as workplace and local leaders relate to each other).

5. Power analysis.

Knowing your opponent is indispensable to building your power and strategy. This includes not just mapping your employer's strengths and vulnerabilities but also that of the broader power structure you face geographically — in the community and at higher regional and sometimes national levels.

6. Documenting the potential power of workers themselves.

Keeping track of every worker's involvement, assessing hierarchies of leverage within the workplace, and noting influential contacts in the community and support from other unions is the flip side of documenting the employer's power. Power analysis and charting involve technical expertise but the process of gaining this information should also be structured to engage the members as part of their learning and development.

7. Direct action.

The model is biased toward direct action. Strikes are not only economic weapons but crucial to building capacities and relationships. The same goes for directly confronting management in the workplace over grievances rather than confining responses to legalistic forms.

8. Big bargaining.

The bargaining itself is distinct not only in terms of the demands put on the table, which must be sensitive to both the needs of the members and building community support, but in terms of the structure of bargaining. The innovation here lies in bargaining committees that include representatives from every department, every shift, every classroom, floor, functioning unit — the size of the bargaining team can number in the hundreds.

The justification for this break with the traditional structure of union bargaining teams is that it demonstrates to management the depth of the union's strength; it exposes workers to management arguments and develops confidence in directly confronting them; and it is part of broadening the cadre base. (The extension of bargaining to broad involvement may have roots in anarchist thinking but here it is especially structured and disciplined).

9. Stress tests.

Constant self-evaluation is fundamental. Tests are built in so that the union is constantly assessing the strength and weaknesses of organic leaders, the members, and specific departments (for example, any department that cannot show it has a strong majority of its members supporting the union does not get a seat at the table — pushing such departments to do the organizing so they aren't excluded).

10. Systematic organizing.

All organizing has to include strategic flexibility. But McAlevey is also adamant that the model is a totality and works because various aspects of the model are self-reinforcing. Cherry-picking pieces can derail success. As well, the fact that this model can be presented as a whole makes it easier to emulate.

Confronting Class

McAlevey refuses to romanticize the working class; worker spontaneity will not build power. Developing the potential agency of workers requires bringing the specific art of organizing into their struggles by way of carefully trained and experienced staff and full-time paid organizers.

It's this emphasis on staff and paid organizers that has led to criticisms of the model being top-down. But the whole thrust of the model, confirmed in its actual practice, is precisely to identify and develop rank-and-file organic leaders who can in turn be the catalysts for the widest and deepest engagement of workers, and the development of their capacities and confidence as the workplace and community organizers without whom success is impossible.

There is also the argument that in McAlevey's focus on staff and workers, she ignores the role of the "militant minority" that can lead the strikes and resistance that inspires others. There are two crucial distinctions between them and McAlevey's "organic leaders." First, the organic leaders are not self-selected or chosen on the basis of their ideology but their credibility among workers.

Second, the organic leaders are part of a patient, disciplined internal plan to develop majority power as opposed to adventures that might result in high-profile but premature and ultimately counterproductive actions. Nevertheless, if the socialists or independent militants that make up the "militant minority" come, as they did in the 1930s and in some of McAlevey's recent examples, with the kinds of skills and orientation that fit the deep organizing model, their contribution can be invaluable.

One recent critique rejected the very idea of having an organizing model: "Trying to find an ideal 'model' is a distraction. Organizing is hard. It is expensive, risky and even in ideal circumstances fails a lot." No-one would deny the complexities of organizing workers but the point is precisely to *limit* those uncertainties and counter the powerfully resourced and highly systematized efforts of employers. (And no-one would deny that even then the messiness is never totally erased).

Moreover, if organizing is primarily and irrevocably “difficult” it seems to let questioning union structures and practices off the hook. If the idea of an overarching method is precluded, then the question of how radically unions must change to be successful likewise tends to be set aside.

In light of McAlevey’s model and the larger contradictions shaping the struggle to build localized bases of workplace and community power, three questions about the limits of McAlevey’s model arise: First, how can this model be disseminated more broadly? Word of mouth and McAlevey’s publications are not enough given the scale and urgency of the issue.

Second, the model works where there is a union leadership fully committed to implementing it as a whole. But such unions or locals are the exception, not the rule. What then are the model’s implications for operating within unions that are hostile to the model or only interested in pulling particular pieces from it?

Third, there are limits to what unions, even the best unions, can do. Globalization, financialization, austerity, etc. may often be defeatist excuses but they are nevertheless also real barriers and threats to workplace power. Can unions do more than stretch the limits they face or is it necessary to address other forms of working-class organization? Or, pushing the last point a bit further, where in the discussion of power, class, and worker agency does socialism come in?

On the first point of getting this model out there, as successful as McAlevey’s work and books have been in popularizing this approach to building worker power, we need something much more systematic to realize the potentials of deep organizing. Does that part of the labor movement that is sympathetic need to establish an institute to train the organizers who can then fan out across sectors and across the country to multiply the message? And in line with the thrust of McAlevey’s model, should such training include a heavy dose of field work and learning by doing?

But even this would be limited to the few unions already on-side. What then? The Toronto Labor Committee, a group of socialists, labor activists, and organizers, has initiated an experiment in bringing the McAlevey model to a larger working-class base. We had been floundering in trying to create cross-workplace rank-and-file links focused on “democratic, militant, class-based” unionism. As correct as it may have been to attempt this, it was too abstract to sustain rank-and-file interest.

In contrast, using McAlevey’s work to give people a tangible notion of how a transformed union might function and be able to stand up to what they face has led to great interest. The local example of the eleven-thousand-member Elementary Teachers of Toronto (with whom we have links) adopting the McAlevey model powerfully reinforced that interest. We had to first teach ourselves the key components of McAlevey’s model, and then recruit interested rank-and-file workers (and some leaders) to classes that elaborate on the principles and experiences of this model. The next crucial step is asking which pieces of the model can be applied or adapted to building a force within the union to get the model on the union’s agenda.

Alongside this, we have been struggling with how to combine building the union with raising larger, more political questions. One modest element of this, especially but not only in the public sector, is to confront the apparent constraint

of fiscal budgets on what is possible and run educational for workers on how to read budgets technically and how to understand them politically.

But the larger point is that even the best and most community-rooted unions cannot change the world by themselves and so are confined to the limits of operating under capitalism. Unions can educate about elite and local power but focusing their education on capitalism as a *system* rarely occurs. They can create organic leaders but not necessarily lead them to the next step of becoming organic *socialist* leaders. They can support political parties but do not ask what role workers and unions might have in transforming capital states to socialist states. Such things — all vital to dealing with working-class power — can only be tackled within or alongside an institution with a broader and longer-term perspective: a coherent socialist tendency or party.

In fact, the absence of such a left is not only a limit to further advances, it also goes a long way to explaining the defeats of the labor movement over the past decades. This is suggested by the very origins of the model McAlevey promotes. The Communist Party and other socialist organizations were indispensable to the advances in working-class struggles in the 1930s — the decade out of which McAlevey's model emerged. And it is no coincidence that the remarkable organizing carried out by the Chicago Teachers Union or the Smithfield workers included socialists with their particular skills, connections, strategic sensibilities, and longer-term horizons.

Though *No Shortcuts*, in its concern with revitalizing unions, doesn't directly raise the relationship between class power in the workplace/community and the struggle for socialism, McAlevey does nevertheless make two contributions to that issue: First, and most important, any socialist project demands multiple concentrations of progressive and sustainable institutional power; neither protests nor electoral breakthroughs will mean much without this. McAlevey has demonstrated that building such bases is possible in the here and now.

Second, her model includes general organizing tenets beyond getting workers a union or organizing the already unionized. Principles such as taking class beyond the workplace, identifying organic leaders, seeing all workers as potential organizers of an alternative power base, addressing how to penetrate those not unsympathetic, etc. are of value to *any* class-based organizing, including socialism. What needs careful consideration and assessment is the potentials of adapting McAlevey's organizational insights to taking on capitalism — not just fighting and reforming it, but replacing it.

For those of us grappling with the near-overwhelming difficulties of the “how-to” of changing our workplaces, communities, and society, *No Shortcuts* is an invaluable resource. It should be read, passed on, discussed, constructively challenged, and acted on.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sam Gindin was research director of the Canadian Auto Workers from 1974–2000 and is now an adjunct professor at York University in Toronto.