

What Is Classism

<https://classism.org/about-class/what-is-classism/>

“Classism is differential treatment based on social class or perceived social class. Classism is the systematic oppression of subordinated class groups to advantage and strengthen the dominant class groups. It’s the systematic assignment of characteristics of worth and ability based on social class.”

That includes:

- individual attitudes and behaviors;
- systems of policies and practices that are set up to benefit the upper classes at the expense of the lower classes, resulting in drastic income and wealth inequality;
- the rationale that supports these systems and this unequal valuing; and
- the culture that perpetuates them

Classism is held in place by a system of beliefs and cultural attitudes that ranks people according to economic status, family lineage, job status, level of education, and other divisions.

Middle-class and owning- or ruling-class people (dominant group members) are seen as smarter and more articulate than working-class and poor people (subordinated groups). In this way, dominant group members (middle-class and wealthy people) define for everyone else what is “normal” or “acceptable” in the class hierarchy.

People who are poor/working class sometimes internalize the dominant society’s beliefs and attitudes toward them, and play them out against themselves and others of their class. Internalized classism is the acceptance and justification of classism by working class and poor people. Examples include: feelings of inferiority to higher-class people; disdain or shame about traditional patterns of class in one’s family and a denial of heritage; feelings of superiority to people lower on the class spectrum than oneself; hostility and blame towards other working-class or poor people; and beliefs that classist institutions are fair.

People who are middle-class and wealthy sometimes internalize the dominant society’s beliefs and attitudes toward them, and play them out against others. Internalized superiority is the acceptance and justification of class privilege by middle-class and wealthy people. Class privilege include the many tangible or intangible unearned advantages of “higher” class status, such as personal contacts with employers, “legacy admissions” to higher education, inherited money, good childhood health care, quality education, speaking with the same dialect and accent as people with institutional power, and having knowledge of how the systems of power operate.

A person from the more privileged classes can be a class ally—a person whose attitudes and behaviors are anti-classist, who is committed to increasing his or her own understanding of the issues related to classism, and is actively working towards eliminating classism on many levels.

Class Definitions

Class – relative social rank in terms of income, wealth, education, status and/or power.

Classism – differential treatment based on social class or perceived social class. Classism is the systematic assignment of worth based on social class; policies and practices set up to benefit more class-privileged people at the expense of the less class-privileged people, resulting in drastic income and wealth inequality and causing basic human needs to go unmet; the rationale and the culture which perpetuates these systems and this unequal valuing.

Class Privilege – Tangible or intangible unearned advantages of higher-class status, such as personal contacts with employers, good childhood health care, inherited money, speaking with the same dialect/accents as people with institutional power.

Class Ally – A person from the more privileged classes whose attitudes and behaviors are anti-classist, who is committed to increasing his or her own understanding of this issue related to classism, and is actively working towards eliminating classism on many levels.

Individual Classism – This term refers to classism on a personal or individual level, either in behavior or attitudes, either conscious and intentional, or unconscious and unintentional.

Institutional Classism – This term refers to the ways in which intentional and unintentional classism is manifest in the various institutions of our society.

Class Definitions

From Class Action: classism.org

Adapted from "No Class" in Maine: <http://www.abilitymaine.org/noclass/>

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Social Class Privilege Checklist

- ★ If I got into a situation where I didn't have enough money to pay rent, I could ask a family member for money.
- ★ My occupation allows me to be free most evenings and weekends.
- ★ I have regular access to email.
- ★ My family owned the home that I grew up in.
- ★ I have health insurance.
- ★ Most of my debt is in the form of low-interest student loans.
- ★ I associate second-hand clothing, food salvage, and reducing/reusing/recycling with environmentally sustainable practices or anti-capitalism rather than with poverty.
- ★ I wouldn't have a problem taking minutes at a meeting.
- ★ I have disposable income for spending time with my friends outside of the house.
- ★ I don't have any hesitations telling people that I am "poor" or "broke."
- ★ I have ample time to invest in my union, and expect everyone to invest just as much time as me.
- ★ Meetings that start or end late are not particularly detrimental to me.
- ★ I don't have to worry about my personal hygiene reflecting on my class.
- ★ I don't have any hesitations about bringing my family to meetings.
- ★ If I do not choose to share something, people do not see me as being "stingy."
- ★ My parents took me on vacations and sent me to summer camps during my childhood; I am excited for an outdoors coop retreat.
- ★ Talking about money issues in public is not an issue for me.

Being a Class Ally

- ★ I don't assume that it is a working class/working poor/poor person's job to educate me about class issues. I read up on class struggles.
- ★ I understand that knowledge from books is never as valid as knowledge based on personal life experiences.
- ★ I understand that a middle class/upper-middle class/rich position is privileged and not normative or average.
- ★ I don't assume that it is a working class/working poor/poor person's responsibility to tell me their life story. I don't force discourse.
- ★ I make an effort to use inclusive language, because I understand that education and overly academic language are often inaccessible to working class/working poor/poor people.
- ★ I realize that class is not a defining marker of intelligence and don't "talk down" to a working class/working poor/poor person.
- ★ I understand anger and allow space for discourse about my specific privilege and/or moneyed privilege in general.
- ★ I recognize how classism interacts with and is complicated by other systems of oppression: racism, sexism, ableism, oppression of parents, etc.
- ★ I engage in anti-classist struggles and seek to build cross-class alliances.
- ★ I share money when I can.
- ★ I investigate my own life and how I am classist. I challenge these beliefs and behaviors in myself and my life.
- ★ I work to make meetings and events accessible by considering where they are held, when they are held, whether or not child care is available, etc.
- ★ I understand that the right to have/adopt and parent/care for children should not be dependent upon class position or income.
- ★ I recognize that class does not equal income, but also includes education, geography, job, and many other factors.

- ★ I respectfully interrupt classist jokes, slurs, comments, or assumptions when I come across them.
- ★ I offer alternatives and/or accurate information when I hear classist stereotypes or myths.
- ★ I build and maintain friendships and relationships across class and race lines.
- ★ I use the words "class" and "classism" in my conversations with people.
- ★ I acknowledge the class implications of all the decisions that I make.
- ★ I try not to assume that others have the same level of resources as I do.
- ★ I support the leadership of poor and working class people.
- ★ I don't make assumptions about people's intelligence based on their appearance.
- ★ I am open to talking about my class situation and class of origin.
- ★ I take care to notice and critically analyze judgments I make about people and look for class elements in those judgments.
- ★ I take care to notice what clothing I wear and why.
- ★ I go to activities and events that are outside of my class comfort zone.
- ★ I support boycotts and strikes.

Challenging Classism in Our Organizations

Mission

- ★ What is our organization's mission?
- ★ Who are our members?
- ★ What are our expressed values and our hidden values?

Physical Location and Space

- ★ What is our access to public transportation?
- ★ How is space allocated in our organization?
- ★ What is the decor like, what are the images on the walls?

Decision-Making

- ★ How are decisions made?
- ★ Who holds leadership positions?
- ★ Whose opinions and needs are considered in decision-making?
- ★ What is the racial, gender and class make up of our organization?

Compensation and Qualifications

- ★ What is the ratio between highest and lowest paid?
- ★ In hiring, do we question the need for formal educational degrees and credentials?
- ★ What are our benefits and who is eligible?
- ★ What are our personnel policies and whom do they serve?
- ★ Do we recruit people from lower-income backgrounds for leadership positions?
- ★ Do we offer mentoring and support?
- ★ Are people treated differently based on their job titles?

Organizational Culture

- ★ How are people greeted when they come in or call on the phone?
- ★ How are people dressed? How do they appear to others?
- ★ Who feels comfortable in our organization? Who feels most uncomfortable?
- ★ What are our co-op's rituals around food and celebration?
- ★ What kinds of humor and jokes are acceptable or not acceptable?
- ★ What is our attitude towards time and what are our expectations?
- ★ What is considered polite or impolite?
- ★ How do board members and donors interact (or not interact with) administrative staff?

Dealing with Conflict

- ★ How is conflict dealt with?
- ★ How does one show respect?
- ★ What is considered appropriate and/or inappropriate?

Language

- ★ What language is spoken (acronyms, slang, vocabulary)? What language is inclusive and what language leaves some people out?
- ★ In what language are our materials written?

Other Questions

- ★ Do we have flexible fees for our events, activities and/or services?
- ★ How do we ensure access and participation by poor and working-class people?
- ★ Do we have childcare at our meetings and events?
- ★ Do our programs, displays and materials reflect a range of occupations or class lifestyles?
- ★ How well is our organization doing in meeting the needs of the folks we work with, particularly around class?
- ★ How openly does our organization discuss issues of class, race and gender in relation to ourselves and to the people we serve and work with?

Resources

Organizations and Collectives

Class Action -Class Action inspires action to end classism. They raise awareness, facilitate cross-class dialogue, support cross-class alliances, and work with others to promote economic justice.

www.classism.org

Class Matters - classmatters.org

Colours of Resistance

A grassroots network of people who consciously work to develop anti-racist, multiracial politics in the movement against global capitalism. They are committed to helping build an anti-racist, anti-imperialist, multiracial, feminist, queer and trans liberationist, anti-authoritarian movement against global capitalism.

www.colours.mahost.org

Enough - The personal politics of resisting capitalism"

enoughenough.org

Highlander Research and Education Center

The Highlander Center is a residential popular education and research organization that brings workers, grassroots leaders, community organizers, educators, and researchers together to address the most pressing social, environmental and economic problems facing the people of the South.

<http://www.highlandercenter.org/>

Poor News Network

PNN is a multi-media access project of POOR Magazine, dedicated to reframing the news, issues and solutions from low and no income communities, as well as providing society with a perspective usually not heard or seen within the mainstream media.

poormagazine.org

Colorlines Magazine
colorlines.org

Resource Generation

Resource Generation works with young people with financial wealth who are supporting and challenging each other to effect progressive social change through the creative, responsible and strategic use of financial and other resources.

resourcegeneration.org

United for a Fair Economy

Raises awareness that concentrated wealth and power undermine the economy, corrupt democracy, deepen the racial divide, and tear communities apart.

faireconomy.org

CROSS-CLASS CAPACITY TOOL

<https://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/cross-class-capacity-tool.html>

This living document was created by the SURJ(Stand Up for Racial Justice) poor and working-class group as an act of love and commitment to our common desire, across the class spectrum, to bring white folks into action, dismantle white supremacy and engage with the complex struggle and beauty of collective liberation.

Some framing: White people working together to dismantle racism is critical work. Attempting to do this work without acknowledgment and thoughtfulness to how class affects folks experience of race limits a true understanding of what is racism and what is classism. Working to dismantle white supremacy and to end structural and interpersonal racism doesn't mean we can avoid talking about issues of class privilege. On the contrary, if we don't become bold about what cross-class solidarity work means as white folks yearning for racial justice, our work will be less effective and our wins short-lived.

With this in mind here are some examples of common sticky spots that class privileged whites come upon when working across class:

- **Conflating Race and Class.** Assuming that all white people have access to wealth erases white poor and working class people. Referring to communities of color with an assumption of poverty erases the Black middle class and other class privileged people of color. These two systems of oppression use similar tactics and have always been intimately linked, however they are not interchangeable.
- **Scapegoating.** Through subtle or direct means, operating with a bias that assumes working class whites are somehow more racist than white folks with money reinforces classism. This scapegoating takes responsibility away from middle and upper class families who have often accrued wealth through exploitation and takes emphasis away from the damaging policies and practices put in place by wealthy whites that structurally reinforce both racism and classism.
- **Discomfort around conflict.** Recognition of conflict and figuring out disagreement is very different across cultures and classes. White, class privileged cultures often carry a value that avoiding conflict or being 'nice' and 'polite' are the better/only ways to talk about difficult things. This value is not universal and can sometimes stifle needed dialogues.
- **Outcome over Process.** Sometimes the desire to create action can override the process of thoughtful and intentional planning. When intentionality breaks down, group norms will almost always default to those with the most privilege/power calling the shots.
- **One right (controlling) way.** As is true with whiteness in general, within class privileged circles there can be an attachment to things happening in a particular way. The sense of what is the right way is informed by folks class background and status. Attempts to control or micromanage the details can push out poor and working class involvement/leadership.

- **Attempting to homogenize.** Just as whiteness can attempt to subsume everything into a false perception of sameness, class privileged cultures often do the same. Creating cultural norms around language, dress, actions etc that cater to middle and upper class comfort. Bringing working class folks to the table without changing the class culture of the table in question will often be short lived.
- **Palatability.** Choosing only working class folks who are college educated or otherwise assimilated into middle/upper class norms to be a spokesperson/reference point around class.
- **Convenience.** Recognizing class dynamics when it's convenient but treating it as off topic when brought up in a way that challenges power or requires long term investment in our lives and communities.
- **Masking/False Scarcity.** Presenting as though stressed about money from a false sense of scarcity, not a lived experience of not having access to enough. This can be done in an attempt to relate to working class people or to assuage guilt, confusion, a lack of exposure to cross class learning spaces, or a combination of them all.

Examples of things that can be alienating to welfare/working poor, low income and working class whites:

- Speaking for and about working poor, low income and working class whites without the necessary leadership or adequate representation from these communities.
- Introductions that pivot on education/employment status and lineage or political resume and credentials. This holds true within emails, on conference calls and in person.
- Giving advice or asking questions about people's struggle; our impairments/health, lack of money, employment or anything that might be intrusive, patronizing or blaming.
- Presuming shared experience about activities that are dependent on middle class lifestyle and values of some sort, examples: college, out of state / country travel for pleasure, rejuvenation or political actions
- Using acronyms without explanation
- Not using class identifiers (see below)
- Defensive reactions to questions and feedback about barriers and assumptions that hinder our involvement.
- Inaccessible language and jargon (academic and non-profit speak)
- Making fun of, dismissing, or shaming working, welfare class, and rural cultures and equating our communities with ignorance and bigotry.
- Cultures of perfection, 'professionalism', and respectability politics (meaning messaging, language, formatting, and campaign demands have to be always appear 'respectable' to middle and upper class people in order to be legitimate)
- Commodifying our lived experiences to add credibility without an implemented commitment to alter the material conditions of instability and poverty we often are living through within our practice of white anti-racism.

Examples of some things that create room to be, breathe, and engage as welfare, working-poor and working-class whites:

- Provide food and childcare at meeting spaces/events. Ensure that meeting spaces are child friendly and have reasonable start and finish times
- Use class identifiers – be transparent and honest about your class background when getting to know each other and when starting to work together. Often class is not mentioned, and therefore, class experiences and differences are erased, even though they strongly inform everything we do!
- Practice creative ways to redistribute wealth. Examples include: prioritizing (whenever possible) resourcing of poor, welfare and working class leaders, as well as local leaders in under-resourced areas, over well resourced, urban career consultants. Work on building a presence within our communities that provides support for ordinary needs. Resource and staff regular food banks, provide basic advocacy for folks navigating government benefits. Help with access to childcare, healthcare and housing. Commit to stay - reduce the impact economic fragility and exploitation has upon our vulnerability to the race bribe. Build up local leadership within these spaces.
- Move at an accessible pace! Keep in mind that poverty and instability can be debilitating and at times completely preoccupying. Modeling a schedule, leadership or decision making structure based on class privileged and able bodied capacity can be a deterrent to poor and working class involvement.
- Engage in campaigns that are relevant to welfare and working class whites, ideally that are developed by and for low-income white folks. Includes relevancy in approach, demands, and language.
- Reflect on what type of culture is being created and in what ways it's centered around middle/upper class norms and comfort. What would it look like to center it around working class participation instead? Practice moving back from the front of the room and decision-making positions - embrace the value of being middle class / upper working class supporters and allies of working poor and low income leadership and direction.
- Support meeting spaces (in person, phone, online, etc.) for welfare and working class whites to strategize, share and develop resources, develop peer mentorship relationships, and support each other!
- Prioritize resourcing of leadership development and training for poor, welfare, and working class organizers
- Provide fundraising support for poor and working-class led projects (fundraising training as well as sharing resources)
- Provide travel support – metro cards / rides . Know where the local food stamp / HUD/ social security/ food banks office and shelters are.
- Find other class privileged people to sort thru things with. Challenge one another to dive deeper with your understandings and self reflection. Understand that less privileged folks get to move away from situations, without explanation, that they simply don't

want to have to deal with... again. Remember it is not the responsibility of welfare and working class folks to be supportive of a middle/upper class learning moment when those with less power are being hurt, alienated, offended, oppressed, triggered, and insulted.

Shifts of Consciousness for the Anti-Classist Activist

By Paul C. Gorski
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1. Charity is Not Activism

Charity, when not coupled with an insistence on and movement toward systemic change, only reaffirms the power hierarchy. It does not—*can not*—lead to real sociopolitical reform because it fails to challenge existing power structures. Moreover, a benchmark of authentic activism is personal vulnerability. Charity does not make me or my privilege vulnerable. In fact, it allows me to maintain a comfortable distance. Therefore, seeing charity as activism is a demonstration in privilege.

2. “Culture of Poverty” or “Culture of Classism”?

Dozens of studies conducted since the early 1970s refutes Oscar Lewis's (and more recently, Ruby Payne's) construction of a “culture of poverty.” The poor Somali immigrants arriving in Minnesota this year are *not* the same culturally as poor families who have lived for generations in Appalachian West Virginia, for instance. And again, focusing on the supposed cultures of oppressed people is an expression of privilege, as it diverts attention from the gross and systemic class inequities (such as inequitable access to high-quality schooling) that pervade the U.S. and the world. It is this culture—the culture of *classism*—that I, as an anti-classist activist, must work to eliminate.

3. Capitalism Is Not Democracy

The consciousness of the anti-classist activist refuses binaries and false correlations by challenging most vigorously those notions that are defended most vigorously by the power structure. Chief among these is the unquestioned rightness and fairness of capitalism. Despite the propaganda, there is nothing inherent about capitalism that aligns it with democracy or freedom or justice. But somebody benefits from the notion that these concepts are synonymous. Who might that be? Other notions, systems, and conditions for critical reconsideration: consumer culture, globalization, and corporate welfare.

4. The De-demonization of Socialism

It's odd, don't you think, that while everybody seems to agree that a public (meaning *socialist*) education system is an essential part of democracy, a public healthcare system is inherently evil. And again, who exactly benefits from this demonization?

5. With Whom Lies the Deficit?

Deficit theorists such as Ruby Payne essentially blame poor people for their poverty by pointing to supposed deficits in their characters, spiritualities, and world views. Deficit theory helps to justify what Herbert Gans calls “the war against the poor”: the process of linking nearly every social ill to people in poverty in order to justify the elimination of social programs and policies meant to help them. If we see the poor as “undeserving,” then we needn’t waste our energies questioning skyrocketing healthcare and housing costs, the dissolution of labor unions, the disproportionate amounts of water and air pollution in high-poverty neighborhoods, or the fact that tens of thousands of people die all over the world each day from preventable poverty-related illnesses. The *real* deficit is a moral one and it lies with people who perpetuate classism, not with those who bear the brunt of that classism.

6. The Un-Meritocratic Meritocracy

The ideal of meritocracy assumes a level of equity and social justice that simply doesn’t exist, either in the U.S. or most (if not all) other societies. The education system is a good example. Economically disadvantaged students are much more likely than their wealthier peers to be assigned to schools with an abundance of unlicensed and inexperienced teachers, dilapidated buildings, inadequate educational materials, lower-order thinking curricula, over-crowded classrooms, and high teacher turnover rates. These conditions are wholly unrelated to individual students’ intelligence, ability, motivation, or “merit.” But they have an enormous impact on the quality of education students receive and, as a result, on their future opportunities. We might say we have a *wealthocracy*, wherein access and opportunity are granted on the basis of one’s existing levels of access and opportunity. Where’s the “merit” in that?

7. Everything’s an Intersection

One cannot understand classism or poverty, whether locally, nationally, or globally, without understanding its intersectionality with a plethora of other oppressions. In the U.S., for instance, classism is inextricably linked to racism. Slavery, Jim Crow, housing discrimination, Manifest Destiny—these are examples of racism institutionalized for the purpose of economic exploitation. Only about 4% of Fortune 500 CEOs are women. People with disabilities are much more likely to live in poverty than people without disabilities. Much of the undocumented immigration that some people rail against today is at least in part the result of U.S. and European colonization, imperialism, and economic exploitation of Southeast Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa. So any attempt to study or act against poverty and classism without a deep understanding of these intersections cannot succeed. And I cannot be an authentic anti-classist activist without also being a committed anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-every-kind-of-oppression activist.

Paraeducators Strike Secures Wage Increase

Port Angeles, Washington

Run-Up:

After a State Supreme Court decision directing the state of Washington's government to allocate new money to educator salaries, worker associations began to bargain for better pay. Representing the lowest paid workers in the school district, the Port Angeles Paraeducators Association (PAPA) launched their campaign in March 2018, six months out from the expiration of their fifth single-year contract with the Port Angeles school board. Unable to reach a new agreement, the 113-member bargaining unit went on strike.

Organizing Effort:

PAPA focused on earning greater respect for paraeducators by explaining the value of their work to the school district. Their efforts included:

- ➔ Activating parent allies by releasing video footage of the board's bad behavior, which exposed the true cause of the tensions between the board and the association;
- ➔ Robust outreach effort to educate parents about the school board's unfair treatment of paraeducators compared to the teachers;
- ➔ Solidarity with the teachers helped raise awareness, build support and secure a settlement for teachers without a strike; and
- ➔ Persuading all the known substitutes to not to cross the picket lines after the district threatened to replace them.

Success:

When schools were forced to close, during PAPA's two-day strike in November, the board agreed to provide more opportunities and higher compensation to paraeducators.

Strategic Considerations:

Northwest of Seattle, Washington, the Port Angeles School District serves about 4,000 students attending 8 schools in the City of Port Angeles and the surrounding rural areas, including the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe. About 74% are white, 8% are Hispanic and 4.5% are American Indian/Alaskan Native; 60% receive free or reduced lunch. PASD's 5-member School Board oversees an annual budget of \$48 million.

In Washington, local unions often align crisis build ups and potential strikes to overlap with the opening of the school year and the expiration of contracts — most expire at the end of August. At the time, many ESP units did not go out on strike and PAPA was dissuaded from doing so by the state affiliate because they only represented a small group of paraeducators. But by 2018, the Supreme Court's decision coincided with a political shift around member organizing and the hiring of a new human resources director had put a strain on labor relations.

- ➔ Regular communication about proposals, legal options, media and upcoming actions via the website and social media updates, informational sessions and press briefings;
- ➔ Continuous visibility, including literature drops, event tabling, meeting with New American communities and lawn sign placement; and
- ➔ Strike days that began with picketing at their buildings and ended with joining together for unity rallies outside of central administrative offices.

Success:

The board came back with the help of the original fact finder/mediator and relented to much of the members' demands but refused to pay teachers for the 4-days of the strike, which ended up in litigation. Following the strike, BEA membership increased by 5%.

Strategic Considerations:

Burlington School District, the 3rd largest in Vermont, is home to the state's largest city. 65% of the 4,000 students are white, 14% are Black and 12% are Asian; 45% receive free or reduced lunch. A 12-member board oversees the \$88.5 million annual budget for 13 school sites while BEA represents 400 Teachers and 180 paraeducators who work there.

Burlington teachers were the first to strike in Vermont in 1978, but historically limited member engagement to service work. Following several contract disputes, local leaders turned to the state affiliate for support in rebuilding, attending trainings and instituting improved communication systems. After the strike, BEA maintained their connections with the community and other labor organizations. Paraeducators also benefited from the solidarity, but more capacity building was needed after years of underdeveloped leadership.

ESP Show of Strength Averts Strike

Burlington, Vermont

Run-Up:

After years of friendly labor relations in rural Brandon, Vermont the Otter Valley Unified Union (OVUU) school board assumed that the Rutland Northeast Education Association — Paraeducator and Bus Driver Unit (RNEA — ESP Unit) would not strike. So, they cut off contract negotiations in 2015, leaving support staff without the pay raises needed to cover higher health costs. The RNEA — ESP Unit began mobilizing with the intent to symbolically reject the decision, but with 85% attendance at their meeting, the ESP's ended up authorizing a strike with 82% of the vote without the teachers.

Organizing Effort:

Since 80% of members lived in the district, the Unit wrapped their support for affordable health care and living wages around the idea that, "We're your neighbors," which especially resonated when people learned it would only cost .03% of the budget. Their efforts included:

- ➔ More one-on-one outreach, instead of social media campaign, given the rural and close-knit nature of the communities;
- ➔ Recruiting the most respected bus drivers and paraeducators in underrepresented schools to join the organizing team, often adjusting meetings around their work shifts;
- ➔ Mobilized members to attend board meetings and tell their stories;

- ➔ Regular updates via personal emails, mailings, phone calls and handouts in school mailboxes to members, non-members and teachers in the district;
- ➔ Attending local events such as the family-oriented Harvest Festival;
- ➔ Invite the support of community leaders — from faith, business, parent and other labor organizations — including the lieutenant governor hosting a health town hall;
- ➔ Informational pickets, leafleting and phone calls to parents and pro-education voters to talk about their work, the crisis and their need for support; and
- ➔ Avoiding substitute workers by getting teachers to reject additional duties and half of the bus-drivers to agree not to cross the picket lines.

Success:

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 for upfront health expenses. Membership in the association increased by 9% during that time.

Strategic Considerations:

In rural Brandon, Vermont, the OVUU School District serves 1300 students across 8 towns; 95% are white and 40% receive free or reduced lunch. The 13-member board oversees the district's \$22 million budget for 7 school sites. The RNEA — ESP unit represents 100 paraeducators and bus drivers.

Until this point, no ESP association in the state had ever gone on strike without the teachers. Organizers had to reconcile the diverging interests between paraeducators, concerned about rising health costs, and school bus drivers, not covered by the insurance plan and less likely to be members. Meanwhile, teachers initially kept their distance to avoid retaliation from the board, but eventually became supportive. Despite a decline in engagement and membership after the campaign, due in part to the Janus decision, the full board relented to the association in their next round of bargaining.

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

Ask Labor Jane: “I Quit My Job to Dedicate Myself to Organizing. What Now?”

BY

JANE MCALEVEY

Introducing our new organizing advice column, with labor organizer and strategist Jane McAlevey.

Wondering how to make your workplace or movement organizing more effective? Ask Jane!

Jane McAlevey has been an organizer and negotiator in the labor movement for over twenty years. While she continues to organize, she writes for various publications and is the author of three books, *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell)*, *No Shortcuts*, *Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*, and the forthcoming *A Collective Bargain: Unions, Organizing & the Fight for Democracy*.

Thousands of new organizers have passed through trainings with Jane McAlevey. Now, you can have your own organizing questions answered, in *Jacobin*’s newest column, “Ask me about labor and strategy,” with Jane McAlevey.

Hi Jane,

I'm twenty-eight years old, and I recently quit my job to dedicate myself to organizing. I've been volunteering with a few different organizations to try to get a sense for who's doing good work and where I might fit in.

I've been working with Sunrise Movement for the past six months since they seem to have the most momentum and a clear strategy that's working. Sunrise uses a mobilizing model, focusing on young people. How could we possibly apply a structure-based organizing model? I'm feeling at a loss as to how to define a structure and measure progress. Also, how can I get started doing actual structure-based organizing (say, with another organization)? I'm having trouble finding on-ramps into union organizing jobs.

Thanks,

**Jonah
San Francisco**

Hi Jonah, thanks for writing.

Great! Terrific that you want to dedicate your life to the progressive movement.

What we need in the medium and long-term in the United States is for a way bigger, way better, way stronger trade union movement. At age twenty-eight, the very most important thing that you could do is pick a career you enjoy, and prepare to get really, really good at your job. Your coworkers will wind up respecting someone who's very, very good at their job.

In the short-term, given your age, and that you just quit your job, I want to encourage you to spend between now and November 2020 getting some really good skills training. You can do that by working for one of the political campaigns that matter between now and November 2020.

You've got a terrific chance to help save American democracy and the planet if you go to work on an important noncorporate democratic campaign for the next fourteen months. And it will also give you a chance to get serious skills and experience before deciding to go back into the workforce to build a stronger trade union movement. The truth is, if one precondition of becoming a really successful trade union leader is getting good at your job, a second precondition is having some skills as an effective organizer.

I'm also glad you're asking about your volunteer time at the Sunrise movement. Sunrise is a self-selecting organization and that means that lots of terrific, excited, motivated activists join the organization who care a lot about climate change. That's great. The dilemma is, who we, the progressive movement, need to be spending our time talking to are people who don't agree with us.

How to convert a volunteer, activist organization to more purposeful, structure-based work is exactly the right question to ask. We know that Sunrise needs more power because the Democratic National Committee just issued them a resounding defeat on a very good cause, which was having a climate debate. How do we build the kind of power that's going to make it impossible for Tom Perez and the Democrats to ignore the very good demands of the Sunrise movement?

One way to do that is to shift Sunrise into a volunteer organization that focuses on structure-based organizing. That means creating structure everywhere you go. So if I was volunteering for Sunrise, I would sit down with the team of other volunteers at Sunrise, and make a list, what we call a power structure analysis, of all the organizations that existed in the area in which I lived and volunteered.

A power structure analysis would include mosques, churches, synagogues, housing developments, housing complexes, political precincts, parent-teacher associations, soccer clubs, and schools. These are among many structures that exist in any community.

A structure means there's a set number of people who relate to each other through a defined organization that has something like a bounded constituency, meaning again, it's got a membership. Let's just use the church as an example. If I was a volunteer activist at Sunrise, I'd try to figure out who are the important churches in the area in which I lived and volunteered, and then I'd be trying to figure out from among all of the volunteers at Sunrise and everyone we know, who's a member of that church.

Then we would begin outreach to that church, or temple, or synagogue, or mosque, or fill-in-the-blank. We would attempt to start figuring out how we could get a majority and then a super-majority of the members of each community institution around us to sign on to the demand that Sunrise is making. For example, to have the Democratic Party host a climate debate among its presidential candidates.

Structure-based organizing matters, as a method, because it gives it each and every one of us, whether we're full-time, whether we're volunteer activists, the ability to measure our effectiveness. We have a defined number of people who we're trying to move, who we're trying to persuade, and we can judge whether or not the work we're doing is being effective.

I'll close by addressing the last point you asked, about having a hard time finding an on-ramp to union organizing. Again, my own recommendation is that you spend more time thinking about a career choice you want to make and becoming and working your way up to being a very good worker. Then, that's your on-ramp to becoming a trade union leader.

On the other hand, if what you want to do is work as a full-time union organizer, who doesn't come from the rank and file, you have to find a good union, a democratic union that runs real organizing programs. You should only apply to work for a democratic union that's engaging in real organizing, not just shallow mobilizing, or even worse, advocacy.

The main clearinghouse for jobs in the labor movement is UnionJobs.com. There are plenty of unions who are on the union jobs' website that you probably don't want to go work for. And in fact, almost all of them advertise there. Ask

around, to people who are in the labor movement: *which of these unions would be a good place for me to work, where can I learn some serious skills, contribute meaningfully to building a stronger labor movement?*

Good luck, Jonah! The Left needs all the good organizers we can get.

In Solidarity,

Jane McAlevey

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane McAlevey has been an organizer and negotiator in the labor movement for over twenty years. While she continues to organize, she serves as the Strikes Correspondent for the *Nation* and Senior Policy Fellow at UC Berkeley's Labor Center. McAlevey is the author of three books, *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell)* and *No Shortcuts, Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*, and the forthcoming *A Collective Bargain: Unions, Organizing & the Fight for Democracy*.

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Financialization Created Chicago Public Schools' Fiscal Crisis

BY

STEPHANIE FARMER

Chicago Public Schools has constantly found itself in fiscal crises in recent years, crises that then justify brutal austerity. But those crises didn't come from nowhere: they were the logical outcome of turning to Wall Street for funding on credit instead of taxing the rich.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is in a deep and enduring fiscal crisis. After decades of budget cuts, Chicago's public K–12 schools have been hollowed out, magnifying the hardships of stagnant wages, rising housing prices, and more faced by the city's working class. Pundits have predictably blamed CPS's fiscal crisis on either the greedy teachers' union (Republicans' and a few austerity-minded Democrats' scapegoat) or on conservative suburban and rural “downstate” politicians in Illinois hostile to urban children's plight (most Democrats' scapegoat).

But Chicago is a one-party city, controlled by the Democrats, in a solidly blue state, where Democrats usually control the state government. In reality, CPS's endless fiscal crises and austerity are consequences of a ruling-class project to chip away at Chicago public education. This has involved a two-pronged strategy of school-choice policies and education financialization carried out by successive Democratic mayors with the backing and active encouragement of key elements of Chicago capital. School-choice policies seek to remake public education in the image of a competitive market, where schools compete for education consumers (children and their parents). Education financialization expanded the role of financial instruments, actors, and markets in public education's operations.

Together, these policies have reconfigured Chicago Public Schools. The district's funding streams now function as a rent extraction machine, channeling revenue out of the CPS classrooms that serve black, brown, and immigrant working-class neighborhoods and into the pockets of Wall Street.

A Marketplace of Schools

Public K–12 education has many uses. It provides hard and soft skills in preparation for the labor force; socialization in civic, cultural, and political norms; and acts as de facto childcare centers for younger children, reducing the cost of living for parents. Radicals and reformers have demanded tuition-free public education since the late eighteenth century. Universally accessible, tuition-free, public, K–12 education contributes to the social wage, the mix of publicly provided goods and services that add to the normative standard of living. Universal access to tuition-free public K–12 education was rolled out alongside other New Deal reforms of the 1930s and '40s — taxing the rich, the expansion of unions, and regulation of finance and industry — associated with the Keynesian period in the development of US capitalism.

By the 1970s, the Keynesian phase of US capitalism was in crisis as competitor economies in Europe and the Pacific Rim rebuilt following World War II, and high wages and high fixed costs cut into the corporate profit rate. In the 1980s and 1990s, an ideologically committed and organized capitalist class rolled back Keynesian capitalism and rolled out a more cutthroat neoliberal capitalism.

By the 1990s, an anti-tax, anti-union, anti-regulation, and anti-public-sector ideological conventional wisdom had taken root among Republicans and Democrats alike. Taxation was characterized as rent-seeking by the “parasitic state” with its inherently “inefficient” public sector. In contrast, free enterprise capitalism with open markets and light regulation was held up as the ideal institutional arrangement for organizing the production and distribution of nearly all goods and services.

In this context, the meaning of public education shifted. Public education became less about cultural enrichment and civic engagement. Under neoliberalism, the emphasis in public education was placed, first and foremost, on providing individuals with the skills and habits appropriate for the marketplace. Anyone could overcome the hardship of their circumstances so long as they were willing to work hard, first in school and later in the labor force.

Public schools were expected to operate akin to businesses and adapt to the new era of iterative austerity, doing more with less. Public education was expected to reflect and advance the same norms and practices as the prevailing neoliberal capitalism it was embedded in.

In Chicago, Mayor Richard M. Daley and his business-elite organization backers (like the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club) were ahead of the national trend in implementing neoliberal reforms of the school system. In order to make schools function more like businesses, CPS adopted school-choice reform policies (like the 1996 Illinois Charter School Law and the Renaissance 2010 plan of 2004) that would create a simulated “marketplace” of schools. Parents were encouraged to approach education like consumers and choose the best school product for their children, comparing metrics of success like shopping for toothpaste in the grocery store.



Chicago mayor Richard M. Daley in May 2010 (Chris Eaves / Wikimedia Commons)

To create this school marketplace, CPS closed putatively low-performing public schools and rolled out a portfolio of high-performing public schools (like gifted elementary, magnet, and selective enrollment high schools) with competitive admission criteria, primarily in high-value real estate markets.

CPS also privatized the school system through charter schools, schools that are privately operated but still publicly funded. These less transparent, less democratically accountable, and initially nonunionized charter schools were overwhelmingly placed in black and Latino working-class communities.

According to the Chicago Public Schools Comprehensive Annual Financial Report from 1995 to 2018 (our data source throughout), between those years, CPS opened 230 new schools, while closing 123 schools, for a net gain of 107 schools. Over half of CPS's 230 new schools were charter schools. Charter school expansion privileged the interests of charter operators, seeking a foothold for their business enterprises in the city, over what was best for the public school system as

a whole. As the CPS system was growing dramatically with a wave of charter expansion, Chicago's population of school-aged children actually declined from over 435,000 students in 2005 to 371,000 students (64,000 fewer kids) in the CPS system in 2018.

Despite this pattern of population decline, nearly 85 percent of the new charter schools were opened after 2005. By 2018, charter school proliferation consumed 11 percent of CPS's budget, up from just 3 percent in 2006.

The Financialization of Chicago Public Schools

Due to the prevailing neoliberal anti-tax conventional wisdom, the state and city governments were unwilling to raise taxes to fund CPS. So, in order to carry out these school choice reforms, CPS turned to credit markets, paving the way for education financialization. Local education administrators, financiers, and politicians partnered up to devise frameworks and investment instruments that insinuated finance capital into the funding and operation of public education as the needs and well-being of children were monetized for rent-seeking investors.

Finance capital was attracted to public education because it provided new sites for capturing profits. By the 1990s, due to overaccumulation in other markets and government deregulation of finance, capital flooded into US finance and real estate markets. Moreover, dollar-denominated US municipal bonds were comparatively safer and provided steadier returns (albeit at a lower rate of return) than other, more traditional private-sector investment instruments.

With this new, expanded access to credit markets, CPS leveraged \$8.5 billion in debt to finance its oversupply of choice schools. By 2018, CPS was dedicating \$651 million of its budget (or 10 percent of its operations budget) to make payments on its debt, up from \$133 million, or 3.5 percent of its operations budget in 1998 (adjusted for 2018 inflation).

Predictably, charter schools carved out their own niche in the financialization game. Since their finances are considered proprietary, researchers could only find data for 27 percent of all CPS charter schools in 2015 through audits filed with the Illinois State Board of Education. The combined outstanding debt from bond issuances for these Chicago charter schools totaled \$225 million. Ultimately, charter school debt becomes taxpayer debt, since charter schools receive a per-pupil stipend from CPS to cover their facility and operations expenses.



The Chicago Public Schools logo. (WBEZ)

As the debt obligations of CPS grew, the district pursued financial fixes to address debt-driven budget shortfalls. CPS leadership contracted with banks to develop new, higher-risk speculative instruments around CPS debt, including variable rate bonds, auction rate bonds, credit swaps, and options. CPS officials were hoping to deliver a financial windfall for the public sector via these high-risk, high-reward instruments.

CPS made an unprecedented \$1.5 billion bet on bonds with high-risk floating interest rates. Traditional municipal bonds have a fixed interest rate for the term of the bond. In contrast, bonds with floating interest rates have rates of interest that rise or fall in relation to some agreed reference rate (frequently the LIBOR rate at which banks lend to one another). If interest rates fell below the traditional fixed interest rate bonds, CPS would capture significant savings. Yet if interest rates rose above that fixed interest rate, CPS would be obligated to pay more for their bonds than traditional bonds.

Then, in a gambit to protect CPS from the impact of interest rates falling, the district “hedged” their risk by buying \$1 billion worth of interest-rate swap derivatives from Bank of America, Goldman Sachs, Merrill Lynch, and Lehman Brothers.

When the 2007 financial crisis hit, the Federal Reserve reduced interest rates to 0.5 percent. CPS’s interest-rate swap agreements mandated the school district pay a higher fixed interest rate on their variable rate bonds to the investment banks holding the swaps, which only had to pay a little over 0.5 percent interest rate on the variable bond. The investment banks pocketed the difference between what CPS paid them and what they owed on the bond. The *Chicago Tribune* has shown that the variable rate bonds may have cost Chicago taxpayers \$100 million more than if the schools had borrowed the debt with more traditional fixed interest rate bonds.

Meanwhile, the same banks that were reaping windfall profits from CPS’s interest-rate swap disaster were also receiving federal bailout dollars. There was no bailout for CPS. The district had to pay a total of \$254 million in penalties to terminate all their associated swap contracts in order to refinance their underlying debt at the lower interest rates now

on offer. Since CPS revenues nose-dived during the crisis, they had to turn once again to the credit markets, to borrow money (at interest) from banks awash in government bailout dollars to pay those penalties.

CPS also sold option derivatives to the Royal Bank of Canada and Bank of America on its bonds, where the contract compelled CPS to issue debt if certain conditions occurred, like credit rating devaluations. In the wake of the financial crisis, CPS's bond rating fell below the rating needed to be in good standing for those options. In turn, the banks exercised their rights to make CPS issue another \$263 million in new debt in order to protect their investments.

Altogether, CPS's fling with exotic debt instruments cost the school system at least \$617 million. Since these payments were themselves largely debt financed, the people of Chicago, via the taxes paid to CPS, will end up paying Wall Street nearly \$1 billion on these losses.

Public Education Dispossession

Chicago Public Schools' school choice reform and financializing strategies have entrenched the public schools in a cycle of austerity. Tax cuts for the rich and retrenchment of federal and state government forced local governments into footing the bill for public goods and services under conditions of fiscal austerity. CPS overbuilt public schools through a high debt leverage funding strategy. This debt-driven oversupply of schools in an era of austerity pushed CPS to use risky financial instruments that then increased the debt burden of CPS.

The rising costs associated with building and operating redundant schools, growing debt service obligations, and the fling with high-risk exotic financial instruments produced recurrent fiscal crises. The response from the mayor and CPS leaders has been to embrace more austerity for the public schools, dispossessing Chicago residents of essential public education services.

“Chicago Public Schools’ school choice reform and financializing strategies have entrenched the public schools in a cycle of austerity.”

By the mid-2010s, the school system was anticipating annual half-billion-dollar deficits. With raising taxes off the table, CPS again cut its expenditures to close budget gaps. Since 10 percent of the district's general operations budget is locked into servicing debt, this portion of the budget is off-limits to cuts, requiring CPS to make even deeper cuts to the parts of the budget associated with frontline teaching and learning.

The district cut teaching and other student-facing education professional positions. Between 2010 and 2018, CPS reduced spending on teachers' salaries by \$421 million. In that same period, CPS's debt service payments increased by \$264 million, from \$387 million in 2010 to \$651 million in 2018. Ballooning debt service payments consumed the "savings" from downsizing the teaching labor force, effectively transferring revenue from Chicago's teachers to the investor class.

CPS starved school budgets, forcing individual schools to make repeated \$1 million cuts from their budgets. Things got so bad that schools held toilet paper drives to supply their schools. Other schools have packed forty kindergarteners into single classrooms and slashed arts, language, and other enriching but noncore curriculum. The most vulnerable students with learning disabilities were not spared, as \$40 million in supports was pulled out from under them.

Dispossession was largely racialized. In 2013, under the directive of Mayor Rahm Emanuel, CPS closed forty-nine schools with low enrollments, nearly 90 percent of which were in mostly black communities.



Protesters march in the Loop on March 27, 2013 during a rally to protest the proposed closing of 54 Chicago public schools. (WBEZ / Robin Amer via Flickr)

In contrast, the affluent (and mostly white) families who sent their kids to CPS were largely insulated from dispossession, thanks to activist parents' fundraising activities. According to CPS's Internal Accounts data, CPS schools raised a combined \$33 million from parent groups and "friends of" committees that hosted whimsical holiday craft markets, teacher bartender nights, and school spirit stores in 2018.

You can't blame wealthier parents for plugging the holes in their kids' budgets. But schools in poorer communities could not equally tap into parents' or charitable community members' pockets.

When cuts and closures proved insufficient to fill in the holes in the budget, CPS doubled down on its financialization strategy and issued another \$725 million bond to pay off one year's worth of debt service and short-term operation expenses in 2016. The district was forced to borrow at an onerous 8.5 percent interest rate, since its debt burden drove down its credit rating. The dependence on debt to pay for operating expenses sealed the conversion of CPS into a rent extraction machine for finance capital.

A New Era of Education Inequality

The two-prong strategy of market-based school choice reforms and education financialization pursued by CPS has created a new era of education inequality. Compelling public education to mimic a marketplace of competition has privileged the interests of elites and the affluent over and against the interests of the working-class majority, hollowing out mostly black and Latino communities' schools so that the district could roll out exclusive enrollment schools (disproportionately serving white professional-class families) and a wave of privately operated charter schools.

Education financialization is transforming the distributive role of public schools, from taxing the rich to fund public education, to borrowing money from the rich to pay for schools. CPS's strategy of education financialization turns schools into income streams for rent-seeking finance capital, which siphons public dollars out of classrooms and communities. Those dollars are then channeled into investors' portfolios. As the burden of debt grows, debt overhang is used by austerians as an alibi to further shrink the public sector by inflicting cuts on frontline teaching and learning.

Political leaders can continue to debt finance and grind public education into dust. Or they can change course and tax the rich to raise the revenue necessary to fund public K–12 education. Clearly, taxing the asset-owning rich is the better option than borrowing money from them (through the bond market) and paying them back with interest.

Taxing the rich to spend on universal, tuition-free, public K–12 education funds quality education for all children; reduces economic inequality, channeling revenue away from the rich and raising the social wage for the working class; and demonstrates the efficacy of providing goods and services via the more transparent, more accountable, and democratically planned public sector. If we don't tax the rich to pay for public goods and services, we'll be stuck in endless waves of austerity — and working-class students, parents, and educators will pay the price.

The author thanks Rachel Weber for her contributions to this piece.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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FILED UNDER

Driving for Decent Pay

Save These Useful Tips On Running a Living Wage Campaign

☐ **Plan a detailed campaign strategy and do a “SWOT” analysis** of your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and the threats that you face. And factor in opportunities for flexibility and creativity.

☐ **Set a salary goal—and be bold.** Research various versions of a living wage for your region, broken down to an hourly rate according to members’ workweeks. Then develop a theme/message that stirs members and keeps the campaign on track.

☐ **Set a timetable to reach a living wage** in one contract, or over several agreements.

☐ **Work for a strong, short salary schedule** to move people to the top rate quickly and maximize their career earnings. And aim for extra schedule columns/lanes for professional development.

☐ **Consider interim ways as well to boost pay**, such as paid lunch and holidays or added pay for professional development.

☐ **Tie the living wage to the pension issue.** After all, the more you earn by the end of your career, the higher your pension.

☐ **Survey members and, if possible, the public** on the salary issue. Be aware of what members are thinking at *every* step of the campaign.

☐ **Collect living wage arguments that resonate with the public.** Document the changes in ESP work, its growing complexity, and ESPs’ positive day-to-day influence on students.

☐ **Find ways to incrementally engage members** in the living wage campaign. Get teacher support upfront and use teacher help to reach ESPs.

☐ **Use Association communications** to the fullest. Use your state affiliate publication and state and local affiliate web sites to “create a buzz” around pay. Prioritize salary coverage on local sites.

☐ **Use the media.** Find out who local education reporters are, then cultivate them.

☐ **Find, then train “respected” members on the living wage and campaign skills.** Build a durable committee, with representation from all classifications, that gets constant member feedback. And get more trained Association reps into the schools.



ESPs, talking about their work and their impact on students, are a living wage campaign’s best spokespeople.

☐ **Organize regionally** to build momentum, compare tactics and pay scales, and create favorable pay patterns. Build coalitions among different locals in the same district and across district lines.

☐ **Find and develop your best ESP spokesperson.** They’re the most credible voices in the community on the need for a living wage.

☐ **Inventory your ESP assets.** Devise a reporting form to record each member’s seniority, community connections, awards, specialized training, etc.

☐ **Inventory your members’ community links through a “community contact card”**—from church affiliation to rescue squad membership. Focus on those links *first* before reaching farther.

☐ **Research other potential community allies**, including unions, religious denominations, PTAs, influential parents, and other community groups. Develop ties with them early, before campaigning.

☐ **Research school board members/decision makers and build relationships with them.** Use a “board watch” reporting form. Identify points of leverage. And start sending members, in an organized way, to every school board meeting.

☐ **Rely on member input, enthusiasm, and creativity.** Collectively, you and your members are far, far smarter than the most clever consultant!

--Dave Winans (Dwinans@nea.org)

Ten Living Wage Communications Tips

IT'S ALL ABOUT ESPS TELLING THEIR OWN STORIES

To win a living wage for education support professionals (ESPs), you've got to "win the hearts and minds" of the community they serve. That's common-sense advice from NEA state and local affiliates -- and other labor organizations -- that have pursued and won pay increases that better reflect the value of ESP work. Here, from the trenches, are 10 valuable communications tips for any living wage campaigner.

1. FIRST AND FOREMOST: ELECT GOOD SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS.

Says Bernie Mulligan, a veteran communicator with the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT): "If you're not involved in the election of school board members in your community, you're limiting your opportunity to communicate with them in an effective way about a living wage. Superintendents sometimes control information and access to board members -- and constantly shape their perceptions."

2. STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS.

Before taking a living wage campaign public, advises Mulligan, it's important to assess the strength of the local Association and its community roots. Starting from the personal connections of individual ESPs, build two-way relationships with parents, other unions, community and business groups, and faith communities.

"The thing to remember," says New York State paraeducator Debbie Minnick, "is that you make those partnerships and relationships ahead of time. Then when you need them, you're able to call on them, and vice versa. You keep those relationships going because your partners are going to want to be able to use your backing as well. It's just kind of a circle that keeps going."

3. KNOW WHO YOUR ESP MEMBERS ARE.

ESPs tend to live in the districts in which they work and have deep roots there. Survey ESP members on the work they do, their years of service, and their leadership roles in community groups. List family connections in the community, children or grandchildren attending local schools, individual commendations and awards, special talents, specialized training/qualifications for the job, and even the number of unused ESP sick days.

4. ASK ESPS ABOUT WHAT THEY'RE PROUDEST.

It might be their impact on student achievement, the "hidden" ways they reach and inspire young people, or the contributions they make to the community in which they live and work. Tally this information for an Association communications campaign that can give parents and community residents a full picture of the value that ESPs add to schools and their community.

5. DEVELOP A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN.

Consider the living wage campaign's overall goal. Identify the decision makers you need to influence, and spot the people whose support will be needed to achieve a living wage. Who can help you reach those people, and who will try to stop you? How will you allocate resources to a communications campaign? How will you persuade potential allies to join the campaign and how will you neutralize adversaries?

6. DEVELOP YOUR SALARY MESSAGE.

Members, potential allies, and the public need to understand the living wage issue. Develop a theme and message that explains it simply (such as "It's All About Fairness"), and then publicize it, repeat it, and disseminate it widely -- being direct and positive.

7. COLLECT YOUR BEST ARGUMENTS FOR A LIVING WAGE.

Some examples:

- **ESPs play a vital role in children's lives, especially in their health and safety.** We need qualified, caring people in every job in every school.
- **ESPs are the first people parents and children see in the morning, and the last they see in the evening.** People form many of their impressions of the school and school district from the image of teachers and ESPs working together.
- **When workers are paid a living wage, taxpayers no longer subsidize low-wage employers.** Every school employee should have the right to spend time at home with his or her own kids, without working two or three extra jobs to survive.
- **Teachers can't function their very best if ESPs aren't there to help them.** Without ESPs, teachers would have less time to do what they do well in the classroom.
- **Better pay attracts quality staff and stems turnover.** A living wage and low turnover is all about maintaining "institutional memory" in the workplace. Human resource experts estimate that the cost of recruiting, hiring, and training new employees is between 10 percent and 50 percent of a salary for a position.
- **The local economy will benefit through higher ESP spending power.** "A \$40,000 minimum salary for all teachers and a living wage as starting pay for education support professionals would mean economic prosperity for communities," says NEA Research staffer Michael Kahn. "Why? Because education is highly labor-intensive. A dollar invested in education creates more jobs, direct and indirect, than any other sector of the economy."

8. BE READY FOR THE COUNTERARGUMENTS.

Assess local attitudes towards schools, educators, and the concept of a living wage. Prepare to deal with arguments against a living wage from community members, employers, and school board members. Role-playing can be helpful in preparing answers to refute counterarguments.

9. GEAR UP ESPS TO TELL THEIR OWN STORIES.

Bus driver John Boggs, a leader of the Kentucky Education Association's (KEA) Eastern Kentucky Living Wage Campaign, thinks that the biggest factor behind the campaign's momentum is communications by ESPs themselves, "who let people know what's going on" with low pay.

Organizers should pick the brains of ESPs about their work and life experiences, adds NYSUT's Bernie Mulligan. "That's the raw material for a campaign message, and we need ESP spokespeople for a campaign," he points out. "It's really a question of figuring out how to humanize and personalize the theme of fairness."

10. TAKE THE LIVING WAGE MESSAGE PUBLIC.

Veteran campaigners stress the need to identify public education supporters in the community and work with state affiliate communications staff on strategies to move the living wage message to them -- through meetings or the media. Some useful advice from the Virginia Education Association and other organizations that tackle living wage issues:

- **Plan any meeting, whether you are going alone or as a group.** Research your audience. Decide who will lead the meeting, and what each person will contribute to the discussion. Plan to focus on one issue only: the living wage.
- **Tell the living wage story in a personal way that brings the low-wage issue to life.** Speak about personal hardships due to low pay. Bring photographs to illustrate your perspective. Give specific examples as often as possible. Don't speculate, exaggerate, fudge, or invent -- just tell it as you see it. Engage your audience in dialogue.
- **Appeal to your audience's sense of fairness and justice.** There's widespread public opposition to paying less than a living wage, and a tremendous amount of respect for what ESPs do in schools. Work to get elected officials to agree, in principle, that low ESP salaries are unfair. As soon as possible after your visit, jot down notes that record what was said, the tone, and what questions were asked at the meeting.
- **Deal intelligently with the media.** Compile a list of media outlets in the community. Develop relationships with news directors, editors, education reporters, and talk show producers. Reach out to the media early and foster direct relationships with reporters likely to be assigned to the ESP wage story; use the time to educate them on the issues. Keep pitching story ideas, new or creative angles on ESP work and economic struggles.
- **Introduce journalists to struggling, underpaid ESPs.** Train selected members to handle contact with the media and have them speak at rallies, community meetings, and other events. The Vermont Living Wage Coalition does public awareness training for members, preparing them to approach school boards, the press, and the community.
- **Create your own news through rallies, demonstrations, public forums, community events, and news conferences.** Train members how to put together a media package, how to write press releases, and how to follow up after the release to ensure coverage.
- **Make liberal use of free media,** including letters to the editor, cable TV, talk radio, and community petitioning -- door to door, if necessary.
- **Collaborate with teachers to generate positive publicity** about teaching and learning, student achievement, safety, and efficient operations in the schools -- and the vital role that ESPs play in making it happen.
- **Create a video, PowerPoint, or blog on the work or financial plight of ESPs.** In a PowerPoint made by a Pennsylvania ESP local, each bargaining team member talked about her job and how it had changed over the years. The local affiliate effectively corrected an

outdated school board impression that poorly paid ESPs were nothing more than menial "paid volunteers."

- **Find parents and community members to help you tell your story.** "When Mrs. Jones or Mr. Kelly tells a heartwarming story about ways ESPs help their kids, school board members who ignore us listen; they see those parents as 'real' people," says Bernie Mulligan. "It's really effective when people in the school community start to talk about you -- then a campaign comes alive!"

NEA Collective Bargaining & Member Advocacy

Five Ways to Research a Living Wage

A living wage can enable an education support professional (ESP) to survive on one full-time job, without support from relatives or government agencies, and have time left over for a real personal and family life. A living wage is sufficient to pay for the basic needs in a given community — including food, housing, transportation, health care, child care, clothing, taxes, personal necessities, and even some modest savings.

A “basic needs budget” is the total of these expenses, calculated monthly and adjusted according to family size, work status of adults in the household, and regional variations in costs. Using estimates of a monthly living wage, Association bargainers/lobbyists can break the numbers down to several different hourly wage figures, reflecting the length of the ESP workday, workweek, and school year.

You can research an area living wage on your own. Here are ways to start:

1. Go online for [living wage calculators](#) and other resources.
2. Do some research with the help of a local credit union, an area college or university, or a non-profit organization working on economic policy issues.
3. Look for “self-sufficiency standards” and housing costs on the Web site of a state agency that administers social assistance programs.
4. Find out if your state government establishes a living wage figure on a regular basis. If so, adjust it for an ESP work schedule.
5. Devise expenditure categories for a living wage, and have a representative group of ESP members in your local track their monthly expenditures in each of those categories. Then compute average costs.

Living Wage Calculator

Another related online tool is MIT's [Living Wage Calculator](#). Select and state, then choose a county or place to find data on living wages, the hourly rate an individual must earn to support a family; monthly expenses; and typical hourly wages for various occupations at the location. Wages less than a living wage are shown in red.

The Ithaca Living Wage Campaign: How We Did It

New York State ESP leader Debbie Minnick describes how her local affiliate boosted starting paraprofessional pay by 50 percent.

WE PARAPROFESSIONALS were the lowest paid in the Ithaca, New York, district. And you know what we do: We work with the most difficult kids in the whole school district. We have more of a connection with the students than most of the classroom teachers. I'm talking about special ed students; we're with them more, directly teaching them more.

Respect was such an issue throughout our whole living wage campaign. Not only did we want the pay, but we wanted the respect that went along with that.

I had three different women in my local come to me and say they went to the Salvation Army for dinner. They didn't have any more food at home and they didn't have any more money to make it through to their pay day. Three of them happened to run into one another at the Salvation Army, where they went to get dinner.

You just get pushed into a campaign like this. What's right is right and what's just is just, and you have to take on this kind of commitment—all of you.

It's a Ton of Work

We started negotiating with the district in January 2001. We took several months before that preparing for negotiations with staff from the NEA state affiliate. We were very lucky to have a local living wage coalition.

We asked for \$11.50 per hour, which I think was a 73 percent raise. The assistant superintendent had his own calculator out. His glasses were down and he just looked at us and said, "You do know that's a 73 percent raise, don't you?"

Not to fool you—you know it's a ton of work. One of the key things we did: We had our members on board before we started. We had meeting after meeting, before, during, all the time.

Written communications were going out, telling members what we were asking for, telling them what we were getting ourselves into. We told them we could not do this without everybody's support. If you don't have your own members on board, it's just a ton of work and it's going to fail.

Reaching Out to the Community

Our next step was to get the community involved. Throughout the year and a half that we did this living wage campaign, we escalated our activities—candlelight vigils, rallies, panels with well-known community members and testimony of paraprofessionals. We told the community who we were, what we did, and what we made for all of that.

We made a video. We had a preview of that at the local library. At the same time, we had a panel of religious leaders—with a priest, a rabbi, and minister, a Tibetan monk, close to seven of them. They read all their separate scriptures and they all connected it to paying people poverty wages, and that's not the way it should be.

As it kept escalating, we had a Parade for Paras. We ended having 500 people in the parade itself, not counting the people who were watching the parade. We had stilt walkers and jugglers, kids from the schools, kids on bikes with signs that said, "Tykes on bikes for pay hikes."

We did everything we could think of. . . We ended up in the downtown Commons. We had speakers about our negotiations and the living wage campaign. We had bands and musicians come, and face painters for kids. It was a huge community-, family-, and child-oriented-type thing.

We did petitions that were so easy. We just asked: Would you pay so much more in your taxes to support paraprofessionals in the district to make a living wage? People were just signing that left and right. They didn't know who paraprofessionals were, and that was our chance to explain to them—they were appalled.

In just a couple of days, 3,000 people signed, a tenth of the population. We turned the petitions over to the board members.

You Have to Go For It

Just before we settled, one of our last activities was taking over the school board meeting completely. . . We had about 50 people signed up to speak. The board said, "We'll take the first couple of people and then we'll adjourn for executive session"—which they knew would be the next couple of hours. "The rest of you can wait until we get back." That sent everybody over the edge. We all went to the mike, chanting, "Let us speak!"

They did not know what to do. They were so embarrassed, the whole nine-member board, the superintendent, and all the school administrators. So they huddled for ten minutes and finally just said, "OK." They listened to all 50 of us individually.

I'm just here to tell you it's a lot of work, a lot of organizing, a lot of meetings and paperwork, and communications.

September 11, 2001 came right in the middle of negotiations, and that put a real crimp in our thinking. We thought, "We're not going to have any money, and that's what we're going to hear a lot in the next year or two down the road: 'There's no money anymore.'"

You know what? They always have money, and I don't care. It's their problem, not our problem, and you have to go for it and you have to ask.

Remember, if you're asking for 50 percent or 20 percent, who cares what you end up with? It's better than the 3 percent that you normally get. So you can't think of any of it as a failure, because you're going to get more than what you normally bargain for.

We settled in June 2002 with a 50 percent raise in the starting salary at the end of the third year of the contract and no givebacks.

—*From an interview with Dave Winans, NEA Today*

Somerville, MA, Paraprofessionals Win Huge Living Wage Victory: The Story and Lessons for the Future

By **Margaret Whittier-Ferguson** June 12, 2020

<https://www.socialistalternative.org/2020/06/12/somerville-ma-paraprofessionals-win-huge-living-wage-victory-the-story-and-lessons-for-the-future/>

Margaret Whittier-Ferguson works in a prekindergarten classroom as a Paraprofessional in Somerville, Massachusetts. She is a Building Representative with the Somerville Teachers Association and served as the chair of the Paraprofessional Contract Action Team throughout their year-long campaign for fair salaries and job security. Before the contract campaign paras made between \$20,000 and \$25,000 a year. Margaret is also a member of the Cambridge/Somerville branch of Socialist Alternative.

To see Socialist Alternative's past reporting on this inspiring campaign, check out these articles written as this struggle unfolded:

Somerville, MA, Paraprofessionals Fight for Livable Salary and Job Security

Somerville, MA Paraprofessionals Escalate Fight for A Fair Contract

Somerville Paras Continue Fight for Fair Contract



After over a year of organizing and fighting, Somerville Paraprofessionals, organized in the Somerville Teachers Association (STA), have won an important victory. We won a starting salary of \$25,000 a year which amounts to an immediate 25% raise. I'm going to say that again: an immediate 25% raise!

What makes this victory all the more critical is its context. Educators face

budget cuts across the country triggered – in part – by the impending economic depression. Despite this overall trend, Somerville Paraprofessionals won! By running a rank-and-file and community oriented campaign, we were able to win a starting salary of \$25,000, up from an abysmal \$20,000, and 3% raises next year and the following year, as well as job security after 4 years of employment (previously Paraprofessionals had no job security).

Paraprofessionals (support staff) in Somerville have been in [contract negotiations for around a year now](#). This victory for Somerville Paraprofessionals can serve as inspiration for support staff and teachers across the country fighting for raises and, crucially, against budget cuts.

This article tells the story of how this victory was won and the most important lessons for teachers' struggles and the labor movement going forward. Somerville Paras should vote YES on this contract, as this is a massive victory not just for Somerville, but for support staff across the country!

This victory is 100% a testament to the strength of our union and the community campaign that backed us. Before the pandemic hit, we were going all out: we were storming school committee meetings, organizing walk-ins, and receiving large levels of community and parent support. The story of this year-long campaign should serve as a reminder to teachers' unions that our power comes from our ability to mobilize our unions and the community to fight for what staff and students need!

New Leadership Elected and Paras Reject a Concessionary Contract: The Fight Begins

In October 2019, 77% of Paraprofessionals voted down a contract proposal that did next to nothing to address the financial hardships Paraprofessionals were facing. With a 72% turnout of Paraprofessionals to the vote, it was clear that we were not okay with business-as-usual contract negotiations. This "no" vote came just months after we elected a new "reform leadership" in our union: the Somerville Caucus of Rank and File Educators (SCORE) slate.

The election of SCORE members as President, Vice President, and several building representatives, myself among them, injected new life into the union. SCORE ran on the basis of jump-starting rank-and-file union involvement and social justice unionism, both things that were sorely needed in the STA. SCORE winning brought about a renewed confidence among union members that if we fight, we can win, and this undoubtedly played a major role in the willingness of a majority of Paras to reject the business-as-usual contract.

Following the "no" vote, we decided to try a different type of contract negotiation than what the STA had done in the past. We formed a Contract Action Team (CAT), comprised of rank-and-file Paraprofessionals from across the district, based on the idea that our power as a union comes not from clever arguments at the negotiation table, but by involving as much of the union rank-and-file as possible, building community support, and not being afraid to confront the School Committee and Mayor. Consistent CAT meetings throughout the campaign were crucial in providing ongoing leadership to the rank-and-file of the union. Our demands were as follows:

- A starting salary of \$25,000 a year
- Job Security after 4 years of employment
- A 2-year contract so we negotiate at the same time as teachers

A Strategy to Win

At every step in the campaign, there were active debates in the union over what was the most effective strategy to win. How do we most effectively fight for a fair contract? What is the best way to mobilize union members and the community? How do we make democratic decisions? Should we mobilize now, or wait until later?

Democratic discussion and debate involving the rank-and-file are crucial for the success of any contract battle. In the past, the STA focused on closed-door meetings and negotiation with the School Committee. As a socialist, I see the active involvement of fellow union members as the key to our success. We are far stronger when we are united and determined. I consistently pushed for a strategy of rank-and-file mobilization, building a strong base of community support, and not shying away from confrontation with the School Committee and Mayor.

On December 19, 2019, we held an incredibly successful community meeting. We built for this by flyering parents outside of schools and reaching out to those that signed our [Pledge of Support](#). Nearly fifty people attended the meeting, including parents, union members from other local unions, and a City Councilor. We discussed the important role that Paraprofessionals play in our schools — we are the extra set of eyes, ears, and hands that ensure that our students' basic and more complex needs are met — and strategy for how our movement could win. Out of this meeting, we decided to build for a massive turn-out to the School Committee meeting on January 13, 2020.



Packing School Committee: A Turning Point in the Campaign

On January 13, 200 Paras, teachers, parents, and community members rallied and packed the School Committee in one of the largest, if not the largest, turnout to a Somerville School Committee meeting ever recorded. After a standout and impromptu rally featuring speakers from the STA, Boston Teachers Union, Massachusetts Teachers' Association, and Socialist Alternative, we marched into City Hall chambers. Details and videos from this amazing action can be found [here](#).

The mood in schools across the district was electric following our successful turnout to the School Committee meeting. Many educators were realizing for the first time what can be accomplished when a union is organized and takes a movement-building approach to fighting for what we need.

Following the School Committee meeting, the CAT launched a series of walk-ins where educators at schools across the district rallied outside of their schools at the same time. At many of these walk-ins, students, parents, and community members joined rallying educators, putting on full display the depth of our movement! At my school, the school with the most Paraprofessionals in the district, Socialist Alternative members who live in the community played a crucial role in driving turnout to the School Committee and walk-ins.

Throughout February we continued building pressure by hosting community meetings, rallies, and participation in School Committee meetings. [Check out a speech](#) I gave at one of these rallies, the last action before the Coronavirus hit.

School Committee Uses Coronavirus for Illegal Move: Paras Stand Strong

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted the work of educators across the country. We have been tasked with setting up a completely new model of educating – remote learning – with little notice or resources. We have had to adjust our entire approach to teaching to meet the needs of this particular situation. On top of that, for those of us in the middle of contract battles it threw a big wrench in our plans. We have had to teach our students *and* fight for our rights as educators under lockdown! To add insult to injury, educators across the country are now facing brutal budget cuts as states scramble to deal with growing debt.

This is not a new phenomenon, we have seen how districts use crises as an excuse to cut social services and education. In New Orleans, following Hurricane Katrina, countless public schools were shuttered, replaced by charter and private schools. Now, districts across the country will likely attempt to use Covid-19 to similar ends.

In this context, on April 30th, the School Committee took their last offer – a 5% raise this year, 6% raise next year, and 7% the following year – off the table. They instead offered 0% raises over the next three years. That's right: 0% raises from a \$20,000 starting salary over the next 3 years.

Given this, it is shocking to read the [City of Somerville's official press release](#) about the agreement reached which quotes School Committee Chair Carrie Normand saying, "For many months, School Committee and City officials have publicly stated our support for a Paraprofessional wage scale that starts at \$25,000 annually." This would be laughable if we hadn't spent a year campaigning for a living wage in the face of the School Committee's blatant and insulting opposition.

This 0% proposal was a real blow and the CAT struggled to see a path forward, but we were determined to keep up the pressure on the School Committee virtually. We attended virtual School Committee meetings and finance meetings. We attended School Committee office hours en masse. We did not let up the pressure, despite the fact that the budget process was looking grim.

The School Committee's move to take their last offer off the table and replace it with 0% raises is considered "regressive bargaining" and is totally illegal. While we of course filed an unfair labor practice, we knew we couldn't rely on Trump's National Labor Relations Board to rule in our favor. Additionally, getting to a conclusive ruling in this process can take years. It has actually been quite common for supposedly progressive cities and institutions such as universities to consciously carry out illegal bargaining tactics with the [full knowledge](#) that Trump's NLRB appointees [will have their back](#).

At a district-wide all-Paras meeting in mid May, we discussed and debated how to move forward. We voted not to take a 0% raise and to continue fighting for a living wage. District-wide discussions are imperative for unions.

Black Lives Matter: The Straw that Broke the School Committee's Back

In a complete reversal of their previous position, on Wednesday, June 3, the School Committee offered us a starting salary of \$25,000 a year. For many of us, given the 0% raise offered just one month earlier, this new offer felt out of the blue. So what happened, and why did the School Committee finally give into our demands after a full year of fighting us with all their power? We will never fully know what discussions went on behind closed doors that led to this 180 degree turnaround, but we can make a confident, educated guess.

First, the School Committee's power move in late April didn't break us. They used the pandemic as cover to offer us 0% raises over three years, knowing we were in a weaker position to organize and hoping to kill our spirits, but this did not work. We did not back down and made it clear we were still going to fight. We discussed organizing a car caravan to put pressure on the School Committee, and we knew that in order to win our demands, we must maintain constant pressure on the School Committee and the Mayor.

Then, Black Lives Matter broke out. The brutal police murder of another black man has sent shock waves around the world, with solidarity protests springing up in every corner of the country and dozens of countries across the world. The majority of Paraprofessionals are women, and many of them are women of color. Demands around defunding the police to fund education, housing, and social services gained steam. A group of community members including members of Democratic Socialists of America and other local activists began to circulate a [petition](#) calling for the defunding of Somerville police to fund education, and a living wage for Paraprofessionals in particular. The petition went semi-viral across the city, getting thousands of signatures. Undoubtedly, the Mayor and School Committee saw the writing on the wall that with the new wave of BLM, they would look even worse than before if they refused to pay Paraprofessionals a living wage.

This victory for Somerville Paras would have been unimaginable without the year of intense struggle and a rank-and-file led, movement-building approach by our union. But in the eleventh hour, we believe the straw that finally broke the School Committee's back was the Black Lives Matter movement. If true, the implications of this are enormous.

The fight against racism and the fight for economic demands are not separate issues to be fought on separate fields of battle. If unions and the labor movement use our power as workers to boldly take up the fight against systemic racism our movement will be unstoppable.

In Seattle, members of the Seattle Education Association have [officially voted](#) to support the call, spearheaded in City Hall by Socialist Alternative's City Councilor Kshama Sawant, to defund the Seattle police by 50% and redirect those funds to necessary social services. Locally, though not as strong but still important, the Boston Teachers Union recently passed

a [resolution](#) calling for a 10% reduction in the Boston police budget, as well as getting police out of our schools. These are examples of the solidarity we need between the labor movement and anti-racist struggles.

The Role of SCORE and Reform Caucuses in Unions

None of what the STA has accomplished over the last year would have been possible without the election of SCORE at the end of last school year. But at the same time, just electing a new reform leadership was not enough. Immediately after being elected, all sorts of pressures are exerted on any new union leadership. There can be pressure to tone down your message, abandon promises to build rank and file democracy, and give up a more combative approach in favor of backroom negotiations. We see similar pressures exerted on progressive elected officials at the city, state, and federal level as well.

Because of this, active rank-and-file involvement and accountability is crucial. Throughout this campaign there were debates about strategy, leadership, and needing to stay true to the platform and approach that SCORE promised upon election. This is an important lesson for reform caucuses and teachers unions nationally. After the election of a new reform leadership, the caucus should stay active and organized and the members or supporters of the caucus have a crucial role to play in successfully transforming the union into an effective fighting organization.

SCORE's platform crucially included more general membership meetings, however there's been a lack of regular meetings over the past year. Going forward, having more regular membership meetings will help build off this victory and prepare us to fight for an equally strong teachers' contract, which is up next school year. While it may take time to build up, there is no replacement for an actively engaged rank-and-file.

Our Fight is Far From Over

This is an absolutely tremendous victory. Socialist Alternative has stood alongside Paraprofessionals fighting for a living wage throughout this campaign, and this sort of solidarity has been critical to the campaign's success. A year ago, most people in Somerville had no idea what a Paraprofessionals was. Today, we see massive amounts of community support not just for Paraprofessionals' living wage campaign, but for school funding more broadly. It is because of the community support that we were able to win this victory. And we should be clear: this is a victory not just for Somerville Paraprofessionals, but for all educators across Massachusetts and the entire country. Paraprofessionals in other districts should reach out to Somerville Paras to discuss how we ran our campaign, so that we can all learn from one another how to fight for a living wage and job security. We need to work together to ensure we have the working and learning conditions we need!

Despite the budget crises we are seeing across the country, it is absolutely imperative that educator unions do not let up the fight for fully funded schools. Wall Street should pay for this crisis, not working families. Brookline Public Schools, one of the wealthier districts in Massachusetts, [pink-slipped over 300 teachers in the last few weeks](#), and only because of a strong public outcry have they retracted some of these layoffs. This is what we should expect to see across the country.

Many of our students are going to be coming back to school dysregulated and many having experienced trauma. We need not less but *more* well-paid staff and wrap-around services for students including counseling services. This pay raise for Somerville paras cannot come at the expense of staffing cuts, and if the School Committee makes any attempts to cut para or other positions, the STA should fight back against them just as hard as we did for the contract fight. Fully funded schools means well-paid *and* fully staffed, not just one or the other.

For educators and families across the country, the question of how and when we reopen schools is at the forefront of our minds. Educators must be the ones to determine how and when we go back to school, given the very real health and safety concerns of returning to school.

It is crucial that we learn the lessons of building broad support, being well organized internally, and connecting to larger demands around defunding the police to fully fund our schools. In a period when we are up against massive budget cuts, this victory should be shouted from the rooftops. The union and our community must draw correct conclusions about how and why this campaign was successful: It was only by building a movement that mobilized *both* the rank-and-file of the union and the community that this victory was won. We should be proud of our success, but should also know that the struggle is not over. We have a responsibility to share these lessons and join in other struggles happening across our city, our state, and our country. We're going to need to continue to take militant and bold action to win the schools we all deserve.