

CASE STUDIES

ORGANIZING SUCCESS STORIES

TRADE SECRETS:

- 1.** Challenge assumptions.
- 2.** Acknowledge the traditions that add strength while exploring opportunities to grow stronger.
- 3.** Make the most of your circumstances and culture — even rural organizing has its advantages.
- 4.** Constantly assess ways of improving the union's leadership and structure.
- 5.** Take time to build internal and external capacity in advance of a contract crisis.
- 6.** Build solidarity by building relationships.
- 7.** Make room for new leaders to make decisions.
- 8.** Members should own the work as much as staff.
- 9.** Use multiple and consistent methods of communication with members.
- 10.** Trust democratic decision-making.
- 11.** Remember to tell the stories of members.
- 12.** Recruit members during the campaign.
- 13.** Educate potential members on the value and role of the union.
- 14.** Members can organize while building up the crisis campaign on a short timeline.
- 15.** Strike experience and know-how is not necessary to win a fight using a strike.
- 16.** Make sure to use a settlement checklist to clarify all major issues, especially wages/salary during strike days and non-reprisal language.
- 17.** Statewide actions can greatly increase member engagement.

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.