

Faculty and Staff Union Win Contract Gains in Two-week Strike By John Braxton and Karen Schermerhorn

Can strikes work for public employee unions in 2007, when public treasuries are stretched thin? The thirteen hundred faculty and staff at Community College of Philadelphia answered that question with a clear "Yes!" in a recent two-week strike.

Bargaining started more than a year ago for 200 classified employees (clerks, housekeepers, and other non-teaching staff), 450 full-time faculty, and 650 part-time faculty who form the three separate bargaining units within AFT Local 2026. The local has had numerous strikes in its 37-year history, but the most recent one was ten years ago. The stalwarts who built our local are heading towards retirement, and nearly half of our current membership had been hired since the last strike. Furthermore, different groups of members have somewhat different interests, making it unclear whether we could establish unity, or whether management could exploit the differences to their advantage.

Interest-based Bargaining

Early on, the administration proposed that the two sides engage in "interest-based bargaining". Sometimes called mutual gains bargaining (or more sloppily, "win-win" bargaining), this approach has both union and management list their interests on particular issues and meet in committees that brainstorm possible solutions to the problems, without initially committing themselves to any particular solution. In theory, this allows for the possibility of more creative ideas emerging than the traditional method of bargaining where each side declares its proposals and the two sides clash.

The leaders in our local were concerned that interest-based bargaining might lull some members into believing that all issues could be resolved simply by discussion, even though we knew that power would be the main factor determining the outcome of the bargaining. On the other hand, we thought that some of our members might think that, if we rejected interest-based bargaining, we were just "stuck in old-fashioned ways of thinking and bargaining", and would think that we were needlessly combative if we rejected interest-based bargaining. As a result, we decided on a two-pronged approach: (1) engage in interest-based bargaining on certain issues that might lend themselves to this approach; and (2) mobilize our members in a contract campaign that would build up to a strike if necessary.

Open the Books Contract Campaign

In a move that was new for our local, we hired Mark Richard, a leader of another AFT local, to lead several meetings to help us plan the campaign. This helped us to identify goals for our campaign, as well as themes that would help us communicate with our members, with the students, and with the public. Knowing that the administration would be asking us to cut our health care coverage, we decided to focus on the fact that the administration had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on a new branding campaign,

AND had hired lots of new administrators, while at the same time they were raising tuition rapidly, turning away students, and claiming there was no money to pay for faculty and staff health care and decent raises. We decided to pull one of our experienced rank-and-file members out of half of her classes to coordinate our mobilization campaign. We also hired an experienced union-side public relations consultant, Jamie Horwitz, who helped us develop the theme. In December, after the administration refused to divulge the salary ranges or how much money they were paying health care consultants, we posted signs and leafleted the campus with the slogan, "Faculty and Students open our books every day. Why won't the administration open theirs?"

A Practice Strike

Although some of the interest-based bargaining committees did succeed in coming up with ideas acceptable to both the union and management, it became increasingly clear that on other issues the administration was intent on dramatically reducing the power of the union. They wanted not only cutbacks in health care, but they also wanted to gut seniority protection for part-time faculty and tenure rights for full-time faculty. To prepare our members, our students, and the public for the possibility of a strike, we decided to call a "practice strike" in February. We carried our picket signs in front of the college entrances, with the "On Strike" line partially covered by stickers saying "Just Practicing", attracting good media attention. Our leaflets encouraged students to sign up for an on-line newsletter that would keep them informed of the issues surrounding negotiations.

The real strike: creating a crisis

All of this build-up meant that by the time we decided that negotiations had bogged down, our members were prepared, and voted unanimously to strike. The picket line combination of the mostly blue-collar/pink collar classified employees with our white-collar faculty was exciting: the chants, songs, line dances, tambourines and drums were captured on every TV station and area newspaper for two weeks. Only a tiny number of members crossed the picket line. Student quotes in the press were mostly aimed at calling on the administration to settle the strike in a fair way. Jobs with Justice and the Coalition of Labor Union Women helped out in rallies and on the picket line, giving the strike a broader labor character.

Interestingly, the crisis created by the strike was felt not only by the administration, but also by political leaders. Newspaper coverage focused on the important role that the college plays in building an educated workforce that improves the tax base in the city, and the failure of the city government to provide adequate funding. In the final analysis, a labor-friendly congressman stepped in and arranged for an additional \$800,000 to be found through his connections at the state level, which was facilitated by our local's connections with AFT-Pennsylvania and the AFL-CIO. The victory was only partial, as the administration insisted that the extra money be distributed in the form of bonuses, rather than be added to our base pay. Nevertheless, our strike resulted in a settlement that

was better than what we had been offered before the strike, creation of a new group of rank-and file activists, and a new sense of unity for the struggles ahead.

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