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LESSONS LEARNED IN THE RUTGERS UNIVERSITY STRIKE¹

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The United States is in the midst of an upsurge in education-sector labor organizing. Higher education workers are rapidly [unionizing](#) while K-12 and higher education unions increasingly use [direct action](#) tactics such as [strikes](#) to [pressure management](#) and strengthen overall gains.

In mid-April 2023, thousands of full-time faculty, adjunct faculty and graduate student workers at Rutgers University staged an [historic five-day strike](#) at campuses across the state. Rutgers is the State University of New Jersey, with four campuses. It was the first strike among academic workers in the school's 257-year history, and three locals of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) stood together on the picket line and in negotiations to achieve significantly improved contracts for Rutgers academic workers overall.

Nearly a year has now passed, and Rutgers rank-and-file members and union leaders identify six lessons learned from their experiences preparing for, and engaging in, the 2023 Rutgers academic worker strike.

WHAT WAS WON

Three locals—constituting 5 distinct bargaining units and 5 contracts—were simultaneously engaged in contract negotiations with Rutgers management. They mobilized a multi-year process of coalition-building among locals on the Rutgers campus that culminated in a five-day strike. The locals, each holding its own set of priorities, represented full-time faculty and graduate workers, adjunct faculty, and medical school faculty.

They struck primarily over salary concerns for the lowest-paid workers and job security. [93 percent](#) of ballot-casting members approved the resulting five legal frameworks, with gains particularly benefitting the lowest-paid workers, such as adjuncts, lecturers, and graduate workers.

[Major gains](#) over the life of the four-year contract included salary increases of 14% for full-time faculty, 33% for graduate student workers, 44% for adjunct faculty, and 28% for postdocs. Other significant wins included greater stability through multi-semester and multi-year appointments, funding for professional development, binding arbitration for grievances, and quicker (and additional) paths to advancement.

At times, members' priorities came into conflict. Yet, a carefully cultivated alliance allowed them to achieve a stronger set of gains for members overall than they would have as individual locals.

¹ This public press article draws upon journalistic interviews to draw out and analyze practitioner organizers' reflections on union organizing during the Rutgers strike. Interviews were not conducted as part of a research study, nor under Institutional Review Board guidelines and mandates, because this is a journalistic rather than academic article. This article has not been peer-reviewed. A similar [version of this article](#) was also previously published in *Spectre*.

Lesson 1: Organize far in advance.

Rank-and-file members and union leaders began preparations for this round of negotiations [years](#) before the strike.

Members ran a series of campaigns that built upon one another over several years, growing power for the movement over time. Amy Higer of the adjunct faculty local described organizing three or four years in advance: “We formed an articles committee for what we would like to see in a contract... We did happy hours, socials, knocked on doors.” She also said the local hired an organizer who taught techniques in phone and text banking, as well as using technology to build momentum around campaigns.

Additionally, the year before contract negotiations, the adjunct and full-time faculty locals formed a merger campaign. The locals gathered the required number of signatures, but Rutgers University’s President Holloway ultimately rejected the merger. However, the campaign itself was important because it nurtured closer connections between rank-and-file members within and across the two locals. The campaign also helped management recognize that the locals were a powerful united front.

Lesson 2: Build coalitions and fight together.

Rank-and-file union members and leaders believe that their contract gains would not have been possible without the development of a strong and trusting coalition. Despite different priorities, the three locals were able to support one another and work together. Five contracts for various groups of workers were bargained separately, but workers stood on the picket line together until agreements were reached for all contracts.

Ravi Mill, of the full-time faculty and graduate worker local, said the old adage of “stronger together” holds true. However, hierarchies in the workplace can make it challenging to organize, he said. For example, full-time faculty are paid more than lecturers or graduate workers. Such challenges are important to address-head-on when building coalitions. The Rutgers unions addressed this by ensuring there was representation from workers across all the different job categories.

Creating and sustaining a coalition among stakeholders with a divergence in priorities was not without conflict. For example, Nusrath Yusuf and Erin Santana described how graduate workers sought a stronger set of gains from the resulting contract. Demands for graduate workers included: annual childcare stipends of \$5000, five years of guaranteed funding (including the state healthcare package), the inclusion of a wider range of graduate workers within their bargaining unit, more stable and substantial wage increases, and universal one-year appointment extensions for graduate workers impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Even though they did not receive the desired gains in many of these areas, graduate workers voted to suspend the strike in solidarity with the other workers in the coalition.

The locals also established coalitions with people extending beyond their membership. Santana reported the locals built a [Bargaining for the Common Good](#) coalition with undocumented workers represented by [New Labor](#) and [Cosecha](#) to advance demands for fair compensation for essential workers during the recent Covid-19 pandemic. And they worked in coalition with groups of undergraduate students to elevate demands such as a rent freeze on campus housing and the elimination of other fine- and fee-related debts penalizing students.

Santana said that common good demands benefiting undocumented workers and undergraduate students were dropped during negotiations, which had a negative impact on the coalition-building work. In future negotiations, Santana argued that bargaining locals should prioritize common good demands.

Lesson 3: Prioritize the most precarious workers.

Building a strong coalition across locals with varying degrees of precarity and economic security is often fraught with complex power dynamics. According to Rutgers organizers, the key to reaching consensus among disparate members is for them to agree on what problems they want solved through negotiations.

“You have to have a mindset that we’re in this together,” Higer said. “You somehow have to create the idea... where we all feel like we are getting what we deserve, and being valued.” If there are some members who do not feel valued then the university isn’t doing its job and students ultimately suffer, she said. “We talk a lot about students and what students need.”

In many higher education institutions, it is [challenging](#) to convince tenured workers or those with greater economic advantage and job security to work closely with more precarious workers. They may think they have to give up some of their own gains in order to pull up more economically insecure workers.

Rutgers strike rhetoric directly challenged this assumption. Higer reported that Rebecca Given, who was President of the full-time faculty and graduate worker union, asserted: “If we continue to have cheap labor, for teaching at our university, it’s pulling all of us down. Because they won’t be offering new lines, they’ll hire the cheap labor. So you have to pay people fairly.”

Convincing workers to prioritize the needs of those facing greater precarity and economic insecurity thus centers on creating a clear vision and framing that shows the inherent reliance and interconnections across workers in all parts of the system. Meanwhile, Mill pointed out that the people who were most reliable and active in strike preparations and on the Rutgers picket lines “were the more vulnerable people in the coalition. You know, grad workers, lecturers... We had some stalwart tenured faculty members also, but we need to turn these folks out in greater numbers next time.”

Lesson 4: Prepare a list of “minimum criteria” and stick to it.

Strike periods are heated, and workers didn’t always feel prepared for the myriad pressures they would face. Mill said there was a lot of pressure from management to end the strike urgently: “And that was being communicated to the different chapters and chapter leaders separately, which is kind of a classic negotiation tactic.” He said that management sought to “split people up, try to divide and conquer.”

When engaged in coalitional and simultaneous bargaining processes with multiple locals involved, Mill believes that a key method for avoiding falling into the “divide and conquer” trap is to create a very clear set of minimal criteria for each job category engaged in bargaining before the strike even begins. He said the idea of closing the strike should only be entertained when a minimum set of criteria have been met, as agreed upon by all job categories. “And I don’t think we approached it that way,” he said. “We had a longer list of demands that we wanted implemented in our contract, and they weren’t really weighted.” There is a push to revise this approach in the next round of bargaining.

Lesson 5: Get the students and public on board.

Over 67,000 students attend Rutgers, and so it was important to the striking locals to ensure that they had student and broader public support during the strike.

In this effort, a student coordinator was hired to work directly with Rutgers students. The coordinator worked to link the union with undergraduate students, with the goal of building student support in the time leading up to the strike. Sherry Wolf, senior organizer for the Rutgers AAUP-AFT, says “the undergrads were undoubtedly a huge part of amplifying our strike, standing with our strike.” The undergraduate students took it upon themselves to talk with other students about why they should stand with their professors.

Technology also created opportunities for undergraduate students to communicate with one another and their professors about the strike. They used Reddit, GroupMe, and other mechanisms for sharing information both leading up to and during the strike.

This work galvanizing support for the academic workers paid off. Undergraduate students showed up on the picket lines in large numbers, supporting their striking professors and other academic workers.

Lesson 6: Take the long view: plan for future contracts.

Rutgers union members and leaders emphasize that it is important to approach contract negotiations with the “long view” in mind. While workers seek significant gains in this current contract, they must also understand that the next contract should and will build upon their wins and learning from this round of bargaining. Thus, gains can be viewed as incremental over time and across several contracts.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most significant lesson from the Rutgers strike centers on the true meaning of “union.” Although the three AAUP locals held varying, and at times conflicting, priorities and organizing philosophies, they were able to build a

common alliance and coordinate negotiation processes. As a result, Rutgers workers were able to achieve significant gains for members—particularly benefiting those who were most undercompensated and underrecognized. Rutgers workers stood together, in union, to achieve such results and thus can serve as a model for K-12 and higher education unions broadly, as we continue the long struggle for equity in our workplaces and the public education system.

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