

CONTRACT ACTION TEAM



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WHAT IS A CONTRACT ACTION TEAM?

A Contract Action Team, or CAT, is an internal union network of member activists created to engage and activate members using a two-way pipeline of communication.



The Northampton Association of School Employees (NASE/MTA) is made up of multiple bargaining units, each with a separate contract. Representing teachers, counselors, administrators, nurses, education support professionals (ESPs), clerical workers, custodians, cafeteria workers, and bus drivers, NASE intentionally aligned all their contract expiration dates and joined together to bargain at the same table. Utilizing a form of open bargaining as part of their strategy, they invited members into the room as observers. Among those observing were members of the CAT, thereby enabling them to have first-hand knowledge of the bargaining and establishing a communication network across the district. What made this situation unique was that although not every CAT member of NASE was part of the same bargaining unit or the same employee classification, they became familiar with all the issues and in turn were able to discuss the issues and proceedings of each bargaining session with other members. On any given day, bus drivers could be talking with teachers, teachers with administrators, custodians with nurses, and so on. This cross-communication helped create a stronger sense of solidarity across the union.

Following their most recent successor agreements as the COVID-19 pandemic began, the CAT sprung into action, becoming a hub to assist members with finding an available vaccination appointment when they were extremely scarce.

WHY HAVE A CAT?

If you've been involved with planning an event or action such as a membership meeting or rally; either as a union officer, staff member, association representative (AR), etc.; then you've likely also experienced the frustration of not reaching your targeted response or turnout goals. The union's ability to successfully negotiate a strong collective bargaining agreement (or other advocacy agreement if you don't have bargaining rights) depends upon the union's strength and power. Strength and power derive from a solid foundation of organizing union members and community stakeholders that increases activism, engagement, and solidarity.

By creating vital new roles and delegating responsibilities, the union can position itself to build capacity and develop enough power to win demands. It also enables the union to identify new activists and leaders to continue to build on its successes in the future and promote a strong and sustainable democratic movement.

HOW ARE CATS STRUCTURED?

Every workplace is different, and every local union is different, so no two CATs will look exactly alike or work exactly the same. The structure of a CAT is dependent on a variety of factors, including the size and layout of the facility, shift schedules, existing internal networks, and the goals of the union. The primary goal of a CAT structure is to be able to easily reach all members with effective, one-on-one in-person communication. To successfully accomplish

this, a CAT should be representative of the local worksite—aim for one CAT member per 10 educators (1:10), and one member from every department, work area, or shift. The high ratio of CAT members to educators makes the tasks manageable and creates an opportunity for more people to get involved and become empowered. It also enables a rapid response so that information can be quickly distributed and collected.

WHO SHOULD JOIN A CAT?

A CAT should be composed of members of the local who are respected within their building, department, and/or shift and are interested in being active in the contract campaign. It is also important that a CAT is diverse and representative of the local union membership by including age and gender diversity, people of color, and non-native speakers.

Traditionally, local unions have relied heavily on their ARs and small group of core activists to perform all the work of the union at the building or site level—new member sign-up, representation, communication, recruitment, and advocacy to name a few. Placing such a heavy volunteer burden on a few individuals in addition to their school district job responsibilities has consistently proven ineffective. Additionally, it doesn't allow for increased member involvement and engagement and will result in burn-out in the volunteers who are doing all the work.

A CAT should be entirely separate from the AR structure, empowering more members to get involved and step up as leaders while lightening the load of ARs. Naturally, there may be resistance to these types of changes as there will be some who may not want to relinquish their authority. Change can be difficult and will likely require some tough conversations, but in the long run, it will pay off.

The St. Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE/EdMN) expanded on the concept of the CAT structure and created the Teaching and Inquiring about Greed, Equity, and Racism (TIGER) and the Political Union Member Action (PUMA) teams.





WHAT ARE THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF A CAT?

A CAT is more than just a group that explains issues and informs the membership about activities. It creates two-way communication between the membership, the local union leadership, and the bargaining committee. This two-way communication allows the membership to fully participate in identifying key issues, developing ideas, and suggesting activities for the campaign. Being involved in the process will also lead to more active membership participation.

The CAT structure becomes the eyes, ears, and voice of the local. The two-way communication can serve to:

- provide bargaining updates
- solicit feedback and ideas
- explain the campaign plan
- recruit co-workers to join actions
- maintain the contact list
- track participation
- identify problems and concerns
- dispel rumors
- track employer activity
- reassure and inoculate fearful members
- share information with the leadership and bargaining team
- transition duties to picket captains in the event of a strike

Part of the Sacramento City Teachers Association's (SCTA/CTA) strategy was to position their CAT as part of a larger bargaining team. With the goal of having at least one CAT member in every school within the district, SCTA launched an application process to interview interested candidates prior to selection. They engaged in open bargaining, inviting CAT and local union members, as well as parents and community allies. At times, it was not unusual to have 50-60+ people in the room during bargaining. During caucus, the bargaining team would engage with the CAT members, sharing proposals and counter proposals and asking for feedback. Having a member of the CAT from almost every building enabled SCTA to have a two-way communication pipeline with every single member of the local.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF A CAT CONT.

Beyond the contract campaign, building a CAT and involving the membership will create a stronger and more active local to address future issues and contracts. It is important to maintain the CAT even after the contract is ratified by:

- keeping the communication network active and immediately available for all union activities and issues.
- continually monitoring changes in membership and replacing members who have resigned.
- organizing mini campaigns on issues that arise between contracts and beginning to prepare for the next campaign.

Following the key role that the CAT played in their historic 2019 strike victory, United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA/CTA) recognized the importance of maintaining and sustaining a strong structure. When schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and learning went virtual, a principal at a district school asked teachers to call students who had fallen off the radar, a violation of District Policy. It took an organized effort from the membership, led by the CAT, to stave off the building administration's unreasonable demands. Fortunately, UTLA was able to achieve a strong Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the district, further solidifying their rights. An organized local with strong internal structures will continue to be vital in order to enforce existing agreements and policies as well as address new issues as they come up, because they will come up!

Read more about UTLA's efforts in Labor Notes: ["Los Angeles Teachers Use Contract Action Teams to Win COVID-19 Victory"](#)



