The State's Fortunate 50

Peter Schmalz
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Abstract

[Excerpt] Reaganomics are alive and well at the state and local levels. Not only are funds tight, but the same mean-spirited, anti-worker attitudes that characterized the Reagan administration have become increasingly prevalent among state and local government employers. For much of the 1980’s, politicians were able to satisfy both public sector unions and the taxpayers by negotiating contracts that provided reasonable wage and benefit improvement without busting budgets. Today, most public employers perceive a direct conflict between the needs of their workers and a public attitude that is both anti-tax and anti-government. Like many corporations of the 1980’s, public employers now find it easier to scapegoat workers and public sector unions than to grapple with the real issues of management responsibility and effectiveness.

The consequence is a dramatic change in public sector bargaining. Where negotiations once were focused on achieving gains for workers, they are now all too often dominated by talk of layoffs, privatization, wage freezes and insurance or other benefit give-backs. Public sector unions, which once were able to achieve good contracts through a combination of strong local union leadership and an effective political program, now are joining their brothers and sisters in the private sector in the search for more effective strategies to mobilize their members and to pressure their employers.

The corporate campaign model may be one such tactic. Although the model has been largely developed and used in private sector fights, many of the component parts have been used by successful public sector unions for years. This tactic offers two major advantages for the public sector fights at the bargaining table. The first is that public employers are highly visible and more vulnerable to public pressure than their counterparts in the private sector. Second, corporate campaigns provide methods of putting direct pressure on the employer while the union seeks to activate and energize the membership.

AFSCME Council 31 and Local 3700, representing 2,200 clerical and support workers at the University of Illinois in Champaign, were forced to use nontraditional tactics to successfully negotiate a first contract. Our struggle at the bargaining table demonstrates the effectiveness of corporate campaign-style tactics in the public sector.

Keywords
public sector bargaining, negotiation, Illinois, labor unions

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What’s the most exclusive fraternity at the U. of I.?

"The Fortunate 50"

- They’re the 50 highest paid University employees.
- They all make more than $106,000 a year.
- And they’re all men.

That’s right. The 50 highest paid employees at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign are all men. Their salaries range from $106,500 to $152,500. But that’s not all.

- Of the 120 highest paid U. of I. employees, only 2 are women.
- Of the 160 highest paid U. of I. employees, only 6 are women.

"The Fortunate 50"

Stanley Sandberg  $152,500
William Schoeller  $154,800
Robert Shoemaker  $140,600
Paul C. Laidler  $130,800
~

As the Union representing nearly 2,100 clerical employees on the U. of I. campus (more than 90% of whom are women), we believe it’s time for the University administration to address the inequities in pay. Currently, our salaries average $17,000 a year, 23 percent less than the wages paid to our counterparts who work for the State of Illinois. Meanwhile, University employees on the top end of the scale, who are almost exclusively male, earn wages that are as much as 63 percent higher than the wages paid to the female clerical workers.
Reaganomics are alive and well at the state and local levels. Not only are funds tight, but the same mean-spirited, anti-worker attitudes that characterized the Reagan administration have become increasingly prevalent among state and local government employers. For much of the 1980's, politicians were able to satisfy both public sector unions and the taxpayers by negotiating contracts that provided reasonable wage and benefit improvement without busting budgets. Today, most public employers perceive a direct conflict between the needs of their workers and a public attitude that is both anti-tax and anti-government. Like many corporations of the 1980's, public employers now find it easier to scapegoat workers and public sector unions than to grapple with the real issues of management responsibility and effectiveness.

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*Peter Schmalz is Assistant Director of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 31 based in Chicago, Illinois.*
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FIGHTING BACK THE DECERT

AFSCME won a narrow victory for 2,200 clerical workers at the University of Illinois in August of 1991. The primary issues in the campaign were the differences in wages and working conditions between university employees and other state workers which AFSCME already represented.

When we got to the bargaining table, it was clear that the U of I had no real interest in reaching a settlement and were hostile to the whole concept of parity between university employees and other state workers. Though the employer was willing to meet on a reasonably regular basis, we had to fight about the size of the committee, paid time for negotiators, and even about basic language already agreed to with other unions on campus.

The University's stall tactics worked. An organized group of anti-union employees who had opposed us in the original election were able to collect enough signatures to file a decertification petition as soon as the election bar was lifted. In addition, the University had already announced a four percent increase for other workers on campus. We knew that if we settled for the same percentage, the union would lose the election, but if we held out, the anti-union employees would use it against us, pointing out that other employees on campus had already received their raises.

In order to win the election, we had to raise the stakes at the bargaining table. We now had to publicly define our goals so that
the majority of employees would believe that the goals were both realistic and would represent a significant improvement over the gains of other campus workers. In addition, we knew we could not publicly portray the administration as anti-union. Our bargaining unit consisted largely of conservative women who had a strong, positive identification with the U of I. If we had attacked the University, we would have alienated many potential supporters. Instead, we portrayed the employer as bumbling and reluctant, rather than hostile to our goals. Both of these tactics worked effectively in the election campaign which we won by 20 votes.

Winning the decert campaign, however, did not put us in a strong position at the bargaining table. We had successfully raised worker expectations, but our slim margin of victory reduced the pressure on the University to meet our demands. Moreover, while the election campaign had significantly strengthened our local leadership, the overall membership was sharply divided and decidedly non-militant. We had little or no ability to pressure the employer through worker actions.

If we were going to succeed at the bargaining table, we were going to have to find another way to put pressure on the U of I. This is when we turned to corporate campaign-style tactics.

PRESSURING THE FORTUNATE 50

Staff and local leadership analyzed the University’s weaknesses and the union’s strengths. We came up with three potential employer weaknesses. The first was the University’s own image. Its ability to attract quality students and faculty was dependent on maintaining a strong reputation across the country and the state, so we knew it was extraordinarily sensitive to public criticism.

The second problem area for the University involved its relationship with the Board of Trustees. In the summer of ‘92, we succeeded in convincing the trustees to pass a resolution supporting parity for university workers. To ensure continued support, we targeted two pro-labor candidates for the Board of Trustees in the fall statewide elections, and they both won. With their impending addition to the Board, it was likely that the new chair would be a strong advocate for unions and workers. The University knew that the trustees were likely to become even more assertive about negotiations if it did not settle before then.

The third area of vulnerability for the University was its relationship with the Illinois legislature. The state provides a significant portion of the university budget, including most of the money
designated for nonacademic wage increases. U of I had been reasonably successful in getting its budgets approved over the years, but it had also built up a backlog of resentment because of its unwillingness to be accountable for how it spent the money.

The union’s strengths, aside from good local leadership, were effective research and public relations capabilities, a strong presence and good reputation in the state legislature, and the ability to garner support from some top union and political leaders. We now had all of the ingredients for a corporate campaign, but we needed to find a way to make effective use of the parity issues.

AFSCME had already conducted a substantial amount of research during the organizing campaign. The key elements of our parity arguments at the bargaining table were: our members were paid on average 23% less than their counterparts in state agencies; automatic step increases had been consistently frozen by the U of I while continuing for state workers; most state employees worked a 37½ hour work week while university employees continued to work 40; and the university civil service definition of seniority—in contrast to the state’s definition—left workers vulnerable to layoff if they tried to move up within the system.

When we took a look at the university administration, however, we discovered that the parity issues were reversed. University administrators consistently made significantly more than their state counterparts, even though they had fewer responsibilities. Something else was reversed as well: our bargaining unit was 90% female while 100% of the top 50 administrators were male; further research revealed of the top 120 university administrators, only two were female.

Our opening shot focused public attention on both of these parity issues. We took out full page ads in the local and campus papers asking, “What’s the most exclusive fraternity at the U of I? The Fortunate 50.” The ad listed the administrators with their salaries and dramatized the fact they were all men. Simultaneously, we held a press conference in Springfield where we revealed our research into the parity issues. The ad and the press conference generated immediate and intense interest from the media. We received statewide coverage and dominated talk radio in Champaign for several days. The University’s response, which said in effect that there weren’t enough qualified women around, only added fuel to the fire.

We also were approached by many female state legislators who wanted to know what they could do to help. We had been working key legislative leaders on the issue of budgetary accountability for some time so that became an obvious focal point to direct their anger. The following week the women legislators held a press conference

to announce that they had sent a scathing letter to U of I President Stanley Ikenberry denouncing the university’s treatment of women and threatening support for a line-item budget (which would have severely restricted the University’s historical ability to choose how to spend its money without reporting to the legislature) if corrective action was not taken immediately.

During this period, we began a series of worker job actions which would attract media attention without requiring large numbers of employees to participate. Although many of the employees were not very militant, the leadership, which had become very sophisticated during the decert campaign, understood the importance of making sure the University knew that these were their goals and their fight. They attended most press conferences, organized a postcard campaign, held a bargaining day luncheon at the bargaining table, and presented a giant Christmas card and caroled the U of I president and vice president. Their participation and support were crucial: it demonstrated that this was not just a fight between university and union officials, but one which seriously affected the lives and jobs of university workers.
We also kept the pressure on the Board of Trustees and the university administration both directly and through supportive political and labor leaders. We continued to flood the U of I with Freedom of Information requests asking for such data as minority hiring, administrative perks, and expense account information. We were working through our members to develop a network of support among religious and community leaders, campus organizations, and women's groups who were willing to sign on to an ad showing their support for our bargaining demands. We also were looking at ways to reach out to alumni and grant providers.

But the University had already had enough. Less than two months after we began our campaign, we were able to reach a settlement which addressed all of our bargaining goals. The contract was ratified by more than three to one, and our membership climbed to over 75%. Best of all, our victory gave us the ability to build a stronger, more militant local before the next contract fight.
Although it didn’t occur to us at the time to define our strategy as a corporate campaign, it did include many of the basic ingredients. By focusing intense public pressure on the university’s administrators and with elected officials acting as the stick, we forced the University to agree to issues which we and other unions had been fighting to achieve for more than a decade.

As bargaining in the public sector becomes tougher and tougher, public sector unions are using a variety of new and old tactics to fight to protect our members. If the U of I contract fight is a useful example, applying some of the tactics used by private sector unions in their corporate campaigns may be one road to public sector success.

RESOURCES


Public Service Practice Handbook gives strategic and practical guidance to help rebuild public services, and resist privatization and contracting out. For more information fax request to Public Services International at 011-33-5040-7320.