

A blue-tinted photograph of a two-story house with a porch. The house has horizontal siding and several windows. An American flag is flying from a pole on the porch. The porch has stone pillars and a white railing. In the foreground, there is a large, dense bush. The overall scene is peaceful and well-maintained.

**STRONG UNIONS,
STRONGER COMMUNITIES**

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INTRODUCTION

Across the country, Americans are working longer hours for less money and fewer benefits, despite being more productive than ever. No matter how hard people work, many are finding it more and more difficult to get by and provide for their families, much less take a day off when they are sick or save for retirement. All the while, a handful of CEOs and those who are already rich have seen their salaries and wealth skyrocket.

This is not by accident. Big corporations and the wealthy – along with the politicians who do their bidding – have rigged our economy and our political system against working people.

However, when working people have the freedom to join strong unions and negotiate a fair return for their work, they have the power to help everyone succeed – whether or not they belong to a union.

For instance, when unions are strong, wages are stronger – and not just for union members. When union density was at its height in the middle of the 20th century, so was the middle class. However, [as union density has shrunk since the 1970s, a larger share of income has gone to the top 10 percent](#). According to the Economic Policy Institute, “By most estimates, declining unionization accounted for about a third of the increase in inequality in the 1980s and 1990s.”

Today, union members continue to negotiate for better wages and conditions that have a ripple effect in local economies. But the work does not stop there. Through collective bargaining, union members are scoring victories that help entire communities – like safer nurse staffing levels that help patients and smaller classroom sizes that help students. Together with community partners, unions are also using their collective voice to advocate for policies that benefit all working people – like affordable healthcare and great public schools. Finally, unions are using their resources to provide communities with direct support – whether that is making sure children have access to counselors and drinking water at school or training is available for good jobs.

Put simply: When unions are strong, communities are stronger.

This report looks at numerous case studies where members of labor unions have used their freedom to join strong unions and collective voice to fight for improvements that benefit all working families in communities throughout America. From helping hospitals and airports prepare to respond to the Ebola virus to helping high school students start careers in nursing, labor unions and their members are helping communities across the country prosper.

Over the past several years, corporate special interests have launched unprecedented attacks against the freedom of working people to form strong unions, most recently urging the U.S. Supreme Court to take up a case called *Janus v. AFSCME*, which would further benefit the corporations, wealthy special interests and politicians that have rigged the economy against working people.

The aim of these special interests is clear. In a 10-page fundraising letter from the State Policy Network, a group of conservative think tanks, CEO Tracie Sharp [recently wrote](#) that the goal of the network’s \$80 million campaign was to “defund and defang” unions.

The American people, however, support labor unions by growing margins. According to a [recent Gallup poll](#), more than three in five Americans approve of unions, including 42 percent of Republicans. This is up by five points from 2016 and is the highest percentage since 2003.

The strength of labor unions is critical to fixing the rigged economy and political system by helping working families get ahead. The case studies included in this report are just a few examples of the many ways strong unions are making our communities and our country stronger.

USING COLLECTIVE BARGAINING TO BRING BACK JOBS AND PUBLIC SERVICES

In the years leading up to 2014, Los Angeles, like many large population centers in the country, began a series of extreme budget cuts, which had a significant impact on the delivery of a wide array of public services.

Hiring freezes and early retirement offers reduced the city's total number of employees by 5,000 – which caused a severe strain on those who remained as well as those looking for full-time work with the city. Instead, the city relied on private contractors who employed part-time workers, and public services – everything from trash removal to street repairs – were suffering as a result.

In 2014, the Fix LA Coalition was formed in response to the severe decline in public services, especially in communities of color. The coalition included community organizations and local labor unions such as SEIU 721 and AFSCME District Council 36. Together, these groups pushed for citywide reforms that would help all residents of the city, both union members and non-union workers.

This agenda included returning jobs and public services back to the city, with a special emphasis on hiring and training personnel from local communities. The coalition brought community leaders to City Council hearings to testify on the importance of public services and public-sector employment in the communities where they resided.

“By cutting staff, we have fewer operators able to answer emergency calls, especially on the bilingual line. We are working twice as fast as before – with inadequate staffing to handle the calls. People in crisis are waiting minutes to get their calls answered. That can represent the difference between life and death.”

– Eva Espinoza, 911 operator
[City Council testimony](#), July 2, 2014

In 2015, the Fix LA coalition persuaded the City Council to establish a goal of adding 5,000 jobs by 2018.

TRAINING STUDENTS FOR CAREERS IN NURSING

By 2022, nearly [3.5 million nurses will be needed](#) in the United States. But while the need increases, the number of trained registered nurses is actually decreasing. At the same time, people – and especially young people – across the country are struggling to find good jobs with fair pay.

In New Jersey, members of AFSCME Local 1199J/NUHHCE are helping train the next generation of health care professionals.

The 1199J Training and Development Fund – established in 1987 as a joint labor-management agreement – helps union members develop and maintain the skills needed for career advancement. The Fund also supports programs like the Youth Transitions to Work Certified Nursing Apprenticeship, which helps prepare Newark-area high school juniors and seniors as they start a career in nursing.

The apprenticeship program was designed by a local consortium of employers, educators, and medical professionals. It has seen huge success, with 100 percent employment placement. In 2010, the Fund also established Youth Transitions to Work Physical Therapy Aide Apprenticeship, a pilot program in New Jersey and the first of its kind nationwide.

Candido Perez was the first student accepted into the nursing program in 2008. A graduate of Essex County Vocational Technical High School, he now works as a Certified Nursing Assistant at Saint Barnabas Medical Center and is pursuing his nursing degree at Union County College.

“Working as an entry-level nurse makes me proud. I love working at Saint Barnabas. I have a real opportunity to have a good life.”

– Candido Perez, certified nursing assistant

More trained and qualified health care professionals are needed in New Jersey and nationally because safe staffing levels are critical for patient safety. Several [studies have shown](#) a link between higher registered nurse staffing levels and lower occurrences of hospital-related mortality.

Despite the research, in New Jersey, safe staffing levels have not been updated in decades. Additionally, under Gov. Chris Christie’s administration, an end to state inspections of New Jersey’s hospitals has put patient safety in jeopardy and made it difficult to enforce the safe staffing laws that currently exist.

Not willing to accept reductions in patient safety, AFSCME 1199J/NUHHCE members have responded. Helping to train the next generation of health care professionals, these union members are helping patients get the care they deserve and students find good jobs to help them get ahead.

BARGAINING A UNION CONTRACT THAT SUPPORTS STUDENT SUCCESS

Smaller class sizes, expansion of an innovative home-visit program, and a 25-percent reduction in the time spent on testing and test prep – these were the top priorities of the St. Paul Federation of Teachers at the bargaining table in 2016.

Years before the Minnesota union started negotiating its contract, St. Paul union leaders decided to focus not only on pay and benefits, but on the needs of their students.

“Parents, teachers, support professionals, and community members built relationships around three basic questions: What are the schools our children deserve? Who are the teachers our children deserve? And what is the profession these teachers deserve?”

— Nick Faber, SPFT Vice President

In St. Paul, before the new contract was ratified, more than 39,000 students had access to just 10 licensed media specialists. Schools shared nurses, getting one for just one day a week. And art, music, and physical education programs were rare in some schools.

When the union and the district sat down at the bargaining table, the union insisted that negotiations be open to the public. But after a few months, the school district’s negotiators walked out of bargaining, filing for state mediation. The move to mediation automatically closed negotiations to the public but also opened the door to a possible strike by teachers.

More than 4,000 signatures from parents, students, and community members were delivered to the school board, urging them to settle for the good of students. Teachers and parents joined forces around “walk-in” demonstrations, arriving at school together in a red sea of color-coordinated scarves and hats. Signs were made that said, “St. Paul Children Deserve...” for parents and students to fill in with their answer – like smaller class sizes or less testing.

Just a few days before the SPFT’s scheduled strike vote, teachers and community members met for the largest rally ever at the school district office building. The local union walked into negotiations, hearing the cheers of hundreds of parents and students. No less than 23 hours later, on the morning of February 20, they walked out with a contract agreement, which included provisions on safety and school climate, a commitment to hire more counselors, social workers and nurses, among other victories.

Teachers, parents and students had won on every issue, but local union leaders still consider their contract a “work in progress.” They continue to work with parents and community leaders to co-create solutions that will help all kids succeed.

UNITING TO REFORM CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES

More than 3,000 front-line social workers in SEIU Local 509 led a two-year effort to improve the services available for child safety in Massachusetts. Their goal was to bring the best practices in child social work to Massachusetts. That meant ensuring social workers in the field had mobile communications, bringing state caseloads in line with national standards and updating child social work to best practices.

Peter MacKinnon helped lead the way. Peter was a child protective supervisor with the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families, and is currently serving as president of Local 509. “I see the work my colleagues and I do as the front line for children’s safety in our state,” MacKinnon said. “I chose to pursue a career in social work because I care deeply about helping families provide safe homes for children. That work routinely puts me in difficult situations, situations that call upon the training and tools I’ve been provided through my union. Being a union member allows me to make the most of my job, which benefits both myself and those who I help.”

“The improvements to child protection that we won would not have been possible without the support of my co-workers in the union. We were able to advocate for children and families with one voice, strengthening our message to reach those who could help us create positive change.”

— Peter MacKinnon, social worker

SEIU Local 509 members continue to work together to tackle the state’s caseload crisis head-on, fighting for a host of changes to overhaul misguided policies and to better recruit and retain front-line staff. Because they have a strong voice together on the job, they are able to stand up for the children of Massachusetts.

PARTNERING TO PROVIDE BOOKS FOR KIDS IN NEED

Forty-five percent of our nation's children live in neighborhoods that lack public libraries and stores that sell books, or in homes where books are an unaffordable or unfamiliar luxury. At the same time, two-thirds of the schools and programs in our nation's lowest-income neighborhoods cannot afford to buy books at retail prices. That means that, today, 32.4 million American [children go without books](#) — even as study after study has shown that literacy is crucial to success in school, future earning potential, and the ability to contribute to the nation's economy.

For the past 20 years, First Book, a national non-profit organization, has helped to provide access to new books for children in need. To date, First Book has distributed more than 120 million books and educational resources to programs and schools serving children from low-income families throughout the United States and Canada.

Six years ago, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) launched a partnership with First Book, becoming the organization's largest partner. The labor union has worked with the organization to grow the First Book network from 30,000 classrooms, programs, and schools to more than 160,000, distributing nearly five million books directly to educators, parents and students.

“Some of the kids were absolutely overwhelmed. They'd never had books like that. One little girl was coming to get pizza, and she would not even leave her book — she made me hold it for her until she could get her pizza and ice cream. I tell you what, I just wanted to cry.”

– Vi Parramore, president of the Jefferson County AFT,
After [a book distribution in Jefferson County, Alabama](#)

AFT and First Book are building dynamic partnerships across the country, from New York City to McDowell County, West Virginia. In addition, the partners have worked together in the wake of tragedy to help students, families and school communities recover. After superstorm Sandy, AFT and First Book delivered tens of thousands of books and supplies to hard-hit students, and in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, AFT and First Book are partnering to bring materials and supplies to kids and educators devastated by this disaster. And now, following Hurricane Harvey, AFT and First Book partnered with the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation to launch the Essentials for Kids Fund to provide books and basic need supplies to educators and students impacted by the storm. This effort is part of a national Essentials for Kids Fund to provide books, educational resources and basic-needs items for educators and their students in districts where the public schools are severely underfunded.

In addition, AFT and First Book have been working together to help diverse authors publish their books and increase the availability of books with characters and storylines that children from any culture, neighborhood or family background can relate to.

Together, AFT and First Book aim to build on the empowerment that comes from owning that first book to create lifelong readers and lifelong learners.

PREPARING HOSPITALS AND AIRPORTS TO RESPOND TO THE EBOLA VIRUS

Several years ago, there were a few cases of the Ebola virus in the United States. While no new cases have been diagnosed since then, according to researchers, it is likely that the United States will once again face the threat of Ebola.

As the Ebola outbreak continued to grow in 2014, members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Committee of Interns and Residents became concerned that the plans for dealing with an Ebola-infected patient at their medical facilities were insufficient. Through joint labor-management committees at hospitals across the country, they voiced their concerns. The hospital administrators agreed to work with them to develop a plan that would keep both hospital staff and patients safe.

Several months later, when Bellevue Medical Center in New York admitted its first patient showing signs of Ebola, the plan was put into action and no one in the facility ended up infected. This is in contrast to the nonunion, privately owned Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital Dallas where [several hospital staff](#) were infected after treating a patient with Ebola.

“It was great to be recognized. For all of us — the doctors, the nurses, everybody. We all worked together. It means a lot to be able to help people. That’s part of our job and to be acknowledged that way felt great — especially for us medical technologists because we’re in the background. It was a real privilege to be chosen.”

– Miguella De La Cruz, lead medical technologist

[After healthcare workers from Bellevue were honored at New York’s City Hall for their efforts](#)

Soon after, SEIU and several of its locals began a series of trainings for airport workers such as cabin cleaners and wheelchair attendants – employees at risk of Ebola exposure should an infected person travel via airplane to the United States. The trainings were so successful that the union received a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to conduct similar trainings that continued into 2016.

While Ebola may come back to the United States, thanks to the actions of SEIU members who –through the power of their union – pushed for increased safety measures, the spread of this deadly disease hopefully will be better contained.



Frontline healthcare workers from Manhattan’s Bellevue Medical Center were honored at New York’s City Hall March 10 for their Ebola preparedness and response work.

FIGHTING FOR RACIAL JUSTICE IN A UNION CONTRACT

The American Labor Movement and the Civil Rights Movement have a long history of working together for economic and racial justice.

In 1968, almost fifty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. marched alongside striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee who demanded the freedom to join a union. Their union gave them a voice and the power in numbers to resist racist so-called “right-to-work” legislation that to this day drives wages down for working people and people of color. Fast forward to 2017 and unions continue to partner with civil rights organizations and leaders, decrying the kind of violence that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia and calling out politicians who defend white supremacy.

In 2014, public service workers at University of California campuses and hospitals, members of AFSCME Local 3299, formed a Racial Justice Working Group to fight for racial justice through their union by surfacing individual experiences of discrimination, identifying systemic issues, and using collective bargaining to tackle on-the-job discrimination.

After forming the working group, the local union convened workshops on racial justice and reconvened an Immigration Committee. They also connected with community groups and coalitions to participate in a variety of campaigns for racial justice.

In 2017, as they were preparing to negotiate a new contract, the bargaining team surveyed members and drafted proposals. In addition to protecting benefits and increasing wages, the proposals the members presented to the local CEOs and chancellors included creating hire-and-training programs for low-income people of color who live in the communities near the worksites, as well as policies that build on past nondiscrimination provisions the union had won to protect immigrant workers.

“When we talk to co-workers about the racial justice demands, we’re connecting them to a bigger picture — the new threats to our communities and national right-wing efforts to divide and destroy our labor movement.”

**– Luster Howard, truck driver;
Maricruz Manzanarez, senior custodian;
and Seth Patel, local’s lead negotiator**
[Labor Notes](#), March 15, 2017

As of this report’s publication, contract negotiations are ongoing. In putting forward these demands, members of AFSCME Local 3299 are carrying on the legacy of unions fighting for racial justice.

TAKING ACTION TO PROTECT PATIENTS

No hospital patient wants a long wait after they press the nurse call button, but when the nurse's caseload is too high, that is what happens. And no one wants to arrive at the hospital in crisis only to learn that it has cut the services the patient needs. But all too often, hospitals put profits before patients by cutting staffing levels to the bare minimum and outsourcing vital services that communities rely on for health and safety.

In 2013, nurses, health professionals and service workers represented by three American Federation of Teachers (AFT) locals at Lawrence and Memorial Hospital in New London, Connecticut, were locked in a fight with hospital management to protect patients and workers.

In an effort to boost profits, the hospital had proposed moving or cutting vital services – including infectious disease care, a diabetes center and occupational health services. Union members – understanding the vital role of these services to the community – demanded that the hospital preserve those services and ensure safe staffing levels in all units so patient care would not suffer.

In November 2013, 800 union workers went on strike – the first strike in L&M's more than 100-year history.

The workers were not alone on the picket line. A community coalition stood strong with them to protect services and demand the hospital deliver safe conditions for workers and patients alike.

“The patients we serve need us at their bedside, but we need to be sure they're not being shortchanged on the quality care they deserve going forward.”

– Barbara Sadowski, registered nurse

In the end, the union members and community allies won. The new contracts ensured safe staffing levels for all health professionals, protected vital patient services, created a first-ever set of core principles for hospital management, and guaranteed a base minimum wage for all hospital employees – whether they were union members or not.

In the years since, the AFT members at L&M and their community allies have stood together time and again to protect patients and workers. When Yale-New Haven Health Systems mounted a takeover of L&M in 2016, the unions and community coalition ensured that the process was transparent, had sufficient oversight, and key services were once again protected from closure as part of the merger.

WINNING PAID SICK LEAVE FOR ALL WORKERS

Across the country, workers often do not take off work when they are sick because they cannot afford to lose pay for the day or risk termination. Labor unions are on the forefront of the fight for paid sick days, successfully advocating for policies that help all working people.

In 2014, the Fair Shot for All coalition was founded in Oregon. The coalition was a new experiment to show how unions and community organizations could come together and fight for racial justice and worker rights at the same time – using their combined power to win big on both fronts.

The coalition’s membership includes the state’s largest unions, including AFT Oregon, SEIU Locals 503 and 49, AFSCME District Council 75, and the Oregon Education Association, as well as the most respected racial justice advocacy organizations in the state.

In 2015, the Fair Shot orchestrated a successful campaign to push for higher wages, paid sick days, better retirement security, and nondiscrimination protections, among other priorities.

That year, Oregon legislators passed four key pieces of legislation to expand economic and racial justice for Oregon working people and families. One piece of legislation ensured five paid sick days for every full-time worker in firms with 101 or more employees, making Oregon the fourth state in the nation to pass paid sick day legislation.

Other pieces of legislation included a state-managed retirement plan that employers must make available to employees; a “ban the box” law prohibiting employer discrimination against job applicants with previous convictions; and a state ban on police profiling that actually held local jurisdictions accountable.

“This visionary agenda was put forward by the ‘Fair Shot’ coalition and I want to make sure we thank everyone who worked so hard to make our state a better place for working Oregonians.”

— **Kate Brown, governor of Oregon**
[Remarks at Fair Shot Bill signing](#), July 13, 2015

The coalition has not stopped since. The Fair Shot priorities in 2017 include paid family and medical leave, ensuring all children have health insurance coverage, and helping families stay in their homes.

A VICTORY FOR STUDENTS: ENSURING LOW-INCOME KIDS HAVE TIME TO PLAY

Across the country, educators and parents have recognized how the No Child Left Behind-era of high-stakes, high-stress testing has altered their children’s school day, lengthening the hours that students stay in their seats and squeezing the minutes they swing across playgrounds.

However, research shows that what happens on the playground as kids negotiate games and navigate their world is important for social and emotional learning. In fact, one study found that 6-year-olds who engage more in unstructured play are better decision makers and more capable of social relationships than their more structured counterparts.

“As elementary school educators, we know how important playtime is to young students. That’s why we used our collective power at the bargaining table to guarantee equitable access to recess for all students.”

— Michael Tamayo, 4th grade teacher

In Seattle, Washington, there was no district-level policy on recess. Additionally, a 2014 National Public Radio investigation of recess in Seattle found stark divisions between wealthier, predominantly white schools and those serving mainly students of color and low-income families. While the more privileged group would get upwards of 45 minutes of recess a day, low-income, black students typically had no more than 15 minutes of unstructured play. Sometimes, they had none.

In 2016, a coalition of Seattle teachers, along with partners in Seattle public schools formed to bring back recess to the school day. They organized a coalition of educators, parents and community leaders to stand up for student recess time. These efforts, in part, led to a five-day strike, after which the school district and members of the Seattle Education Association agreed to a guaranteed minimum time for recess for elementary school students.

Specifically, the new contract ensures that all of Seattle’s elementary students have the opportunity for at least 30 minutes per day of unstructured recess. How those 30 minutes are allocated is up to the classroom teacher. The contract does not bar educators from using recess for academic or disciplinary reasons. If teachers want to use that time to tutor a student, or do some problem-solving related to discipline, they can.

As Fred Rogers – also known as Mister Rogers – once said, play is the “work of childhood.”

ADVOCATING FOR MORE SAFETY DURING EMERGENCIES

Members of Uniformed EMS Officers Local 3621 put their lives on the line daily to help New Yorkers during emergencies. Yet, like many city workers, they have struggled with understaffing.

To address this situation, the local union filed and won a grievance to address understaffing and provide more safety for their members and the public, especially during emergencies.

In the grievance, the local union claimed that the New York City Fire Department violated the collective bargaining agreement by failing to adhere to mandated ratios of supervisors to subordinates – also known as “manageable span of control” – as required by the Fire Department’s own Incident Command System.

At the time, the required ratio was one EMS lieutenant for every 20 EMTs or paramedics spread throughout several neighborhoods and communities. During emergencies, such as superstorm Sandy, the ratio increased to a staggering one officer for every 30 or 40 EMTs or paramedics.

The local union argued that the shortage of personnel puts New Yorkers and union members in serious danger and that the ratio should adhere to the New York City Fire Department standard of one officer for every seven EMTs or paramedics.

“Maintaining an effective span of control is critical to providing the safety, coordination, and support that the members operating in the field require to do their job and keep New Yorkers safe.”

– Vincent Variale, Local 3621 President

On September 23, 2012, an arbitrator heard the case and agreed with the union. The arbitrator ruled that the fire department violated its own rules and regulations regarding span of control issues.

The decision ordered the fire department to initiate a review of span-of-control issues and to implement any revisions necessary to be in compliance with department regulations.

Today, the local union continues to work with city officials and the fire department to improve response times by bringing in more personnel and more resources.

NEGOTIATING TO SECURE CRITICAL RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS

When the Great Recession hit Pennsylvania's budgets, Republicans and austerity hawks used the crisis as a weapon against Philadelphia's public schools – slashing the district's budget and pushing a privatization agenda on Philadelphia's families.

Deep budget cuts slashed services for students and left teachers and staff scrambling to fill the gaps. School libraries were shuttered, and nurses and guidance counselors were removed, with a single nurse or counselor responsible for covering as many as seven schools. In many schools, water fountains were shut off because the district could not afford the maintenance necessary to keep the water safe for kids to drink.

As they fought through desperate conditions to serve their students, teachers and staff of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) were also fighting for their work conditions. A bitter fight with the district left them for more than four years without a contract, and five years without a raise.

In 2017, the city neared a contract agreement. But before they settled on pay and benefits for members, the union insisted on contract agreements to restore critical resources for students.

When the district proposed removing language requiring nurses and counselors from the contract – proposing instead a handshake agreement that these positions would be staffed – the union refused to budge. When the district insisted that there was simply no way to ensure every floor of every school had safe drinking water, PFT's bargaining team and members stood their ground.

In the end, the union's steadfast commitment won the day. Under the contract, every floor of every school in the city is required to have a safe-hydration station – whether a fountain or a water cooler – to ensure students have safe drinking water. The contract guarantees at least one full-time guidance counselor in every school to ensure students have support and care when they need it. And there is now at least one full-time nurse in every Philadelphia public school.

“I think every teacher and every student will benefit from it. As a teacher, this contract makes me feel appreciated. I feel I can give even more of myself to my students, and at the end of the day, that's the end goal.”

– Kelsey Green, middle school teacher
[Philadelphia Inquirer, June 18, 2017](#)

The union refused to take an offer that failed to meet the needs of their students – and in the end, Philadelphia's students will have healthier, safer schools with professionals to look after their learning and their well-being.

HOLDING BANKS ACCOUNTABLE

SEIU Local 1021 has injected predatory public financing issues into its budget and bargaining campaigns in multiple geographies and industries. In Oakland, the local incorporated these issues in both inside activity at the bargaining table as well as an outside campaign to take the fight directly to the doorsteps of the banks and financial institutions.

Members led the charge to highlight the role banks played in ripping off taxpayers by avoiding taxes and issuing “toxic swaps.” These and other bad deals that lined their pockets while starving our communities of desperately needed resources to invest in services.

In 2012, the local participated, along with community allies, in efforts to get the Oakland (Calif.) City Council to unanimously pass a bill demanding that Goldman Sachs renegotiate its bad swap deal. Local 1021 is also part of a community coalition that is exploring how cities such as Richmond, California, can use eminent domain to provide mortgage debt relief to underwater homeowners and stabilize local communities. This will save the average underwater homeowner more than \$600 each month—money that could be spent locally to stimulate the economy and create jobs.

“It’s not fair that hardworking people consistently get the short end of the stick while the powerful go unchecked. In an economy rigged against everyday people by big banks, CEOs and powerful corporate interests, unions like mine are giving working people a voice to level the playing field. Strong unions are needed now more than ever because they give people like me – people who play by the rules and pay our fair share – the power in numbers we need to protect our families and our future.”

— Felipe Cuevas, heavy equipment mechanic

IMPROVING THE CULTURAL CLIMATE ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES AT THE BARGAINING TABLE

When graduate employees in the Graduate Teaching Fellow Federation (GTFF) at the University of Oregon headed for the bargaining table in 2015, they did not just bring bread-and-butter issues – they also set out to use the bargaining process to improve the campus climate.

Graduate employees see the campus as students as well as educators and scholars, and their unique perspective helped bring about a substantial shift at the university, and across the state.

Several members of the bargaining committee had experienced first-hand the challenges that can arise when a class engages on a difficult topic – like politics, religion, history, or race – and passions run high. Worse, they had seen the damage that can be done to individual students and graduate fellows, especially those from vulnerable populations, when difficult moments are not addressed effectively. The residual effects can derail the campus climate for an entire classroom, and have lasting negative impacts on students and grad fellows alike.

On the other hand, when those moments are handled with cultural sensitivity and a steady hand, they often provide learning moments and opportunities for students on all sides of an argument both to be challenged and supported on campus.

When the GTFF went to the bargaining table, they brought a simple, but radical, proposal: They asked the university to provide cultural competency training to all graduate fellows during orientation.

After tense negotiations, the university agreed. Not only did GTFF members receive the first round of training before the 2016/17 academic year, but the contract formed a five-member advisory board with three graduate fellow members to continually improve and expand the training.

“We’re really excited about the trainings because it’s something that we pushed for really hard in order to make our campus safer for graduates and undergraduates.”

– Shawna Meechan, former president of GTFF
[Daily Emerald, July 8, 2016](#)

FUNDING INNOVATION TO BUILD 21st-CENTURY SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

The American Federation of Teachers' (AFT) Innovation Fund is partnering with districts and cities to create multiple pathways and diverse options for children to succeed.

Career and technical education (CTE) is a proven way to engage students and build capacity in critical workforce areas. Under the Promising Pathways grant from the AFT Innovation Fund, educators, school districts, community colleges, city governments and business groups are collaborating to support CTE in five cities – Peoria, Illinois; Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Miami and New York.

In each city, AFT is working to expand CTE pathways that match the local labor market. The goal is to create a human pipeline, connecting students, the skills and knowledge they need, and the available jobs of today and tomorrow. Students get career and college options, and employers get employees with great qualifications. The program has successes big and small.

In Pittsburgh, the partnership helped launch the Emergency Response Technology program at Westinghouse Academy, a program that prepares high school students for jobs in public safety fields – providing students with opportunity and helping staff critical city roles with Pittsburgh community residents.

In Peoria, the Pathways to Prosperity program has expanded CTE opportunities and created a dual-credit program, where students can earn post-secondary credits in high school while studying Cisco engineering, nursing and child development – preparing students for well-paying jobs and building a workforce that will support the city into the future.

Community schools that focus on children's well-being and engaged learning offer opportunity to educate and nourish the whole child. In 2016, AFT's Innovation Fund launched programs with Texas AFT; Daly City, Calif.; and Rome, N.Y. to build and expand community school projects that incubate and grow educational strategies to give kids and families the support they need to thrive – especially for disadvantaged children.

“The funds provided by AFT’s Innovation Fund opened so many opportunities for these kids—here and beyond the classroom.”

**—Angela Mike, Executive Director,
Pittsburgh Public Schools Excellence for All**

