

Bargaining for the Common Good

by Lily Ryan

In February, thousands of janitors in the Twin Cities walked off their jobs. This strike, led by members of SEIU 26, was far from ordinary. Community members from groups like the Minnesota Youth Climate Strike, MN350, and Sierra Club joined with SEIU 26 to demand healthy jobs and a livable planet. Together, this coalition waged what may be the first formal labor strike to combat climate change, showing the power of bargaining as a force for the common good.

Collaboration between labor and community organizations, termed “Bargaining for the Common Good (BCG)” is not new. At its height, the American labor movement bargained expansively, and unions centered the concerns of both workers and their communities as they bargained with employers. More recently, public-sector employees, particularly teachers, have taken up common good bargaining, recognizing the power of partnering with communities in coalitions to win at the bargaining table and, more importantly, integrating broad community demands into union contracts. In the face of a struggling labor movement, increasing stratification of wealth, austerity and reductions in public services, Bargaining for the Common Good has emerged as a powerful tool to give voice to workers and communities.

Successful Bargaining for the Common Good campaigns begin long before negotiations start at the bargaining table. The power of these campaigns stems from partnerships between unions and community organizations. In recognizing an alignment of values and interests, union and community partners work together to design demands and campaigns focused on transforming whole communities and centering racial justice. As the campaigns have developed, they have forged new and powerful partnerships to take on entrenched, monied interests in a broad fight for working families and in particular communities of color.

As the BCG movement continues to grow, network partners have created a tool to build transformative campaigns at the local level by collecting union contracts from across the country and mapping them by industry, expiration, and type. This map serves as a tool for activists to build stronger campaigns at the local, state, and national level in order to coordinate



graphic: Bargaining for the Common Good

demands for the common good as we work to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The map also includes information on grassroots worker organizing campaigns and new unionization activity as well as state and municipal budget cycles to contextualize labor union and worker organizing as part of a broader fight. Anyone who would like to view the map can visit BCG’s website at www.bargainingforthecommongood.org/

As our communities confront the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic crisis, our movements should look to the examples of coalitions in Chicago, St. Paul, and other common good campaigns across the country, for a blueprint of how we can win the fight for the cities and communities our families need and deserve. Now as millions of educators face the terrifying choice between losing their jobs or returning to classrooms only to endanger themselves, their students, and their communities, the model of past BCG campaigns is increasingly relevant to their collective struggle.

Before COVID, many of our communities were already in crisis, facing the combined threats of climate change, unaffordable housing, and the privatization of public services. The pandemic has dramatically exposed these inequities and injustices. We must use this moment to come together and build power in our communities to expose those who continue to benefit while we suffer. We must also transform the system to expand equity and prosperity.

Our country and our movements already look very different only a few months after the ground-breaking strike in Minnesota. Yet, now, more than ever, brave, bold, and innovative campaigns like those of SEIU 26 and their allies give us a pathway for broad progressive change that will lead to the future we all deserve.

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BCG Campaigns

BCG campaigns in education have gained the most traction in recent years. Thousands of teachers and staff who are members of local unions in cities across the country have partnered with community organizations to fight for themselves, their students and communities. In Los Angeles, teachers, supported by a diverse community coalition, struck in 2019 for racial justice and educational equity. Later in 2019, the Chicago Teachers Union led a strike of school employees to challenge the buyout of Chicago and fight for a range of fixes to the challenges facing Chicago’s students, from smaller class sizes to more affordable housing.