**Contract Action Team (CAT)**

**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.

**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, 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 which 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 for the future along with a stronger and sustainable democratic movement.

*The Northampton Association of School Employees (NASE/MTA) is made up of multiple bargaining units, each with their own separate contract. Representing teachers, counselors, administrators, nurses, education support professionals (ESP), 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 what was going on in bargaining and establishing a communication network across the district. What made this situation unique was that although not every CAT member of NASE were part of the same bargaining unit or the same employee classification, they became familiar with all the issues and in turn were able to talk to anyone about those issues and what was happening during each bargaining session. On any given day, they could have bus drivers 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 early on.*

**CAT Structure**

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 goals of the union.

The primary purpose of a CAT structure is to be able to easily reach all members with effective, one-on-one in-person communication. In order 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 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.

*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.*

**Who should be a part of the CAT?**

The CAT should be composed of members of the local who are respected within their building, department, and/or on their shift, and are interested in being active in the contract campaign. It is also important that the CAT is diverse and representative of the local union membership. This should include a varying age range, gender diversity, people of color, and those who speak different languages.

Traditionally, local unions have relied heavily on their ARs and small group of core activists to do everything – new member sign-up, representation, communication, recruitment, and advocacy to name a few. Placing such a heavy volunteer responsibility on a few individuals in addition to doing their school district job has consistently proven to be ineffective. Additionally, it doesn’t allow for increased member involvement and engagement and will cause burn-out of those few who are doing all of the work.

The 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 some 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.

**CAT Roles and Responsibilities**

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

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

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

*Part of the Sacramento City Teachers Association’s (SCTA/CTA) strategy was to utilize their CAT to be a part of a larger bargaining team. With the goal of having at least one CAT member in every single school within the district, they opened up an application process where those interested had to be interviewed 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 counterproposals 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.*

Beyond the contract campaign, building a CAT and involving the membership will create a stronger and more active local to deal with future issues and contracts. It is important to maintain the CAT even after the contract is ratified. Instead, continue to work to keep the communication network active and immediately available for all union activities and issues. Continually check to make sure no members have dropped out and replace them if they have. Use it to organize mini campaigns on issues between contracts and begin 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. This proved to be a worthwhile endeavor when a principal at one of the schools within the district asked teachers to call students who had fallen off of the radar after schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and learning went virtual, 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.”*](https://labornotes.org/blogs/2020/04/los-angeles-teachers-use-contract-action-teams-win-covid-19-victory)