

THE UFT CONTRACT – A TOOL FOR ORGANIZING?

The contract results from the UFT's collective bargaining with the NYCDOE. Like all contracts, it is a legal document, so the specific wording is very important for application.

Why do we want a contract?

Employers are legally allowed to make all decisions regarding employment and working conditions. In the absence of a contract, the only legal restrictions on what decisions are allowed are contained in employment law (federal, state, and local). Employees of course are interested in additional limitations on what they might be asked to do at work. In the absence of a contract, managers can assign workers to do anything for any pay, with the workers' only recourse being to quit.

Why is the contract so long?

The contract essentially details what administration is NOT allowed to do. The default decision-making power lies with the administration. Sometimes the wording in the contract is vague and open to interpretation because the union was not strong enough to get more specific wording. This is a sign of management strength and union weakness. Sometimes you will hear people describe the length of the contract as annoying red tape that interferes with educators' abilities to teach effectively. People who are saying this believe that administrators will act in the best interests of students, and that the union will not. It is anti-union propaganda. If you believe this, then you probably wouldn't be at this workshop. That said, I wouldn't want to defend this contract as so incredibly great. It *should* be stronger given its length!

What does it mean for a chapter to be "organized"?

An organized chapter has members who are aware of their own and each other's rights, who act in solidarity to advocate for and defend each other's rights ("An injury to one is an injury to all"), and collectively try to bring about the best possible working conditions for themselves, which are the learning conditions of our students. This activity includes a lot of conversation among members: sharing knowledge about current working conditions and potential contractual violations, raising ideas for how working conditions can be improved. These conversations can and should take place daily in an informal way, and at regular chapter meetings. Actions include collectively agreeing to raise issues at consultation meetings, filing grievances, and taking other symbolic actions at work.

How can the contract be used to organize a strong chapter?

The existence of a contract is not enough to make the union strong (otherwise we would see a very different balance of power in our schools). The contract is a *tool* for organizing, and is only as strong as the union makes it by taking action to defend the rights it contains. Members need to meet, talk, and be willing to act collectively. The contract gives people confidence that things can be won, that they have certain rights. Knowledge of the contract encourages people to participate and speak out. Often, people get involved when they have something at stake themselves at the workplace. Putting individual issues in the context of a collective bargaining agreement increases perception of the power and potential of collective action. It focuses attention on the rights we already technically have and that can be more easily and successfully advocated for in the short term. People like to win ☺

How can the contract be used to keep a chapter disorganized?

The contract can make members pessimistic about union power (often rightly so!) if a right is not clearly spelled out. Some can react by giving up hope and concluding nothing can be done. Too many chapter leaders seem to understand their job primarily as telling members what cannot be won, what rights they don't have, especially as our rights are weakened in successive contracts. These "reality checks" don't exactly inspire excitement about the possibilities of collective action! Problematically, the UFT has moved increasingly toward cooperation with management, removing many disputes from the grievance process, and toward joint UFT-DOE committees. Some conditions that individual members previously had the authority to grieve are now only actionable by the chapter leader. On this topic, see Marian Swerdlow's excellent blog post on the MORE website (search "A Contract for Collaboration with the DOE"). If members do not see their own activity as relevant to the protection of our rights, they are less likely to become involved. The contract can be used as evidence that our working conditions are settled, and all that is required is the bureaucracy of the UFT as a service organization to address any concerns. This approach is likely to end up with a passive, disorganized chapter.

The contract is a tool for organizing, but also a potential limitation. Having explicit conversations about these different possibilities can be an avenue for moving members toward thinking about getting better contracts in the future and what is required to make that happen: increasing acts of solidarity and militancy and making the union more democratic and participatory.