Union Democracy: Representing our Peeps

By Dan LaBonte, PSU Member

I couldn’t believe it when I heard that PSU has almost 2,000 members at our Amherst and Boston campuses. If you are anything like me, it makes you wonder, how can the union engage and empower so many members across both campuses? How can PSU transform a static number into hundreds of voices acting in solidarity towards a common goal?

Enter the UMass Amherst Delegate Council (DC) and the UMass Boston Area Representatives. Delegates and representatives are elected and hold the primary function of acting as liaisons between union leadership and members. By building relationships, communicating union information, and making referrals for action, each delegate and representative serves and supports up to 25 colleagues, or “peeps” as they are fondly called on the Boston campus. As UMB organizer Mary Jo Connelly puts it, representatives and delegates “help explain issues, convey member perspectives and concerns, and develop strategies and tactics for member engagement.” UMA currently has 70 delegates and UMB has 19 representatives, many of whom attend monthly or bimonthly meetings to gather pertinent and timely updates.

Although UMA delegates take a unique approach to their roles, central themes exist within the DC, namely providing active support and fostering strong community. Jules Bannister, delegate and PSU membership committee chair, says that the DC offers a “direct way for the voices of members to be heard by leadership. We [delegates] act as the eyes and ears for our areas and can communicate needs, wishes and concerns. Without delegates, PSU could not reflect the community it serves.” Kevin Skelly, delegate in information technology, will tell you that the DC serves as a “hub for activism” when a unified message needs to be delivered to university administration and within the larger community. Kenn Hannah, also serving as an information technology delegate, affirms, “An active DC keeps the membership involved and shows that the union is active.”

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Development & Alumni Relations delegate at UMA Samm Smith recently shared with me the impact that can be made at the department and individual level. As a delegate and bargaining committee member, Smith was able to assist colleagues who were seeking equity and consistency around the implementation of specific processes outlined in the PSU contract. Smith says, “Being able to make that kind of difference for a number of people in my office showed me the value of being a member of the Delegate Council and the impact one person can have on employee power and solidarity.”

Similarly, on our Boston campus, UMB area representatives also have examples of how they have supported their peeps at both the individual and community level. On campus for more than 30 years, UMB area representative Wendy Lanchester has experienced several rounds of contract negotiations, institutional budget challenges, furloughs and layoffs, and various changes to union structures and policies. When staff are confused or overwhelmed, Lanchester provides a welcoming and clarifying voice. Likewise, UMB area representative Martin Hansen-Verma believes that area representatives are able to personalize the union experience for others and make approaching the union easier. Hansen-Verma explains “by working side by side” with our peeps, “there is always a familiar face and someone there to support you.”

Protest and Presidential Silence at UMass Boston Convocation

By Peter Tattlebaum, PSU member

Heavy police presence, no presidential address, and an angry message from union members marked the 2018 Fall Convocation at UMass Boston held September 20. Frustrated with the administration’s unwillingness to bargain in good faith, campus union members and students sent a clear message: it is not acceptable to balance the campus budget on the backs of those not responsible for it spinning out of control. Specifically, the Boston campus community is rejecting dramatically higher parking fees to pay for the replacement of a shoddily built structure.

The protest in the packed hall was scheduled to begin when UMass President Marty Meehan came to the podium. That was to be the moment union leaders were going to deliver petitions with more than 5,000 signatures. “Greetings from the University, President Marty Meehan” was listed as the second item on the agenda but Meehan failed to utter a word.

While Interim Chancellor Katherine Newman led the convocation, patience ran out and union members rose from their seats and delivered the petitions to her. Then, a marching line of protestors chanted “Whose university? Our university!” followed after 10 minutes by the more direct chant of “We want Marty.” Seated at the front of the stage Meehan never moved and his lack of action spoke volumes.

After 14 minutes, the chanting and marching subsided. Led by members of the PSU, this civil disruption forced the UMass administration to hear union and student voices in a public forum. The impact of the protest was immediate, as work on the parking Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) finally began the day after the protest.

“Management had been unwilling to include in the MOA the stipulation that they would not increase parking fees at the West Garage during the bargaining process,” said Anneta Argyres, president of PSU Boston. Within six weeks the contract was ratified. Does that mean that we’ve won the fight to stop parking rate increases? No. But it does show that through collective action we can get management to moderate their positions.

Parking bargaining coalition student representative Sam Bartlett, left, and Faculty Staff Union member Jeff Melnick presented their sentiments at convocation.
YOUR UNION AT WORK: Compensatory and Flextime

By Jo Martone and Meg Smith, PSU members

The hard won 2017–2020 contract makes significant improvements in the areas of compensatory time and flextime, two working conditions that are often misunderstood, and more importantly, denied to PSU members. Our new contract includes acknowledgement by management that comp time is a benefit while the contract defines excessive workloads. The language now clearly states that requests for either comp time or flextime cannot be unreasonably denied.

University management has agreed that exempt staff must be compensated with paid time off when a workload requires a member to work beyond 40 hours a week. Supervisors are now required to make every effort to grant an employee earned comp time. An employee must work 2.5 hours beyond the contracted work week of 37.5 hours before becoming eligible for comp time.

Excessive Workload Indicators

- working extra hours each week for more than two months
- having a day of comp time expire after one year of being accrued
- having one week of comp time unused for four months

Staff is further protected by contract language that states deadlines and goals must be reasonable within a regular workweek and with currently available resources. Comp time is not the exclusive test for workload issues. An exempt staff member might not be earning comp time, but may still have an unreasonable workload.

For flextime, a staff member can change work hours within a two-week period, with approval by a supervisor. For example, if you work on a Saturday you may ask to take off the following Friday.

There are no statistics available to indicate how many PSU members use comp time and flex time, as most of these instances are not formally recorded.

Tips for PSU Members Seeking Comp Time

1. A supervisor must approve work beyond 40 hours in one week.
2. PSU member should document when the extra hours were worked and what the work involved.
3. Total comp hours must be recorded on time and on attendance sheets.

Questions?

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Definitions:

Compensatory time, referred to as comp time, is paid time off given to a PSU member instead of overtime pay. Rather than paying employees time and a half in overtime pay, the member gets paid time off from work, equivalent to the amount of time of extra hours worked, minus 2.5 hours.

Flextime refers to a flexible schedule, such as hours other than the usual 9-to-5 work day. Compressed work weeks are a form of flextime.

Note about non-exempt staff:

Per federal law, non-exempt staff must be compensated for every minute that they work for the university. Non-exempt staff in Unit A have the option of getting cash for their additional hours, or comp time by mutual agreement. Comp time of non-exempt staff never expires. Unit B staff now get only cash for any additional time worked.

Go Union for Higher Wages

- A worker covered by a union contract, on average, earns 13 percent more in wages than a peer in a nonunionized workplace in the same sector.
- Hourly wages for women represented by unions are 9 percent higher on average than for nonunionized women with comparable characteristics.

- Union-represented workers in service occupations (which include food service and janitorial services) make 87 percent more in total compensation and 56 percent more in wages than their nonunion counterparts.

Source: Economic Policy Institute, epi.org
The Massachusetts Teachers Association, our state union, has pledged to unleash member power to increase state funding for public schools and higher education. Fund Our Future: Invest in the Schools and Colleges Our Communities Deserve was launched this fall. Its goal: increase state funds by $1 billion annually for K–12 schools and $500 million annually for higher education. The monetary goals are based on research reports that identified shortages needed to bring excellence to all schools and all students.

The campaign begins at the grassroots level with union members collecting a list of unfunded needs required to ensure adequate staffing and full programming for students. Next step will be union members and leaders developing a plan for winning legislative approval. Expect lawmakers to feel the heat as Fund Our Future goes into high gear in the coming months. Stay tuned to emails about Fund Our Future activities.

For more info:
massteacher.org/current-initiatives/fund-our-future.