

What are we organising for?

Leadership and participation in
trade unions



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Amy Moran
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Introduction

There is every reason to believe that the UK trade union movement of more than six million workers can continue to build the collective power needed to completely transform our workplaces and communities. But in the last 45 years, trade union membership has seen continued general decline.

In 1979, more than half of all employees were union members (Holgate, 2021). Since then, union membership has fallen from 13 million members to 6.4 million in 2024. In 1979, four out of five workers in Britain were covered by a collective bargaining agreement or a Council wages order. In 2025, only one in four workers were covered by such an agreement (Ewing and Hendy, 2025).

This has been primarily driven by generations of UK Government punitive employment legislation, starting with an abusive and anti-union approach to the 1984 miners' strike, and recessions in the 80s and 90s that increased unemployment. An extremely challenging economic and political context led to unions consolidating their remaining membership through a partnership approach to collective bargaining, and a servicing model that offers legal representation and financial services to members (Holgate, 2021).

Strategic conversations around union organising are often limited to a discussion of the respective benefits and limitations of 'the servicing model' versus 'the organising model'. However the terms are ill-defined and it's not clear that there is a simple division between them. Most unions are likely to have one model dominating more than another, rather than adopt one approach altogether (Simms and Holgate, 2010).

The servicing model is described as "where things are done for the membership" generally by a small number of union reps or staff, in contrast to the organising model "where members are encouraged to find solutions by themselves" with the support of elected workplace and area reps (Simms and Holgate, 2010). A hallmark of the servicing model is an overfocus on individual grievances and casework, and to be risk-oriented towards industrial action. The servicing model means that a small number of union officials will represent members and negotiate on behalf of members with employers. Whereas an organising approach generally means that members and workplaces reps are encouraged to resolve issues themselves, collectively, through workplace organisation. The problem for unions with a servicing model, is that engagement is limited to the members that you're servicing, while the rest of your members remain disengaged.

Declining membership has led the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the umbrella body for UK trade unions, to call for all trade unions to adopt organising methods to recruit more members and revitalise the movement (Holgate, 2021). The TUC established an Organising Academy to take advantage of the new statutory recognition procedure that was introduced in the Employment Rights Act 1999 (Holgate, 2021). Many trade unions adopted organising strategies aimed at increased union membership - and subsequently won 2461 recognition claims with employers within six years (Holgate, 2021). Trade union membership saw four consecutive years of growth between 2017 and 2020 to 6.4m, followed by two years of decline (Department for Business and Trade, 2025).

Between May 2022 and May 2023, 3.9 million strike days were recorded - also termed the Strike Wave - and included more strike days than at any point in the 1980s. Much of the Strike Wave was aimed at protecting workers' pay, caused by huge spikes in inflation and a real-terms pay cut for many workers, mainly in the public sector and transport sector (Resolution Foundation, 2023). Most UK strike days in recent years have been taken to protect or improve workers' pay, and to a lesser extent, to protect jobs, with the exception of BMA junior doctor strikes in 2016 (Hodder and Mustchin, 2024). By a range of measures, the UK trade union movement is judged to be "at least no stronger - and probably weaker - than it was in 1997" (Simms, 2013), and our movement has not yet returned to the height of membership and collective bargaining density in the 70s.

"Even more so, when the Thatcher governments succeeded in undermining trade union power and trade union membership was halved. During this period unions became more inward looking and more focused on servicing their surviving membership, and unions became less visible in the wider community."

Kelly and Heery, 1994

Simms (2013) considers this "a consequence of the dominant focus of organising practice targeted at membership development, and occasionally, securing recognition for collective bargaining, rather than the wider and more political objective of promoting worker self-organisation or social movement unionism". Unions have broadly prioritised member recruitment, without the next step of building meaningful worker participation and leadership (Holgate, 2021).

This report covers two public sector education unions with high membership density in big cities in the United States - United Teachers Los Angeles and the Chicago Teachers Union - who have successfully used industrial action to win transformational changes and sustained membership growth over a period of time. Through building towards high participation strike action, they have leveraged millions of dollars of extra funding for education and public services. All of this, against the backdrop of punitive anti-trade union legislation and a challenging education privatisation agenda. Both unions described themselves as moving from a servicing model to an organising model over a number of years. Both unions have adopted organising strategies that go beyond simple member recruitment and activist mobilisation, and instead build meaningful union leadership and high participation at every level of the union, from workplaces to the negotiating table.

“We boldly called out poverty and racism as the root cause of many of the challenges in our schools and demanded smaller class sizes, fully staffed schools with social workers, nurses, and air conditioning, and fair compensation for our members.”

Karen Lewis
Chicago Teachers
Union President,
2025



Glossary

Area Rep

Staff UTLA organisers, responsible for supporting members, organising, and implementing union policy within specific geographic areas.

Bargaining Unit

UA group of workers that are represented by the union. A specific group of workers that negotiate terms and conditions as a single group.

Bargaining Team

A group of workers, often elected by their colleagues, who take leadership in negotiations, including developing bargaining proposals, sitting at the bargaining table across from management, responding to employer's proposals, and reaching agreements (McAlevey and Lawlor, 2021).

Big Bargaining

A form of collective bargaining that emphasises having large numbers of workers present at negotiations sessions, in particular through the use of large bargaining committees (McAlevey and Lawlor, 2021).

Chapter Chairs

School-based union reps who are the first point-of-contact for UTLA members.

Chapter Meeting

A meeting of all UTLA members in a school.

Chapter Action Team

A UTLA organising committee in a school, made up of respected members who take responsibility for communicating with a group of members to make sure they are fully informed and engaged in structure tests. It is also responsible for enforcing the contract and holding administrators to account at the school-site level.

Delegate

School-based union reps who are the first point-of-contact for CTU members.

Inoculation

Helping workers explore their fears about how management might react to signs of union activity, so that they are prepared.

Structure Test

A collective action aimed at demonstrating majority support of the union for a set of demands and testing member's readiness for strike action (McAlevey and Lawlor, 2021).

Supermajority

A structure test is considered successful if more than 80% of members participate. McAlevey considers 90% support essential for successful strike action (McAlevey, 2020).

Trade Dispute

Restrictive UK anti-trade union law sets out that any industrial action must be in contemplation or furtherance of a "trade dispute" which is narrowly defined as a dispute relating "wholly or mainly" to terms and conditions, recruitment, suspension or dismissal, work allocation, discipline, facilities for union officials, or the machinery of negotiation (section 44, TULCRA 1992).

Walk-Ins

A walk in is a form of protest. Instead of walking out of school, union members walk in to school together to start the school day.

Whole-Worker Organising

"An approach to organizing which recognises that workers experiences are impacted by issues which intersect but extend beyond the workplace, such as access to quality education, housing, and healthcare, and forms of identity-based oppression. Whole worker organizing also rejects artificial distinctions between "workers" and "community" and seeks to use workers' roles in the community as sources of strategic power." (McAlevey and Lawlor, 2021)

Workplace Map

A geographic representation of where people work and whom they relate to. The map could be by department, lunchtimes, or social groups. It ensures that everyone in the workplace can be efficiently communicated with by a workplace leader in their area. 7

Case Study: United Teachers Los Angeles

United Teachers Los Angeles, or UTLA, is the second biggest teaching union in the US. UTLA comprises 39,000 educators who are united to collectively bargain for the needs of classrooms, schools, and communities. That means negotiating directly with their employer, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) to secure the changes that educators want to see in education through high participation collective action. UTLA membership includes class teachers, counsellors, nurses, psychologists, social workers, librarians, teachers and other certificated staff.

In the spring of 1970, LA teachers came together to form the UTLA and took strike action for five weeks to secure their first union contract. The lack of a statewide collective bargaining law meant that the courts declared the agreement null and void. But UTLA successfully campaigned for a collective bargaining law and in 1975, the Rodda Act was signed into law. Since then, UTLA has won and protected a range of bargaining rights. In 2014, UTLA adopted a transformative strategy to fight for the “The Schools LA Students Deserve”, centred on building a high-participation union for educational justice, through organising. That meant centring the union’s contract campaign on the needs and demands of students, parents, and the wider community.

By 2019, UTLA was ready to take on one of the biggest school strikes in 30 years, with nearly 100% of members on strike for six days for quality public education - not just pay and conditions. UTLA secured a swathe of important victories for educators and students, including enforceable and reduced class sizes, a librarian, nurse and college counsellor in every school, increased green spaces, financial support for immigrants and families, a 6% pay rise, and £25m in funding for racial justice in schools with the highest proportion of Black students.

“UTLA was formed in 1970. There was no right to form a union. Educators went on strike and forced the District to change the law so that we could form a union. We are born out of struggle.”
UTLA Area Rep

In 2023, a further three days of high participation strike action in solidarity with school support staff - SEIU Local 99 members - demonstrated the collective strength of UTLA members. This industrial leverage resulted in further substantial gains for LA schools and educators, including further class-size reductions, enforceable class size caps for special education, increased support staff, a 21% pay increase, and increased staffing of social workers, psychologists, and counsellors.

Today, UTLA's latest and ongoing campaign, Win Our Future, is a fight for a share of the \$6.4 billion in reserves of the LAUSD, including further reductions to class size, salary increase and fairness, less standardised testing of students, housing security for students, and increased support staff. This report focuses on the Win Our Future campaign.



"LA is the richest state in the nation, and LAUSD has the largest reserves of any county in the country. We want today's money, on today's kids and today's educators."
UTLA Officer

Win Our Future Demands

Support for students and school communities

- \$500k Immigration fund, legal clinics, release days, supports for staff and stronger protocols against assisting ICE
- More support for LGBTQIA+ students and staff
- More support for Black Student Achievement Programme
- Increased funding for community schools
- More housing supports for families
- Use vacant LAUSD land for affordable housing for LAUSD families

Recruitment and retention

- Fix the broken salary system with consistent anniversary increases, a more attainable salary credit threshold, and increases at every level that would result in an average of 21% pay increase over two years

Support and sustainability

- More preparation time, compensation for additional work, limits on supervision, limits on testing, support and resources for Special Ed Inclusion, and paid parental leave

Class size and staffing

- LAUSD pays employees a penalty of \$100 per day for class size and staffing violations
- Class size cap reductions in all grades 11 and 12 and all non-academic classes
- Improvements to PSA, PSW, school psychologist and counsellor ratios

Stability for schools and programs

- Local School Leadership Committees control over all school-site budgets and professional development, additional funding for supplies, and protections against displacement, program cuts, subcontracting, and AI

Healthy, clean and green Schools

- Clean drinking water, HVAC upgrades, shade and playgrounds on every campus, more green space, climate mitigation and protocols for disaster preparedness



Strike Readiness Timeline

The Win Our Future campaign platform was launched in August 2024 and kickstarted a 16 month preparation period over a series of escalating structure tests - a very long way ahead of the first all-member strike vote of the campaign in January 2026. UTLA leaders are explicit with members about the methods and tactics needed to win the campaign. UTLA is systematic about embedding organising and bargaining strategy into members' consciousness, at every level of the union.

Action	Participation	Date
UTLA Leadership Conference 2024	All Chapter Chairs	August 2024
Ballot to approve the campaign platform	All members	19 - 21 November 2024
Paper petitions in support of the campaign	All members	February 2025
UTLA Leadership Conference 2025	All Chapter Chairs	1 - 3 August 2025
School Pickets	All members	16 September 2025
Area Meeting	All Chapter Chairs	22 October 2025
Regional Rallies	All members	6 November 2025
Citywide Chapter Chair Meeting	All Chapter Chairs	8 January 2026
Area Meeting	All Chapter Chairs	21 January 2026

Action	Participation	Date
Strike Authorisation Vote	All members	27 - 29 January
City-wide rally	All members	TBC
Strike 2026	All members	TBC



“If we stay ready, we don’t have to get ready”. Jollene Levid, UTLA Regional Secretary

Building the Platform

Many unions conduct national or local surveys of members or workplace reps, often anonymous, to try and understand members' campaigning priorities. Some may not consider the number of members who have participated. UTLA undertook a process aimed at reaching every member at every workplace in a meaningful way, to identify the urgent issues that would shape the union's strike demands. This was the first of a series of structure tests, aimed at assessing the internal structure of the union, and understanding where there are weaknesses, i.e. low areas of participation in particular schools or areas. The aim is always to reach 100% participation of all members, workplace leaders, and schools.

UTLA workplace leaders coordinated meetings of their colleagues in their school or establishment, and were responsible for recording who attended, and following up with those who hadn't yet participated. The process therefore also acts as a relationship-building tool, where members discuss the challenges of their working lives together and what they hope to win through strike action. It is also an opportunity to recruit new members and help them understand that change can and will be made through a strong union, with high participation. Workplace leaders therefore held more than 665 school meetings across LA.

With feedback from school meetings, the 150-member UTLA elected bargaining team met and developed a platform identified directly by school communities. UTLA used a three step process to build the platform for their contract campaign, including:

- Member meetings in every school to identify broad issues for the platform.
- Review and approval of the platform by a vote of the full UTLA membership conducted by ballot box across school sites.
- Meetings of the 150 member bargaining team to develop specific proposals based on the platform, over three months.



1. What issues, if fixed, would make the biggest difference in improving teaching and/or learning at our chapter?
2. What pay, benefit, and working condition issues should we fight to address in our contract campaign?
3. What do our students most need when at school?
4. When our students go home, what issues are they facing that create challenges to their learning?
5. From your experience working and talking with parents and students, what fights for school improvements do you believe are most broadly and deeply felt by parents, youth, and community?



UTLA Leadership Conference 2025

All Chapter Chairs are expected to take part annually in the UTLA Leadership Conference, held at the end of teachers' summer holidays. At the most recent conference in 2025, Chapter Chairs were presented with a four-step plan to November 2028, by union leaders, who were explicit about the union's plan to win the next contract campaign and beyond.

The conference upholds the union structure. Chapter Chairs are trained with other Chapter Chairs and Cluster Leaders in their area. The UTLA Leadership Conference was very much focused on building the next stage of the campaign, communicating to members the series of potential structure tests over the coming months, up to and including strike action, should the Bargaining Team and Employer fail to bring the contract to a settlement. All of the sessions are aimed at political education and building relationships between Chapter Chairs in their area.

All Chapter Chairs are expected to attend the event, and if they can't make it, then to send a replacement delegate from their Branch instead. UTLA carefully charts attendance at the event and at trainings within the event. If a school does not send a representative, then Area Reps make phone calls to the Chapter Chair or arrange school visits after the conference, to make sure that

Branch leadership is in place and supported. A catch up session is arranged in the following weeks, so that any Chapter Chairs who didn't attend, can make up the training.

LAUSD's budget was discussed in-depth, and Chapter Chairs were "inoculated", i.e. discussed the employer's potential counterarguments and anti-union narratives. The contract is only settled when power is escalated. The union creates a situation where the cost of settling is better than the cost of not.



Union Structure

UTLA's power lies in its tight structures that are easily and readily mobilised by organic workplace leaders across chapters, clusters, and areas. UTLA recognises that power comes from mobilising a supermajority of the membership through a clear structure.

Contract Action Team

The Chapter Action Team (CAT) is an organising committee in a school, made up of respected members who take responsibility for communicating with a group of members to make sure they are fully informed and engaged in structure tests. It is also responsible for enforcing the contract and holding administrators to account at the school-site level. Any school with more than 30 members must have a CAT.

Chapter Chairs

The role of the Chapter Chair is seen as essential. Chapter Chairs are organic leaders in their workplace, often talented educators, who their colleagues naturally follow and respect. They must be democratically elected on a yearly basis by their colleagues. Good leaders have followers - they can turn people out to meetings and to collective actions. And they are responsible for enforcing members' terms and conditions, and upholding union policy, in school. Chapter Chairs are provided with UTLA announcements to be made at staff meetings on a weekly basis - known as 'Tuesday Talking Points'. Advice to members? Don't ever not make an announcement!

Cluster Leaders

Each area is broken down into clusters - a geographical group of schools. Each cluster is led by two or more Cluster Leaders. Each Cluster Leader has more or less ten schools to support, through a direct relationship with the school's Chapter Chairs and/or Chapter Action Team. Cluster Leaders are elected members of the Area Steering Committee and the Bargaining Team. The cluster structure is a simple but highly effective way to disseminate information during the campaign, ahead of important structure tests, and gives leadership to Cluster Leaders.

Areas

Area Steering Committees are democratically elected organising committees, composed of Cluster Leaders, where UTLA full-time staff and officials share consistent messaging. All Chapter Chairs in an area meet once per month at the Area Meeting. The Area Meeting is run as a mini-training session with the content depending on UTLA priorities that month, and is the first port of call for setting up any collective action. The focus of the meeting is to inform the Chapter Chairs about the next collective action, confirm their support, and build their capacity to ask their colleagues to participate.

Bargaining Team

Over recent years, UTLA has gradually expanded its bargaining team over a number of years, from a very small group, to 150 members. The Bargaining Team is composed of Cluster Leader and Board of Director members from across all of the eight areas of the union: East Area, North Area, South Area, Valley East, Harbor Area, Central Area and West Area. It represents 35,000 members with dozens of different job titles and roles.

The Bargaining Team is responsible for developing and amending bargaining proposals and counterproposals, and organising member action in response to these proposals. During the contract escalation campaign, Cluster Leaders will make phone calls or text their Chapter Chairs every week and log information on a central database. Cluster Leaders and Chapter Chairs are expected to be able to readily mobilise members as part of every action. Members are an active part of negotiations, and during 'caucus' i.e. a break in negotiations when the employer is out of the room, members are expected to actively engage in proposals and strategy. Members must uphold the consensus position of the Bargaining Team after a collective decision is made, and demonstrate a united front.

Bargaining Team members sign an agreement that sets out the expectations of behaviour and conduct during negotiations, that emphasises engagement, maintaining a "poker face", only speaking at planned and agreed times, and timeliness.

"If you give workers the option of not doing an action, then they are not going to have the confidence to take part."

UTLA Area Rep

Area Reps

Area Reps are full-time and paid union staff organisers who are responsible for building the power of members across an average of 50-60 schools each, across multiple geographical areas. They are responsible for member representation and driving the programme of the union in their schools, through recruitment and support of Chapter Chairs and Cluster Leaders. The Area Rep is responsible for charting participation of their members and Chapter Chairs in the contract escalation campaign, and following up with low turnout schools. Additional support and strategic advice comes from a Regional Organiser, who leads and supports the work of the Area Reps.

Every week, at the UTLA all-staff meeting, the top of the agenda is an overview of UTLA figures, including an update on the number of members, non-members, percentage density, Chapter Chairs, Chapter Action Teams in schools with more than 30 members, and schools without, plus the participation figures for the latest structure test.

Area Reps are seen as essential in supporting organic workplace leaders to become effective organisers and spend most of their week visiting schools - around five distinct visits per week is expected. There is a big emphasis on responding to Chapter Chairs as soon as possible - "they have to know that you are a phone call away." UTLA Area Rep

One Area Rep described a process of routinely calling their school reps on the commute home. "I don't care if they only have three people in their school, they're just as important to me as someone who has 150. I will make those calls."

"In 2019, educators in LA went on strike. 100% out, 33,000 educators across school sites. We knew down to the person who was not turning up to the picket line. If 15 people didn't turn up, we were following up with them." Jollene Levid, UTLA Regional Organiser

The first step to turning around a low participation site is to re-organise the union at the site level. They may initially call the Chapter Chair to discuss this and ask to see the workplace mapping and a copy of the school's roster. Generally the next step is to rebuild the school's Chapter Action Team. Once the CAT is formed, school turnout can increase dramatically. The CAT can identify the issues that workers are facing in the school. Common issues include school discipline plans, school leadership issues, school equipment and budgets. The priority for the Area Rep is to support members to build strong Chapter Action Teams and get people excited about what they can achieve through working collectively.

If there isn't a Chapter Chair in place, then the Area Rep or Cluster Leader will email the staff to arrange a school meeting, or will often go in cold to the workplace. "I just turn up at the school for a few days. I sit in the cafeteria or the staffroom and talk to people. Sometimes I just stand in the parking lot. I ask, who are the good teachers here? Who do you respect? Then I plan some structured organising conversations." UTLA Area Rep.

"For example, if only five people turn up at a union meeting in the school. I would say, "Can you go away and recruit your colleagues and we'll meet again? This fight is too important and we won't win with just five of us. I will come back the same time next week - can you commit to talking to your colleagues and bringing them along?" This communicates commitment and the importance of turnout." UTLA Area Rep

"A lot of people think we are just trying to get people to do stuff - let's get her to sign the petition, let's get her to vote." But the number one focus needs to be relationships and personal development. You build a relationship first and find out how you develop them as a person. If I can develop a person I help them become a better rep." UTLA Area Rep



"You can't ask for commitment, if you don't demonstrate commitment."
UTLA Area Rep

Defend Our Communities

“Before summer break, there was an ICE truck outside the school - we locked the school down. I’m an Art Teacher and kids open up to me. They’re really scared. Towards the end of last term, kids just stopped coming to school. They told us they didn’t want their Dad to drive them to school in case of ICE. It’s important for us to be able to reassure them about their worries, if we can.” UTLA Chapter Chair

All children deserve to start their school day free of fear, looking forward to see their school friends and enjoy education. But with increased ICE activity in Los Angeles, many young people and families continue to be worried for their and their loved ones’ safety on the way to and from school. Many UTLA teachers described stories from their students of frightening encounters with ICE and other federal agents, and saw notable student absences in their classrooms.

There are half a million students in LA. Over 90% of them come from communities of colour and over 85% from low income households (Caputo-Pearl, 2024). LAUSD schools are sanctuary locations. That means they are designated safe zones for immigrant students, families and staff. There is no legislation that obligates a public school to assist immigration officials in enforcement action or disclose students’ immigration status.





UTLA Chapters have worked to develop robust safety plans at every school, to establish sites as safe zones in the community, and to develop an efficient response protocol for the presence of ICE or federal agents in the community, without a valid warrant from a judge. UTLA members are supported to protect information on students' immigration status and share information and resources with students, and families.

It has been essential for the UTLA to deliver a campaign that includes collective actions to protect and defend sanctuary schools. Ahead of the new school year, on 3 August 2025, hundreds of UTLA Chapter Chairs participated and marched in a rally to demand LAUSD put in place stronger protections for students and families from ICE. Union leaders called on the federal government to return all young people in custody, home, before the first day of school.

UTLA called for LAUSD safety plans, advocacy for deported students to return and graduate, access to food and legal aid, and virtual learning options for students who had been displaced, or were simply too scared to leave the house to come to school, for fear of abduction.

On the first day back to school in the new term, 14 August 2025, UTLA members took part in a first day of school action, a school picket to welcome young people and families back to school on the first day of term. Teachers wore red and stood outside schools, handing out rights leaflets in multiple languages, and holding signs - 'students are welcome here'. This was the first structure test of the new school year as part of the contract escalation campaign - with the aim of laying the foundation for schools as safe zones in the community. It received a remarkable response and unprecedented support from the local community. Local people from community organisations, faith groups, politicians, trade unionists, tenants' unions and parents were also invited to adopt a school for the first day and attend the pickets. 700 people signed up through groups or individually to support a picket, and UTLA called each of them and allocated them to the best school near them.

Collectivising Casework and Representation

UTLA Area Reps interviewed talked about the difference between organising and servicing models and how an organising approach should be applied in all areas of the unions work, especially in representation.

“Before it was like... if a Chapter Chair has an issue... if there’s a grievance, he [the Area Rep] will file it. He’ll do everything for him. If you have a complaint I’m going to go and deal with it. I’ll go to staff relations and this is going to get quashed. “You are paying dues so that I can solve your problems.” Whereas, if your mindset is that folks should realise they are their union, there’s only power in them and their coworkers coming together and giving them the skills. Then the interaction is different. The approach is different: “So you have a problem? So what part of your contract is being violated? I’ll go through the contract with them or sometimes I even say they need to look at the contract first. I say “you went on strike for the contract”. It behoves them to read the contract and know the contract. We need to change the mindset around the contract so that people can address issues themselves with their coworkers. It starts there.”
UTLA Area Rep

“All previous practice was to file a complaint with the Board. “File a grievance” - that was all the union did. We (the UTLA) had 4000 unresolved grievances in 2014. Grievances are management friendly. Because a big

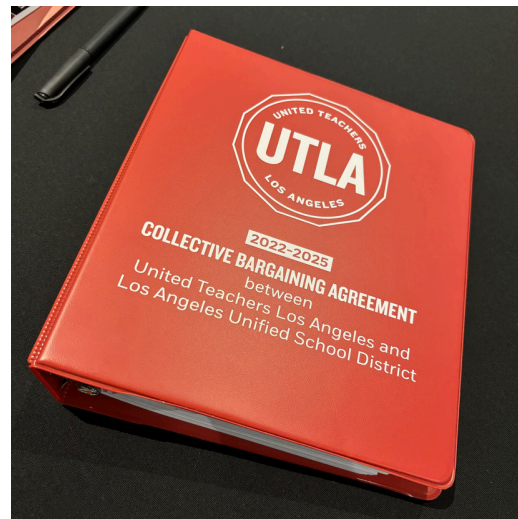
part of the grievance process is that you can’t talk about the issue. By the time the issues were resolved, which could sometimes take two years, the grievance might not matter anymore. It prevents you from organising around it. Now we support Chapter Chairs to organise immediately. That means: get a Chapter Action Team together, arrange a Chapter meeting, get a petition started, maybe escalate to a vote of no confidence in your Principal” - UTLA Area Rep

“I want to support people to come to a decision themselves. A lot of the time, they can figure it out for themselves. A lot of the solutions are already in the community. If you help people too much they can come to rely on you, and that undermines capacity at the school site to work through issues.”

UTLA Area Rep

A good grievance is considered to be a very clear contract violation, that cannot be resolved through informal discussion, and has a clear remedy, often financial. The problem with grievances is that the timescales and processes are dictated by the employer - not the union. Importantly, the grievance process also prevents teachers from taking action otherwise and discussing the issue with colleagues. So once a teacher has signed up to the grievance process, they are prevented from taking any other action to further their concerns or resolution. Effectively, grievances only deal with individual members - organising deals with the collective.

A good example of where the grievance process has previously been a poor tool is class size overage. A class size overage occurs when classes exceed the negotiated maximums set by the contract. Previously, if a member filed a grievance, the employer would deliberately take so long to hear the grievance, the teacher would not have had the class anymore. The grievance became academic and there was no remedy - and the teacher faced a disproportionate and unfair workload throughout the year. UTLA therefore started to organise around class size instead and supported members to launch workplace campaigns that brought class size overages to the parents' attention and generated more pressure on the employer, and the employer would capitulate. The most recent Win our Future campaign is aimed at introducing a \$100 penalty per day for all class size and staffing violations.



Grievances are centrally recorded by UTLA in an attempt to manage and limit the number, as far as reasonably possible. Only competent grievances are submitted and members are directed otherwise to collectivise around issues, like class size infractions, workload, and poor management. It also gives members and reps more time to engage with the contract campaign and collective actions. Where there are delays and the employer does not meet the timescales set out in the grievance policy, UTLA will always challenge the employer and ask them why.

"It's bad for members and the union to have unresolved grievances for a long period of time. So enforcing the grievance timelines is a priority. Grievances are not a substitute for organising." UTLA Area Rep

"Often if you ask members what they think will happen as an outcome of a grievance, it is that their boss will get in trouble or they will get some kind of apology. That is often in conflict with reality. A lot of the time, all that happens is that you have a formal complaint that takes a long time to respond to. Instead, we write to the Principal, and if it happens again, then we start organising to remove the Principal." UTLA Area Rep

Case Study: Chicago Teachers Union

Chicago Teachers' Union or CTU, is a union of more than 30,000 educators. In 2012, CTU launched a massive grassroots campaign of Chicago educators, escalating to strike action, to secure a 17% pay increase for teachers and increased resources for students. CTU regularly campaigns on issues like class sizes, equity, standardised testing, and school closures and puts students, and demands for increased school funding, at the centre of campaigning. CTU describes its organising approach as Bargaining for the Common Good, and emphasises connection between trade unions and community groups. CTU members have taken high participation strike action in 2012 and 2019 in pursuit of outcomes that go beyond the workplaces, and centre the community as a whole, including racial justice and community allyship.

In June 2012, CTU members participated in a historic strike vote where more than 90% of members voted, with 98% voting yes, and took strike action on 10 September 2012, for seven days. CTU considered this a “fight for the schools Chicago students deserve.” The union published a report that set out that the problems in education were the result of “too-large class sizes, limited curricula, inadequate facilities, not enough support personnel, and lack of adequate funding” (Caref, 2018). The strike forced the employer to recruit 512 additional art, music, and physical education teachers, and won class size limits for special education classes. Most recently, the CTU has reached a 2025 contract agreement to create smaller and enforceable class sizes of up to 30 maximum, and securing further investment into sports, art, music, librarians, counsellors, teachers assistance, and other support staff to schools, among many other important victories.

CTU teachers faced legal challenges due to a 1995 law that deemed issues including class size, class staffing, and length of the school day as permissive subjects. Through building towards high participation strike action and some creative strategy, the union was able to successfully bargain for wage rises - alongside class sizes and housing for families.

“We weren't just looking at bread and butter issues, we were talking about root causes.”

Karen Lewis, 2025

Union Structure

CTU emphasises leader identification and development at every level of the union. Strong union structures are essential to their contract escalation campaigns and strike readiness.

Delegates

Delegates are the elected leaders of the union in the school. They are responsible for setting up Contract Action Teams in their schools, activating membership around campaigns, and running monthly members' meetings in schools. They liaise directly with school management through school-based negotiating structure - the Professional Problems Committee. Setting up robust PPCs in every school is an ongoing goal for the CTU. All delegates attend House of Delegates meetings on a monthly basis to participate in the decision-making of the union. As such, union decision-making is tightly connected to the experience of educators in the workplace.

District Organisers

Members are split into districts, led by recruited member-leader District Organisers. District Organisers are vital members who play a critical role in working with Delegates, school-based union reps, to maintain union strength. They meet in monthly District Organiser meetings - a combination of a political education session led by union full-time and officers.

Organisers

Staff Organisers support members, solve easy problems. If you work with Delegates to fix something then they see the value of the union. CTU has developed an annual Summer Organising Institute - established in 2020 and aimed at building organising skills for members in their schools and communities. The programme takes place over summer and is aimed at helping grassroots members develop their organising and leadership skills, undergo political education, fieldwork, and understand CTU history. The training creates around 40 trained organisers in schools every year.

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“As CTU President, I was trying to make the union more democratic and responsive to our members. You have to give people their voice and let them have their say. So I put as many people as I could on the bargaining team, across caucuses, and across bargaining units.” Karen Lewis, 2025

CTU Organisers talked about the challenge of ‘Founders Syndrome’ i.e. the challenging situation when the person who started the role or has been in it so long that they’re the only one people associate with it. It creates a problem and often can prevent people from retiring. Sometimes this inadvertently puts other members off from taking on rep roles. They’re either the hero or the thankless - they don’t want to give up the role but they are the only one who can do it. It’s essential to revitalise any part of the union structure that has become inactive.

“We do not describe the delegate role as a thankless job. If you are a good rep then you feel very appreciated by members and you receive wonderful messages from people.” UTLA Organiser

“Karen (Lewis) was excellent at identifying leaders. She looked at the rank and file and selected leaders from them. She saw people’s potential and wanted to help them get there. That made her a great teacher too.”

Political Education

Political education is embedded into the work of the union. CTU members are educated and knowledgeable about the threats to a well-funded public education system. These tend to be anti-union and anti-public education actors, who could threaten Chicago public schools.

One such example is the Illinois Policy Institute, founded in 2002, an anti-union thinktank that advances a privatisation agenda in the media. Member education is an essential part of challenging the narrative put forward in the media about teachers, who are often portrayed as greedy or lazy. For example, in November 2024, the Chicago Tribune published editorials on the union's latest campaign demands, including claims that "Too many Chicago teachers are chronically absent". The reality is that CTU teachers only get 10 sick days per year - and 40% of teachers take all of their sick days in one year. CTU recognised the potential risk of members disengaging from the union's campaign through fear of lack of public support. The editorial instead triggered a cross-department meeting of organisers, communications staff and members to develop a messaging strategy across schools.

CTU works closely with United Working Families, a political action group made up of organisations across the city. They work collectively to unify voices across the city on specific issues, for example the one fair wage campaign. It is birthed from the movement started by previous CTU President Karen Lewis. CTU actively supports their members to run for public office, and has been an essential part of electing Brandon Johnson, a previous CTU teacher, member, and organiser.

"Previously we did not campaign on 'political issues' - only traditional bread and butter issues. But you cannot divorce politics from reality. Where you shop is political, where you live is political. Being part of a union is political. And we're helping our teachers understand that". CTU Organiser

CTU members have been at the forefront of the fight to keep communities safe. Members have formed Sidewalk Solidarity Teams and distributed immigrant rights information to families of students at pick-up and drop-off times for families. Through strike action in 2019, CTU successfully established schools as sanctuaries. CTU has undertaken extensive political lobbying and media work in response to ICE activity in the city. CTU has used the opportunity to call for more funding for public schools, affordable housing and public services, and to restore staffing and funding to the federal Department of Education, to truly build a safer Chicago.

Anti Trade Union Legislation

In the US, private sector workers' right to strike is protected by federal law. For public sector workers, all trade union relations, including the right to strike, are governed by state law. Many states prohibit all public sector workers from striking (Barajas, 2024). And that means if public sector workers want the right to strike, they have to fight for it.

Having won the right to strike in LA, UTLA strikes are a legally protected activity - that means it is illegal to be fired or disciplined for striking. But the State of California has laws for public sector workers that deliberately create hurdles to going on strike. Unions can only coordinate lawful strike action once the contract has expired. Once the contract has expired, the union enters the bargaining process with the employer. The phases of bargaining include: sunshining, negotiations, impasse, mediation and fact finding. There is no predetermined timeline for most contract negotiation stages, which means that the process can take many months. In the first phase, sunshining, the union and employer present proposals at a public meeting of the LAUSD School Board. The next phase, negotiations, involve meetings of both sides to discuss proposals, with a legal obligation to bargain in good faith, aiming to reach agreement. If either or both sides declare an impasse in talks, there is a legal obligation to participate in mediation in good faith to reach an agreement. The employer produces its last, best, and final proposals.

A state appointed mediator tries to move both sides to come to a bargaining agreement. If this is not successful, then the case goes to a fact-finding panel, with both employer and union presenting issues, evidence and data, in a hearing, to evidence that the proposals are consistent with industry standard requests. The panel produced a 'finding of fact' which is essentially a recommended agreement. But the parties are under no obligation to use this. If there is still no agreement after this stage, then the District can impose its proposals and the union can go on strike. Once proposals have been set out, UTLA enters a phase of escalation against a timeline for bringing the contract to a settlement. The contract is only settled when power is escalated, as the union creates a situation where the cost of settling is better than the cost of not.

“Permissive subjects are subjects that the employer discusses only if it so chooses (and when the union is strong enough to force them to.” (McAlevey, 2020).

Much of UTLA's bargaining platform includes 'permissive subjects' i.e. issues that are considered outside of the scope of bargaining. Either side can propose to discuss permissive subjects, and unlike mandatory subjects, including wages, hours, working conditions, either side cannot legally insist on it. During 2018 bargaining, LAUSD threatened to file unfair labour practice charges over topics that they considered permissive, including green spaces, charter school regulation, and mandatory testing regimes. UTLA removed the subjects that could be legally deemed permissive from negotiations, to avoid an injunction. And it used its strong workplace structures and communication to discuss this with members, avoiding any written communication to members about this strategy, to avoid the risk of an unfair labour practice charge. UTLA was then able to bring these back to the bargaining table, following high participation strike action, which forced the employer to discuss the issues. (McAlevey, 2020).

The Employment Rights Act 2025 repeals some areas of anti-trade union legislation. And this brings new opportunities but continued challenges. One example is that the new legislation removes the necessity for a statutory postal ballot ahead of strike action, and unions will be able to conduct statutory strike ballots over e-ballot instead. Whether a union is ready for strike action should be a matter for the union only to decide. However, the postal statutory ballot has, in effect, acted as an important structure test in preparation for strike action. For example, unions must ensure membership records are up-to-date so that members receive postal ballots on time, co-ordinate replacement ballots where necessary, and support members to return ballots in good time before the ballot closing date. The risk is that unions fail to use robust structure tests to get structures ready to strike. Unions should continue to establish a series of escalatory structure tests up to the point of balloting for strike action, to ensure that the union is ready for successful strike action.

Currently, legislation sets out that any industrial action must be in contemplation or furtherance of a "trade dispute" which is narrowly defined as a dispute relating "wholly or mainly" to terms and conditions, recruitment, suspension or dismissal, work allocation, discipline, facilities for union officials, or the machinery of negotiation (Section 44, Trade Union and Labour Relations Consolidation Act, 1992). Potential legal challenges must be considered as part of union strategy. Unions must continue to actively campaign against the continued organising challenges presented by trade union legislation and continue to build the power to compel employers to consider issues beyond those narrowly defined.

Recommendations

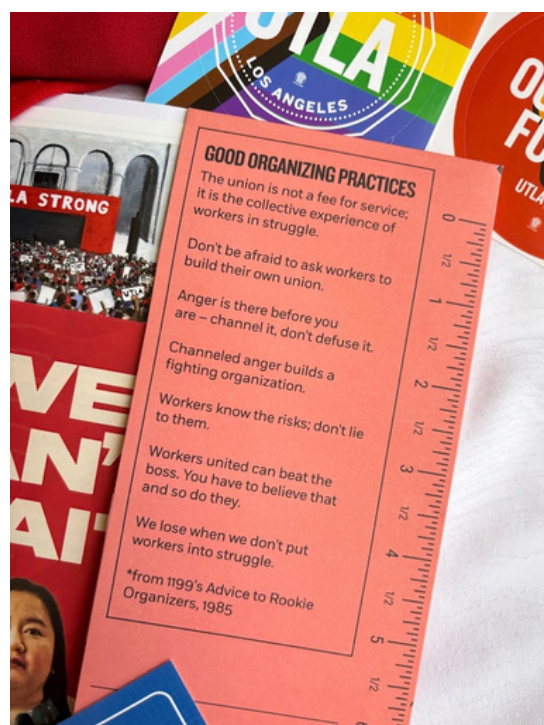
Organising can be defined as building relationships to form the collective power needed to make the changes your community wants to see. Union organisers must therefore consciously build relationships with organic leaders in every area of the workplace to build participation in collective action.

McAlevey (2012) sets out that:

"...Natural leaders already exist among workers, long before organisers or activists get involved. These natural, or organic, leaders have no title, but they are people whom other workers trust, whom they turn to for help when they aren't sure how to get something done."

"A good organiser must be able to recognise organic leaders. Fortunately there is a tried and true method for identifying these leaders and it's not complicated, it does require good listening skills and lots of patience and discipline. To identify leaders effectively, an organiser has to ask most of the workers by work area variations of the same question: Who is the worker you turn to when you need help understanding something? There are more questions but they are all a variation of this single question. Once an organiser hears the name over and over, they will then use a structure test to assess whether this worker really is the worker that most everyone relies upon and trusts."

This report proposes a union leadership development framework that sets out the journey of a union leader from initial organic leader identification to experienced union leadership, against five foundations of organising: participation, political narrative, structure, representation, and relationships.



Five Foundations of an Organising Union

Participation

- Strengthen the union at the workplace level, aiming for 100% density of reps and reps teams across every workplace.
- Strengthen the union at the regional level, aiming for representatives from each workplace, regularly meeting on a monthly basis in their region, with oversight committees, responsible for organising across their respective regions.
- Ensure that all workplace reps participate in training for workplace mapping and charting and are supported to regularly undertake mapping and charting.
- Identify member priorities through systematic face-to-face workplace meetings and plan a series of escalating
- Plan a series of gradually escalating structure tests until members demonstrate strike readiness i.e. over 90% support of the bargaining unit. It took UTLA, a very well-organised union with members on strike in recent years. 18 months preparation, at least, before delivering a supermajority turnout in the first all member strike vote of the 2025 contract campaign. "A deliberate progression of structure tests which are increasingly public and having increasing stakes allows the unions to gauge worker participation and readiness to strike." (McAlevey and Lawlor, 2021)
- Every structure test must test members but also workplace leaders. That means every collective action must test the leadership structure at the workplace and regional level.
- Building strike-readiness should be established union practice at every level of the union.

Political narrative

- Centre racial, gender, social and economic justice and build relationships with key community groups and allies.
- Embed the history of the union's strike action into storytelling, training and messaging about the union.
- Be open and transparent with members about the strategy and the plan to win through building towards high participation industrial action.



Structure

- Commit to embedding an organising model at every level of the union, including members, reps, and all staff.
- Establish an organising expectation across all parts of the union and clarify staff and rep responsibilities for organising with accountability and responsibility for clearly defined and geographic areas of the union.
- Establish a clear and consistent democratic leadership structure across all workplaces and geographic areas with leadership elected from each elected directly to the bargaining table.
- With workplaces of more than 30 workers, establish teams. Maintain and support the democratic process by ensuring all elections take place on an annual basis.
- Ensure that all member lists are up-to-date and accurate so that members' details are correctly recorded, including worksite, phone number, email, and home address.

Representation

- Embed organising in all representation work by auditing and reducing individual grievances where possible and increasing collective work around collective issues.
- Reduce the amount of time focused on individual member cases and increase the amount of time working to build and develop leaders through collective action.
- Demystify trade disputes and striking by sharing union wins through collective action in all communications channels.
- Clarify worksite structures and establish a clear connection between the workers in the workplace and the bargaining table. Both UTLA and CTU have big bargaining teams that are responsible for reporting back to specific geographic areas and attend negotiations with the employer. Build participation in union negotiations, so that workplaces are directly connected to negotiation structures.
- Train all union leaders and organisers to identify collective issues and establish a shared approach to escalating workplace branches to industrial action.

Relationships

- Ensure staff have sufficient time and resources to build strong relationships with reps through regular one to one meetings and workplace visits.
- Identify organic leaders in workplaces and invite them to step up and be part of the union. Organic leaders are respected workers, not necessarily union activists or even union members. Build leadership structures that reflect workplaces.
- Build on internal processes to monitor and support organising activity on a regular basis.
- Train all union leaders and organisers in key organising practices, including one-to-one conversations, mapping and charting.

	Participation	Political narrative	Structure	Relationships	Representation
1. Organic leader	Can turn 90 – 100% of colleagues to a workplace meeting (or significantly reduce participation if they do not support the union).	Feels angry at injustice and highly motivated to find solutions.	Brings others together easily to share teamwork.	Well-connected in the workplace. Other workers highly respect them, good at their job.	Others regularly ask them for advice and support to resolve problems.
2. Organic union leader	Brings 90 – 100% of colleagues together over a widely felt issue. Participates and contributes to collective action.	Channels anger into action. Understands their story of self and connects this to a shared collective experience and political narrative.	Identifies and recruits organic leaders. Develops a team with leaders from other workplace areas through mapping and charting.	Understands that relationships are central to organising. Has one-to-one meetings with leaders to actively build new relationships in weak areas of the structure.	Represents colleagues at meetings with management. Advises on workplace policies and processes. May negotiate and participate in collective bargaining processes.
3. Union leader	Coordinates high participation collective action with 90 – 100% turnout, to win changes of local significance.	Understands the importance of storytelling and collective political narrative to motivate others to action in high pressure situations, rallies and media. Coaches others to share their experiences.	Can map and chart the workplace and target weak areas of the structure, and can teach others to do so. Has built and developed multiple strong workplace leaders.	High participation union structures with a direct relationship with a leader for each area. Builds relationships with key decision-makers in their community based on power analysis.	Represents colleagues at higher risk meetings with management. May negotiate improvements in workplace policies and processes. May lead collective bargaining processes.
4. Experienced union leader	Coordinates multiple high participation collective action with 90 – 100% turnout, to win changes of national significance. Develops and supports others to coordinate strikes.	Easily and readily communicates political narrative and members' stories in high pressure environments to motivate others to action for campaigns of national importance.	Supports and builds multiple teams successfully and support those teams to function well.	Multiple high participation union structures with a direct relationship with a leader for each area. Builds relationships with key decision-makers in their community based on power analysis.	May lead high-level collective bargaining processes. Leads high participation campaigns to successful conclusion, achieving change of national significance.

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Appendix: Methodology

This Churchill Fellowship allowed me to see first-hand how teacher unions have embedded new organising models into their union structures to build powerful movements of teachers in Los Angeles and Chicago, in a research trip that took place over seven weeks. The research for this report included interviews with 37 trade union members, reps, academics, and organisers who practise whole-worker organising. Data collection methods include notes, recordings, observations, interviews, and analysis of resources and materials shared by the UTLA and CTU. I am a trade union official working for a UK education union so the report is written from that perspective. Thank you to all of my colleagues at the Educational Institute of Scotland for their support with this project.

Thank you to all of the US teachers and trade unionists who gave their time so generously, especially during a period of immense challenge for communities in Los Angeles and Chicago. As of January 2026, thousands of children are in immigration detention in the US. Solidarity to all those who continue to fight to make school safe for all young people and educators. The title of this report was taken from an article written by Melanie Simms and Jane Holgate 'Organising for what? Where is the debate on the politics of organising?'. With special thanks to Jollene Levid for her sisterhood.

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