



Reduce harmful work stressors.  
Improve job quality and health.

# Healthy Work Strategies

## Reducing COVID-19-related work stressors

### II. Collective bargaining

Collective bargaining is a tool utilized by labor unions to negotiate better working conditions with employers, including during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Some examples are provided below in case they will be useful to you in your efforts.

**Los Angeles teachers.** Members of United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) used their Contract Action Teams (CAT) to advocate for teachers being expected to do the administration's work in addition to their regular teaching duties during the pandemic. District policy had stated that teachers can contact students through email, phone, or Schoology (a learning platform), and if a student does not respond for five days to any of the three forms of communication, the administration is responsible for calling the students. However, after schools were shut down in March 2020, in addition to their regular school duties and many new challenges accompanying the transition, teachers were pressured to call every student. Efforts by the union ultimately were successful, and the school issued a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on teachers' duties while working at home—teachers will not be held responsible to call each student. In addition, the union supported efforts to help ensure that no student would fail during the school closure.<sup>1</sup>

**University of Illinois graduate assistants.** Graduate workers and graduate and teaching assistants at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) realized that since they were on short-term contracts, they would not have sufficient sick leave, should they contract COVID-19. Furthermore, international student workers only received nine months of financial support from the university and were going to be stranded during the summer of 2020 after the international travel ban took place. The Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) Local 6297 drafted a list of bargaining demands, including two weeks of paid sick leave, full COVID-19 related medical coverage, and free housing and \$400 a month stipend over the summer for the international students that were stranded in the U.S. At first the administration agreed to meet with the union, but each request was denied. In response, a member of the union published an article<sup>2</sup> which argued that at the beginning

of the pandemic, UIC's trustees voted to grant \$300 million to build more buildings and at the same time had voted to increase healthcare premiums for its students. On March 21, the GEO sent out instructions to all its members on how to email the administration, and, within a day, the administration informed union leaders that they would be changing their earlier position and the union should cease to overload their inboxes.

A Memorandum of Understanding was reached, which included two weeks paid sick leave; teletherapy services for mental health (as research showed graduate workers to have some of the highest stress levels during the pandemic); a policy covering all COVID-19-related out of network emergency room (ER) costs; mass pre-authorization of all COVID-19-related tests and treatments at the ER and urgent care; long term repayment plans for students who owe less than \$1,500; and the University's agreement to form a task force on summer funding for international students.<sup>3</sup>

**New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA).** Members of the NYSNA faced major physical, mental and emotional challenges at the height of the pandemic in New York. They also were aware that potentially life-saving personal protective equipment (PPE) became scarce and nurses were going without or were forced to use the same N95 masks for an entire week. Members of NYSNA at Jacobi Medical Center in the Bronx proposed a public "speak-out" call to the federal government, and the action was unanimously supported and planned for two days later. About 50 nurses and 15 reporters participated. It was the first action of its kind in New York City (NYC) and led to similar events at other hospitals over the following weeks.

These events were successful in pressuring NY Governor Andrew Cuomo to issue an executive order that each nurse receive at least one N95 mask a day. Nurses again called on their union when, in the midst of the pandemic, an emergency policy was enacted by the NYC Health and Hospitals Corporation (HHC) that restricted the nurses' sick leave. A doctor's note was required for all sick time, or all pay for that time would be suspended. A second action was organized with double the number of attendees of the first, but the city did not remove the policy. The union organized a "COVID Action Team" Zoom meeting, first for the nurses in Jacobi, and then city-wide. Within two days of petitioning, the mayor's office called on the HHC to end the policy.<sup>4</sup>

**State University of New York (SUNY) faculty and professional staff.** The United University Professions (UUP, a division of the American Federation of Teachers) represents faculty and professional staff at SUNY, many of whom were forced to work remotely during the pandemic. The UUP negotiated the ability of employees to work from home five days a week, as well as "a one-year automatic tenure clock stop (with an opt-out allowance) for academics; a six-month stop for professionals; removal of the requirement for student-teacher evaluations in spring 2020 for future reappointment, tenure or promotion review; and no-cost tele-medicine and tele-counseling appointments for [health insurance plan] enrollees". The union is also working to obtain "compensation (for example, hazard pay, overtime pay, and extra-service pay) for members on the frontlines

at the SUNY hospitals, IT professionals working on IT issues for online education, and adjunct faculty doing prep work for remote instruction."<sup>5</sup>

**Oakland Teachers Union.** During 2020, the [Oakland, California teachers' union](#) bargaining team negotiated and pressured for preventive COVID-19 protections in represented schools throughout the City of Oakland. Their success, the product of an aggressive plan to ensure negotiated COVID-19 contractual language was implemented by the City of Oakland, targeted the development of a comprehensive education, identification, and resolution program focused upon the prevention of worker (and student) COVID-19 cases.

The union's activity, led by and inclusive of all levels of the union- officers, stewards, and rank-and-file members- demonstrated that the identification and resolution of COVID-19 occupational safety and health workplace design issues and hazards was essential to achieving improved working conditions and more safe and healthy workplaces. Through the development and implementation of a comprehensive education, identification, and resolution action plan, the union was able to ensure their members would be protected from COVID-19 exposure as well as building a more unified, collective membership. Clearly, the plan established by the teachers' union was essential in achieving immediate and future collective bargaining victories.<sup>6</sup>

**Evaluation and updates.** It is important that such programs, policies and interventions be evaluated for their impact on working conditions and on worker health. This page will be updated as further COVID-19-related contracts are bargained. Please share your bargaining strategies and accomplishments with us at [contact@healthywork.org](mailto:contact@healthywork.org), so that we can discuss them here.

## References:

1. Griego K. Los Angeles Teachers Use Contract Action Teams to Win COVID-19 Victory. *Labor Notes*. April 2020. <https://labornotes.org/>.
2. Schuhrke J. Even in a Pandemic, the University of Illinois Doesn't Care About Its Grad Workers. *Jacobin*. March 2020. <https://jacobinmag.com/>.
3. Kasimova Z, Tefft D. Chicago Grad Workers First to Win COVID-19 Demands. *Labor Notes*. April 2020. <https://labornotes.org/>.
4. Petty S. Organizing COVID-19 Action Teams in New York Hospitals. *Labor Notes*. April 2020. <https://labornotes.org/>.
5. Lisi M. Putting members first: UUP provides PPE and negotiates to meet member needs. United University Professions (UUP). June 2020; 47 (4), pp. 4-5. <https://uupinfo.org/>.

6. Shelby Ziesing and John Green. [How Oakland Teachers Took Control of Our Return to School](#). *Labor Notes*, July 2021.