

Building Political Influence Through Contract Language

Unlike private employees, public employees can elect who their boss is. Whether it be a mayor, governor, executive or other official, these politicians are elected by the citizens they represent.

Through political action, public employees can help elect candidates who share their interests. These elected officials set policy and establish laws that directly affect public employees' working terms and conditions—they become their boss. Therefore, it is critical that public employees are informed, involved and continually seek to gain positive, political influence.

Getting Members Involved

Attempts to gain political influence can take many forms—endorsing candidates, campaigning, advertising, voting, contributing funds or lobbying.

All of these require a considerable amount of activity, whether you are gaining influence for gun manufacturers, business owners, or public employees. However, there are also other ways to make it easier for union members to participate in the political process.

One vehicle for making political activities more accessible is by bargaining language in the contract. Members could potentially negotiate language that will afford them the opportunity to participate in and support political activities.

For instance, a non-discrimination clause could be bargained which would prohibit discrimination against employees because of political activity, affiliation, or beliefs. Employees have the right to engage in political activity on their own time without fear of penalty or reprisal. This language is already in most Local 17 contracts.

Another example of bargaining in a way that would promote political activity is proposing language that would allow employees to leave work so they can have time to vote on Election Day.

Building Power

Maintaining a political action fund (often called a PAC) to help elect or re-elect officials who support Local 17 members' issues, including maintaining a good wage and benefit package, is critical.

In negotiations, members could propose a contractual provision whereby employees could voluntarily contribute to the union's political action fund. Local 17 has a political action fund which



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supports city, county and state political candidates who support working families' issues. City, county and health district employees can donate regularly through payroll deduction. Contact Local 17 Finance Director Jackie Miller (miller@ifpte17.org or 206-328-7321 ext. 102) for more information. However, the contract language has yet to be negotiated in most bargaining units.

While bargaining committee members can gain contractual language that makes it easier for members to participate or support political activities, it is important that each member vote and take part in political activities to protect not only their rights on the job, but also their jobs.

Through elections and bargaining, members can gain a “say” in who their boss is and ultimately how their contract may turn out. – *By Jennifer Tran, Local 17 Union Representative*

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