



# PEA Broadside February 2017



## President's Column

In my visits to schools during the last few weeks, there have been many questions regarding our current contract negotiations. This month's column will address those questions.

- How is this contract negotiations process different from previous ones? Why should the membership expect an outcome different from those we have had in the last two contracts?

One important response to this question is that the preparation for these contract negotiations is different. Many of our recent contracts were actually "contract extensions," wherein the basic contract remained the same but adjustments were made to a salary and benefits package. These extensions were always approved by the membership by a wide margin. During Sonia Basko's first term as PEA President, PARC determined that contract negotiations should be wider in scope and that the entire contract would be under review. The negotiations team at that time included our local NYSUT LRS, John Hickey. Through no fault of our hard-working negotiating team, as the negotiations process wore on, there was a growing feeling that the process was becoming mired in minutia and that we were not making significant progress. As you may recall, when the contract proposal was presented to the membership, there was much debate about NYSUT involvement in the negotiations and there were conflicting ideas regarding the data that was supplied as part of our negotiations strategy. That contract was ultimately passed by the membership, but for the first time in many years, there was considerable vocal opposition to the proposal and much displeasure voiced when the contract was ratified.

Our most recent contract negotiations process was similar to the one just described. The subsequent ratification was the closest in recent memory and it left a significant percentage of our membership disappointed in the outcome. Unfortunately, whereas some members were genuinely pleased with the contract, others felt that we had turned our backs on new hires and retirees, with both groups shouldering higher health care contributions.

When I ran for this office, I made it a top priority to take a close look at our negotiations process to ensure that all of our members would be presented with a contract proposal that was fair and just, reflecting all stakeholders' worth to this district. I made a pledge that I would settle for nothing less.

Every PEA President has a different negotiation style or preference with which he or she is comfortable. My negotiating style is based on transparency and careful preparation. I wanted



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a negotiations team that would be reflective of our union... young teachers at the start of their careers, veteran teachers looking toward retirement, and those experienced educators in between. I wanted a team that would be comprised of elementary, middle, and high school teachers-- some of whom were experienced in negotiations-- and others who were new to the process.

Before I asked the district to open contract negotiations, I was focused on two things: gathering and sorting current irrefutable data that would be essential to this process, and being prepared to provide as much transparency as I could about the progress of our negotiations.

- Are there any plans in place in case contract negotiations “stall” or do not stay on schedule?

Yes, we do have plans in place. Should district decisions warrant action on the part of the PEA, I will be asking for your support. I will not hesitate to utilize the media as well as to enlist community involvement. The hope is always to secure a contract in a mutually respectful and professional manner, and so far our talks with the district have been just that. Make no mistake, however. The PEA is ready to respond appropriately to any situation that may arise. It will be essential that we stand together as one union, committed to remaining united.

This contract is critical for us, and we must come together as a union to stand strong for the greater good. We are undervalued for everything that we do. We are negotiating a contract that will raise up all of us. This contract cannot and will not be negotiated for the benefit of new teachers over veteran teachers, or on-step teachers over off-step teachers, or even active teachers over retirees. We simply cannot and will not disadvantage one group to advance another. Now, and as we look to the future, we cannot and will not pit one segment of our membership against another.

- Why can't you tell us specifically what you are asking for in negotiations?

To put it bluntly, sharing specifics during the negotiations process does not help us. Traditionally, both sides hold their cards close to the vest during negotiations. “Leaking” specific information about terms or strategy can create false impressions – either positive or negative – and can fuel the rumor mill. Once a rumor is out there under public scrutiny, tensions can build that distract us from our ultimate goal – a fair and just contract for our membership. Like it or not, the public impression is important, and throughout this process, the PEA has done nothing, and let me stress **nothing**, to cause public distrust during our negotiations to secure a fair contract. It is in our best interest to keep it that way.



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More importantly, from a legal standpoint, if details are leaked, either purposely or inadvertently, one side or the other could claim “bad faith” in the negotiating process. This is a serious accusation with both legal and practical implications.

It is not a surprise that most, if not all, contract negotiations deal primarily with issues of salary and benefits. Our negotiations process is no different. We are asking for a salary and benefits package that would honor the work that we do and make us commensurate with our neighboring districts. We believe that the irrefutable data that we have gathered up to this point (and are continuing to gather) make a strong case for our contract proposal. We have listened to your concerns, and we have heard you. It is our firm belief that we have developed a proposal that reflects the matters of most importance to our members.

- How long do you think it will take to obtain a new contract?

It is impossible to guess how long it will take before we have a new contract in place. I think both sides would like to see a new contract sooner rather than later. One thing is certain: I will not bring a proposal to the membership that does not reflect our professional contributions to this district. I want to ensure that every Penfield teacher feels that he or she is a valued member of the educational community.

- What should teachers be doing in the meantime?

The best thing for all of us to do now is what we do best – taking care of our students. It is business as usual while negotiations are taking place. Your job is to continue to be the outstanding educators you are. My job is to make sure that you are properly remunerated for it.

Thank you for your continued support. I look forward to speaking with you at contract information sessions in your individual schools. I will be speaking with your building reps to set up a schedule. In the meantime, do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns.

Together we are Union Strong.

In solidarity,

Bob Young

