

The Role of Unions in Achieving Better Salaries and Pay Equity

By Donna Mandel

What does it take to win better salaries @ Your Library? In a lot of libraries, both public and academic, people have found that the way to increase wages and improve working conditions in general is by forming a union.

The basic principle of a union is that we are stronger working together for something we need than working individually.

Between 17 and 21% of library workers are unionized, depending on how you count. But in those places, on average, people are making significantly higher wages than in non-union libraries.

On average, union librarians make 37% more than non-union librarians. This is according to the Bureau of National Affairs.

But the difference is even more dramatic among support staff. Support staff covered by a union contract are making 42% more than those without a union.

What accounts for this difference? What can unions do that raises their members' salaries to such an extent?

First of all, we need to remember these changes don't happen over night. Once library workers vote to join a union, change comes gradually from year to year. But over time the changes in wages, benefits and working conditions really add up.

There are several basic ways that a union can improve salaries. In order to illustrate these, I conducted interviews with library workers in different parts of the country, including support staff, librarians and a library director. These examples are all from public libraries, but the principles apply equally to academic libraries.

The first, most basic, way a union can raise wages is through a collective bargaining agreement, a contract.

By negotiating a contract you do two things: you come up with common objectives and work together to achieve them, and what is agreed on you get in writing in a legally binding document.

This is a guarantee that people working in non-union libraries can't count on.

Let's start in the mid-west. Holland, Michigan is on the West side of the state, sort of between Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo but closer to Lake Michigan.

The Holland Public library is the only public library in its region to have a union. The support staff is represented by SEIU Local 517.

A number of years ago the state passed a law to create library districts and restructure the governance of the public libraries. Previously, they might have been in school districts or within city governments.

As they've been doing this restructuring they've taken the opportunity to eliminate people's jobs and change their terms of employment.

Local 517 represents 6 or 7000 people statewide. At the Holland Public Library, the union got a written agreement that all jobs, wages and benefits would be kept intact after the restructuring.

Other libraries without unions suffered job loss, pay cuts and reclassifications. In Lansing, 100 miles away, a lot of people lost their jobs.

Holland is the best paid library in Western, Michigan, ahead of the bigger cities. Within 5-10 miles of Holland there are libraries where people are paid half as much, without benefits.

A library aide in Holland, a shelver, starts at 12.34 per hour plus benefits. In two years they make \$14.70. Whenever there is a vacancy in Holland, people from neighboring library systems try to get jobs at Holland.

All support staff working over 19 hours must be in the union and be covered by the contract. In the past two years, the union has increased its membership by almost 50% by getting jobs upgraded to 20 hours. All those people now get benefits.

The librarians in Holland have not unionized. They need to work 40 hours to be guaranteed benefits. If they work less than 40 hours, the library can arbitrarily pay them benefits or not.

They have no control over what benefits they get. Recently their prescription drug co-pay was raised to \$10. The union members still only pay \$2 because it's in their contract.

Through negotiating successive contracts, some support staff got their salaries close to the level of librarians. The librarians threatened to form their own union. The library quickly agreed to a 10% raise for librarians.

This is an example of how unions can even raise salaries for people who aren't members.

A lot of you know Diane Fay, who is here today. Diane works for Boston Public Library in Massachusetts. She is a supervisor in cataloging, although she is not a librarian, and has reached the top of her grade in salary.

The assistant head of her department, a librarian, left 3 years ago and was not replaced. Over time Diane has assumed a lot of this person's supervisory duties, including directing the work of librarians.

Within the first year Diane filed a compensation grade appeal through her union, AFSCME Local 1526.

She was able to do this because she had a union contract. She argued that her job had changed. Her pay was not commensurate with her duties.

Her case went to binding arbitration. During the second day of hearings, the library offered Diane a settlement.

She got an additional \$98 a week with 6 months back pay. How many library workers do their supervisor's jobs and get nothing extra?

A second way unions raise salaries is by working together with other community organizations to raise employment standards in the community. Living wage laws are a great example of this.

Living wage laws have passed in 82 cities or counties around the country. Dozens of other places have active campaigns to raise people's wages above the poverty line, and significantly above the federal minimum.

Most living wage laws result from a coalition effort between unions and community organizations, such as churches and anti-poverty groups.

Traditionally living wage laws targeted city or county contracts or subsidies, rather than public employees. But increasingly, local coalitions are discovering that people on the public payroll, even in the library, are working for not much above minimum wage.

In Santa Cruz, California, a countywide coalition of unions, church groups, social services groups and civic groups formed a coalition to advocate for a living wage ordinance in the county.

They spent a year and a half doing research on who were the workers that most needed a living wage.

They originally thought they'd be focusing on city and county contractors. But through their research they discovered that 60% of city employees were temp workers, with low wages and no benefits.

A significant part of those were library pages: all unbenefitted temp workers making close to minimum wage in the joint city/county library system. So the campaign decided to focus their efforts on temp workers in addition to contractors.

The city officials who supported the living wage in principle balked at the idea of including all the temp workers. The coalition came to an agreement with the city.

In exchange for not including the temp workers in the Living Wage Ordinance, SEIU Local 415, which represents the city and county's permanent workers, would be allowed to organize the temp workers through card check.

Card check is the Canadian system of union organizing. It means if a majority of the workers in a place sign a card saying they want to be represented by a union, they have a union.

The city sent letters to 650 temp workers asking whether their names could be released to the union. Only 8 responded negatively. The union contacted the rest and 80% of those reached signed union cards.

Within a year the temp workers had a contract. The pages won a 30% pay raise with regular step increases. They get prorated benefits.

Through this process the union also got agreement to start converting temporary workers to permanent. They are now in the second phase of the conversions, which will result in the majority of city workers being permanent.

A similar community-labor coalition in Little Rock Arkansas recently passed a living wage law that will bring library clerks up from about \$6 an hour to \$9 an hour by July 1.

Unions have also been involved for many years in getting cities and counties to do pay equity studies, and in getting the results implemented.

AFCME has a great guide to Pay Equity called "We deserve it!" It's available at their web site and I recommend you look for it.

The workers of the San Jose Public Library went on strike back in 1981 over pay equity. Now strikes are very rare in libraries, and I don't know of too many places where a strike centered on the issue of pay equity.

But in the late 70's the city of San Jose decided to do a comparable worth study including only management. The City Employee's union, AFSCME Local 101, demanded that its members be included.

An evaluation was done where every job in the city was evaluated and rated. Job classifications were consolidated and job descriptions were cleaned up.

The union trained its members to fill out the questionnaires. The union was involved at every step. They appealed job reclassifications that weren't appropriate.

Based on the pay equity study, the city management decided to raise management salaries 25-30%. But they stalled in negotiations over raising the salaries of non-management employees.

The union members took a vote to authorize a strike over pay equity. The city then offered them a comparable worth proposal, but took it out of the general salary increase for everyone.

This was not acceptable to city workers and they decided to strike. The strike lasted 8 days. All of the libraries were closed.

The city finally agreed to a 15% comparable worth increase over two years in addition to the regular negotiated raises. Every two years for the next ten years the union won an improvement in pay equity.

San Jose Library employees are now among the best paid in the country.

I often hear people object, how can a union raise my salary if there's no money in the budget for salary increases? In many places, the answer is that the union works to raise the budget.

In the best situation, the union forms an alliance with library administration to make the library a higher priority for funding from the City or County or University or wherever the budget comes from.

Martin Gomez was the director of the Oakland Public Library from 1990 to 1995. He believes that a smart library administrator sees the union as a valuable ally to achieve common goals.

During his tenure there was a constant threat of budget cuts. The library needed a stable source of funding.

In 1993, the library administration tried to get a ballot initiative for a special library tax, Measure N, passed on its own. Unfortunately the measure failed.

Martin realized that if he wanted to get a ballot measure passed, he needed to work together with the union. The union had a large grassroots base that could campaign in the city for the library tax. Together they negotiated a deal.

The union would support the new library tax initiative, Measure O, and in return, the library would agree to several things: no staff cuts, expansion of the career ladder for para-professionals by creating a new senior library assistant classification, and a full-time children's librarian in every branch.

Notice that who really benefits most from this entire agreement is the community that uses the library.

The union launched a major political campaign in favor of measure O, and the measure passed in 1994. All the other elements of the agreement were implemented.

Martin believes that this set the stage for an ongoing positive working relationship between him and the union.

They had the precedent for working side-by-side. And they had developed an appreciation for each other's positions. This facilitated future contract negotiations.

His conclusion is that when a library administrator can develop a good working relationship with a library union, it's a win-win situation that can enhance public service and efficiency.

Collective bargaining, community coalitions and campaigns, pay equity studies, and political clout. These are four ways unions raise salaries and improve working conditions.

Together they account for a lot of the wage differentials between union and non-union libraries.

Unions are not the solution to every problem. They're also easier to organize in some states than in others.

But the bottom line truth is that when library workers work together in a union to improve their work situations, they have a much better chance of succeeding than any of them has on their own.

Thank you.