

WORKING
FILMS

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WE BUILD POWER

WHEN WE ORGANIZE. WE WIN.

DISCUSSION GUIDE



DIRECTORS STATEMENT

This film is meant to be about you and me and the future of education. We live in a time when our public institutions from – PBS to the Department of Education – are under attack by billionaires and the politicians they fund. Thankfully, we also all have the power to change that. Arlene Inouye was a speech therapist and the UTLA bargaining co-chair through multiple historic contract campaigns, and Yoni Golijov is a documentary filmmaker and co-directed a short film about the 2019 UTLA strike.

We made this film, *We Build Power*, to share lessons and questions from organizers in Los Angeles who are defending and expanding public education. Teachers and educators have a special place in our communities, and therefore wield a particular position of power. Most people in the US have a connection to their public school which is in every state and community, whether they are a student, parent, caregiver or school worker. Public education is a cornerstone of our democracy and one of the last public institutions that has not been privatized. Since the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, public education has been under attack with private schools and charter schools touted as the solution.

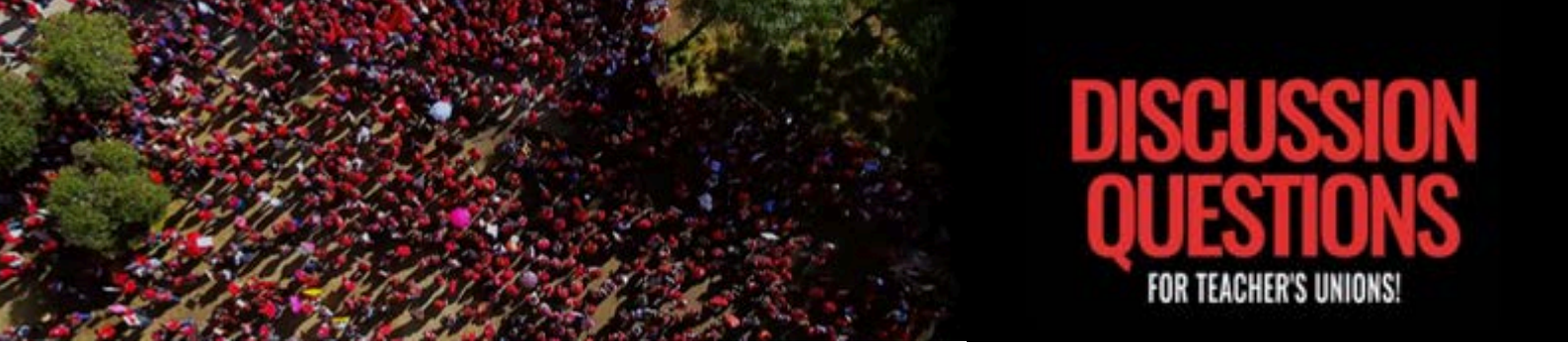
UTLA members transformed their union in 2014, and took bold steps for a vision of the union that included community and student demands along with the interests of other workers (including the classified union of SEIU 99). A progressive caucus within UTLA called Union Power, pushed for an organizing union centered around racial and social justice and the Schools LA Students Deserve. They won the leadership positions in UTLA, and were able to make the changes needed for a democratic union that has been increasing its power and influence. They are part of a national movement for taking back our schools from billionaires and privatizers.

What UTLA has been able to do is something that every union and organization can do. By intentionally listening to members, students, parents, community, and other workers they have systematically organized around a shared vision for the greater good. A vision that can fight authoritarianism and billionaires attacks, and to preserve a strong and free public educational system. You can do this too. We hope this film resonates with you, and serves as a tool for conversations with your co-workers and community.

– Arlene Inouye and Yoni Golijov, Co-Directors of *We Build Power*



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

FOR TEACHER'S UNIONS!

These questions can help guide conversations with unionized teachers. They're meant to help educators use the film as a mirror, to reflect on their own schools and communities and consider how lessons from the film might apply locally.

1.) Before UTLA's transformation, teachers in LA were often isolated and felt powerless. It's a sharp contrast to the strong, fighting union we see today. Do you see any parallels between early UTLA and your own local organizing? Are there challenges in your own organizing that you feel inspired to take on?

2.) As UTLA began its transformation into a fighting union, they took a new approach, officers met with members daily during teacher lunch breaks, digging deeper into issues like privatization, and building trust by showing up, listening, and having one-on-one conversations with members. Which, if any, of these strategies feel worth trying in your own efforts to transform your union?

3.) Part of UTLA's success came from their ability to go on the offensive, rather than simply reacting to the district's moves. How important do you think it is for a union to be proactive? How would you evaluate your union on a proactive to defensive continuum?

4.) UTLA used to have a one-way relationship with parents. Now, they work side by side in a true partnership to fight for public education. How would you describe your union's relationship with parents? Is it more one-directional, or do you see it as an equal partnership? What steps could you take to equalize the relationship?

5.) Parents were crucial in providing support to the 2019 teachers strike. UTLA would not have won the strike without parents and the support of the broader community. What do you think is possible if your union had more support from the community? What steps could you take to build a strong relationship with parents and a broader coalition?

6.) UTLA collaborated with the student-led organization, Students Deserve, to fight for shared goals like removing school police and investing in the Black Student Achievement Program which brought resources to historically marginalized schools. Has your union ever partnered with student-led groups in this way? What could that look like in your context?



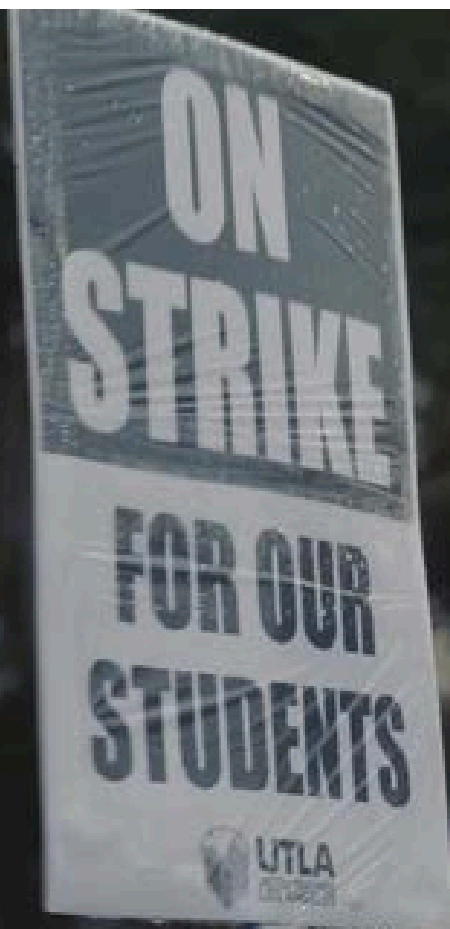
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

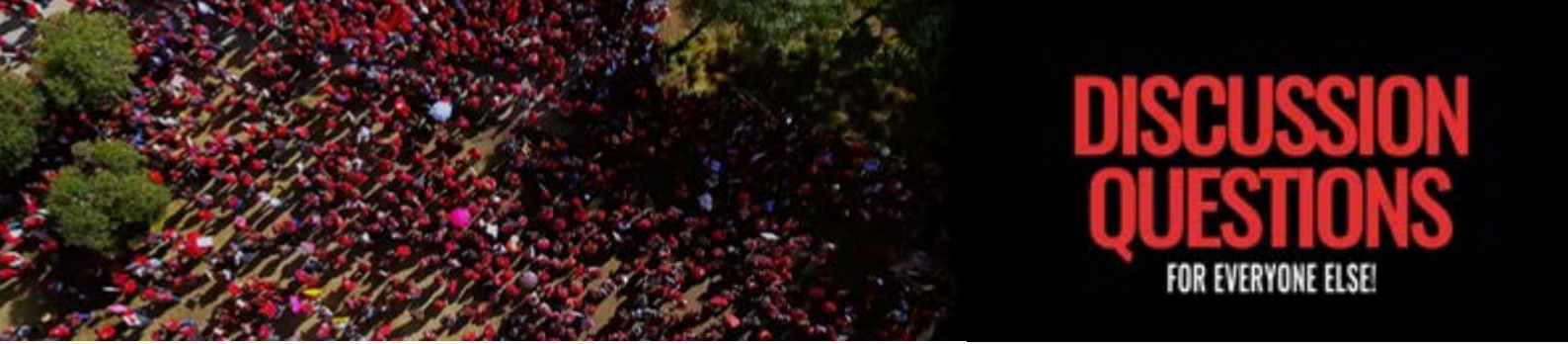
FOR TEACHERS UNIONS!

7.) During the 2019 strike, 80% of students stayed home. What does that level of student support make possible? What is your relationship with students/student organizations at your school? What might it take to build that kind of student power where you are?

8.) UTLA educators went on strike in solidarity with 35,000 support staff represented by SEIU Local 99, including bus drivers, custodians, and teachers aids. What does it make possible when these different unions stand together instead of being pitted against each other?

9.) Workers faced real fears, including loss of pay, food insecurity, and retaliation, but still chose to strike. Why do you think they felt it was worth the risk? What gave them the confidence to act?





DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

FOR EVERYONE ELSE!

These questions are for anyone building power in their own community or workplace. They invite reflection on what this film teaches us about organizing across sectors and how people can come together to build power and win!

1.) Before UTLA's transformation, teachers were isolated and powerless. It's a sharp contrast to the strong, fighting union we see today. Do you see any parallels between early UTLA and your own local organizing? Are there challenges in your own organizing that you feel inspired to take on?

2.) As UTLA began its transformation into a fighting union, they took a new approach, regularly emailing members, digging deeper into issues that affected them, and building trust by showing up, listening, and having real conversations with members. Which, if any, of these strategies feel worth trying in your own efforts to transform your union?

3.) Part of UTLA's success came from their ability to go on the offensive, rather than simply reacting to the district's moves. How important do you think it is for a union to be proactive?

4.) For educators, it is important to build power and solidarity with students, parents and other school staff – who are the analogous communities you serve or work with in your jobs that you want to build power with? What steps could you take to equalize the relationship with these communities?

5.) UTLA benefited from strong relationships with parents and students, that were crucial in providing support to the 2019 teachers strike. UTLA would not have won the strike without parents and the support of the broader community. What do you think is possible if your union had more support from the community?

6.) UTLA educators went on strike in solidarity with 35,000 support staff represented by SEIU Local 99, including bus drivers, custodians, and teachers aids. What does it make possible when these different unions stand together instead of being pitted against each other? Are there other unions or non-union workforces you want to build solidarity with locally?

7.) Workers faced real fears, including loss of pay, food insecurity, and retaliation, but still chose to strike. Why do you think they felt it was worth the risk? What gave them the confidence to act?



TAKE ACTION!

If you are ready to take action, here's what you can do:

- Using the ideas generated from the discussion, assess your union, its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT), what is needed to strengthen the internal structure and organization, as well as building a powerful movement for broader collective change.
- May Day Strong is planning for a massive peaceful demonstration of disruptive tactics with a broad coalition of unions with organizations, parents and community on May 1, 2026. **Get involved at maydaystrong.org.**

MAY DAY



- The UAW and CTU have called for a general strike in 2028 to call out economic inequality, attacks on public education, the erosion of democratic rights and the authoritarian drift of US politics. UAW has asked other unions to align their contracts with the Big 3 automakers contracts that expire May 1, 2028 and to consider other actions they can take in May 2028. **Get involved at may1.uaw.org.**



- The two national education unions- National Education Association (NEA), and American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and Education International have political programs and national/international campaigns are critical in building a massive progressive front. **Get involved by visiting nea.org and aft.org.**



- Make your voice known by ongoing calls to members of Congress and political leaders. The Congressional switchboard **(202) 224-3121** will connect you to your congresspersons. Congressional offices keeping track of input from constituents.



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