



COMMUNIQUE

THEY DID IT!

STORYCORPS SEALS THE DEAL

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It was years in the making to get both union representation and then a contract, but StoryCorps workers finally have both — and they couldn't be happier.

Oct. 21, 2019 — the official first day of the first StoryCorps contract — is one that will be remembered by StoryCorps members and Private Sector Staff Representative Lena Solow for quite some time.

"These members stuck it out through a really tough two years of bargaining after their fight for union representation," said Private Sector Staff Representative Lena Solow. "Their generosity with each other and commitment to the fight was truly inspiring. They were strong fighters at the bargaining table and in the workplace, which resulted in a stellar first contract."

During the battle for representation and for a contract, it was, in fact, the unity and solidarity of the workers that sent a strong message to the StoryCorps board and management.

During the contract negotiations, they sent a letter that read, in part, "When we, the workers of StoryCorps, chose to unionize, we did not intend to maintain the status quo. Although we've made some progress, management's proposals are still pushing some of the same old policies and low wages that led us here. We came together to make StoryCorps a **more equitable and sustainable place to work**. We saw, and still see, the potential for StoryCorps to be such a workplace...We are asking for what we deserve as workers."

While it took a bit more than just "asking," the new, ground-breaking contract secures many new benefits, including:

- Total 7.5% raises during life of the contract
- 20 vacation days after one year of employment
- Yearly professional development fund for each employee
- Remote work policy
- Comp time policy
- New health insurance plan with broader network, lower copays, and decreased monthly premium costs
- Yearly stipend for mental health care
- Guaranteed give-to-retirement plan for those making under \$50,000 and match for those making above \$50,000
- Immediate increase of \$4,000-\$5,000 in salaries for the lowest paid employees

StoryCorps is a non-profit organization whose mission is to record, preserve, and share the stories of Americans from all backgrounds and beliefs in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world. The nonprofit was inspired in large part by the work of Studs Terkel, who documented histories of common Americans and advocated for labor unions from the 1960s through the '90s. To date, StoryCorps has recorded more than 60,000 interviews all across the country. The stories they create are to remind one another of shared humanity, to strengthen and build connections between people, to teach the value of listening, and to weave into the fabric of our culture the understanding that everyone's story matters.

And if everyone's stories matter, so too does the story of the StoryCorps workers themselves.

Their battle began in late 2016 when a group of StoryCorps workers got together to strategize about how they could improve conditions at their workplace. According to Maura Johnson, Program Specialist in Community Training who this January will be at StoryCorps five years, the idea of a union came about because workers were experiencing sudden layoffs, working for low wages, and weren't able to negotiate over working conditions. They wanted a seat at the table to remedy these issues and discuss others like healthcare benefits, severance packages, and greater transparency around pay. That's when they reached out to Local 1180 to help them start the process of unionizing.

Johnson said she herself joined the organizing effort because she had been in a union at a past nonprofit job and had seen it work there.

"Given the importance of the work that we all do at StoryCorps, representing narratives from across the country, it felt important to have representation of a union to support one another in this emotional work. We had seen the results of layoffs in the office and the way that nonprofits can demand so much of their workers. Unionizing was a communal process of workers coming together and wanting to support one another when we had not been able to have that support from our management," she said.

In May 2017, when the workers went public with their intent to unionize, StoryCorps management declined to voluntarily recognize the union. Instead, they immediately launched an anti-union campaign that even drew media attention. In the weeks that followed, management

required all employees to attend meetings where they discussed their opposition to the union.

That left the members no choice but to go to a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) vote, including a hearing to determine unit eligibility that delayed the vote by nearly three months. During that time, the workers stayed strong by hosting happy hours and lunches, posting signs around the office to make sure their coworkers knew their rights, and telling their story whenever they could.

It worked.

On Sept. 13, 2017, the NLRB announced the results of the representation election — StoryCorps workers voted by an 83 percent margin for a union voice.

Soon after winning their election, the workers jumped into contract negotiations and faced their first hurdle — the closing of the San Francisco booth. Members rallied around their laid off coworkers and secured severance, including continuation of health insurance, which eventually got secured in the contract as guaranteed for all future layoffs.

However, that guarantee didn't come without serious determination and drive by the Bargaining Committee and the members themselves. Staff Rep Lena Solow, Local 1180 Organizer Leslie Fine, and CWA District 1 worked with StoryCorps members for two years, planning actions that included t-shirt and button days, StoryCorps app recordings, picketing the StoryCorps gala and chanting "Dave and Robin hear our call, 2% is way too small!"

StoryCorps National Facilitator Rochelle Hoi-Yiu Kwan who has been a member since March 2018, said that despite the difficult contract negotiations, members never gave up and continued to support each other. "We staged a walk-out during an all-staff meeting, a picket line outside the annual gala and in front of our office, a full recording day with labor organizers and StoryCorps union supporters. We had management walking on eggshells, never quite knowing when something would happen next. Our unit came together to support each other and push us all along until we finally reached a contract," Kwan said.

Johnson said members felt empowered by these actions, "like walking into CEO Robin Sparkman's office together to deliver the letter saying we wanted to unionize."

"The power dynamics in that room if you walked in alone would be so different, and that shifts immediately when you have a room full of people in red shirts with this letter in hand facing your boss communally. It totally shifted my perspective on what it means to be in a workplace and navigate these power dynamics," Johnson said.

Local 1180 President Gloria Middleton said the battles for recognition and a contract at StoryCorps should not have been as difficult as they were.

"Many other non-profits have organized without so much conflict and pushback," she said. "At 1180, we represent more than a dozen private sector shops and we have not experienced these types of obstacles with other shops."

Middleton said that management's sentiment felt during the organizing attempt was symptomatic of the anti-union movement spreading across the country during the *Janus* Supreme Court case and being pushed by

the right-wing. However, since that time, unions have seen a huge uptick in membership and have watched their favorability ratings continue to rise as well.

She referenced a StoryCorps Union Facebook post from 2018 that stands out as summarizing the problem.

"Studs Terkel once said, 'Respect on the job and a voice at the workplace shouldn't be something Americans have to work overtime to achieve.' As a union, we've worked countless unpaid hours to achieve just that, and we expect the same level of respect and dedication from our managers who sit across from us at the bargaining table."

"In spite of management pushback, we're proud of the contract we were able to achieve together and look forward to a productive relationship," Middleton said. "These members were an inspiration in their care for each other and tenacity through a hard fight for both unionization and a contract."

Kwan said that as a newcomer to both StoryCorps and the bargaining process, she found the negotiation meetings themselves quite infuriating.

"As someone who joined the Bargaining Committee pretty late in the game, I had a lot to catch up on and was so thankful for all the work that the Committee had already done up until then. Each time, we would arrive early to prepare with each other in order to start our meeting on time. And each time, we would continue to push, knowing that StoryCorps had more to give than they were letting on and knowing that our staff deserved more than what StoryCorps was offering."

Kwan said the long process of negotiations was both exhausting and demoralizing. And yet, throughout the entire time of contract negotiations, their unit came together in unbelievable solidarity. Now, StoryCorps members know that this is only the beginning.

"This first contract has laid a very strong foundation for our union contracts to come and ensures that future staff will have the opportunity to flourish in a workplace that truly cares for them as much as StoryCorps cares about our participants," Kwan said.

Prior to StoryCorps, Kwan had never been part of a union workplace and wasn't sure what to expect.

"To be quite honest, I never knew much about unions at all. I guess I always knew that unions were meant to protect the workers by advocating for a fair workplace, but I never could have imagined the feeling of solidarity until I became a part of one. The feeling of looking out for, and being looked out for, by fellow staff members who I may not work with on a daily basis, by union members from other organizations who come out to support our actions, by past StoryCorps staff who continue to push us and celebrate our successes with us, by the woman on the street who saw a few of us walk by in our red 1180 shirts and shouted 'Go 1180!' There is a collective understanding, vision, and strength at the foundation of union organizing that makes me so thankful to be a part of it," Kwan said.

And that is what the fight for unionization and a contract is all about. ■

