

# Merrie Najimy

## Local:

Concord Teachers Association

## Your Biography and Experiences:

Struggling to learn and read, and feeling invisible in the curriculum as a child, inspired me to want to teach. This led me to what is now my 27th year of teaching elementary school. Most of those years have been in Concord, MA. When I began teaching, educators, schools and entire districts were largely in control of their curriculum, assessment and instructional practices. This is what made teaching and learning meaningful.



The privatization agenda for education has robbed education of its meaning, purpose and joy and threatens democracy. I am a union organizer because I believe in the power of building movements to bring social change.

I've served as president of the Concord Teachers Association for a decade and was a founder of EDU. In Concord, we endured a bullying principal, a privatization scheme against unionized bus drivers, and a retaliation campaign against me for my union activity. Morale across both the Concord and Concord-Carlisle Districts was on a rapid decline. We stood together, developed our relationships with each other and across locals, with parents, and the broader community. We lost our fear and built a movement.

After three years of struggle, we stopped the bus privatization, ended the retaliation against me, and the principal resigned in disgrace. The parents and community members involved in our movement went on to run School Committee candidates. By 2016, they won 4 of the 5 School Committee seats and the Superintendent will be moving on at the end of her contract in June 2017. We went on to open bargaining and won one of our strongest contracts ever.

## Engaging members:

- *How do we engage rank-and-file members to understand the union as a way to both address the immediate problems in their working lives AND build a better world?*

**We need to have a vision about public education that comes from what brings us joy and meaning in the work we do with our students.** It needs to be a shared vision, developed with members, families, students and our communities.

One way to engage our members and develop a vision is through **open bargaining**. The Concord Teachers Association (CTA) lead conversations across our union about the things that brought our members joy in their work with students, what sucked the joy out of their work and what they wanted to change. We developed a platform and proposals based on the themes that came from the conversations, and our members ratified the platform. We brought them into the negotiation sessions, caucused with them and engaged them in a contract campaign along the way. Each morning after a bargaining session, members updated other members about negotiations. Because the members were

involved in the decision making all along the way and engaging each other, they experienced themselves as the union.

**At the same time we need to fight back the broad attacks.** In our locals, we will also connect with the power of the union on a very personal level, if we share our problems, stick together and act together to solve our problems. Our personal attacks will become shared attacks. The solutions will become collective. We will break the isolation and shame and begin to lose our fear, even when we fight the smallest fights, **together**. This is how we **become** the union.

- *In your experience, what has worked well and what has not?*

When members identify the issues and decide on the solutions, they act together. When they act together, they build their collective power. This is what works. But when we try to rally people on issues and/or messages that have not been decided by them, they are likely not to participate.

### **Transforming the culture of the MTA:**

*The MTA is officially an association of locals that are independent in their actions. This, along with a longstanding culture of relying on local presidents and field reps to hold the expertise and authority in locals, has made it difficult to organize around assaults that are statewide and impact every local.*

- *How do we transform MTA culture to cultivate both rank-and-file organizing at the local level and vigorous action on statewide fights such as the Fair Share Amendment?*

The **starting point** is when members see themselves as the union in the way that I described in the question above. This transformation leads to members seeing themselves as **the MTA**. It is beginning to happen. The MTA has held open bargaining summits, and meetings and workshops to end high stakes testing, take on the evaluation system and bully principal, defend immigrant students and confront Islamophobia. I have played a central role in planning and facilitating many of these workshops and meetings. Members are showing up, even if their local leaders are not. They are excited to learn, and are developing plans and going back to build campaigns in their locals and in their communities.

To transform the work of these groups from MTA led to rank-and-file driven, we must take another step; form coordinating committees made up of members of each of these campaigns. Local and statewide member-lead coordinating committees lay the foundation for statewide organizing and to connect the struggles.

### **Loss of agency fee:**

*In the next year, we are highly likely to lose the right to collect agency fees. Estimates of the loss of membership range from a low of 4% (the current percentage of MTA agency fee payers) to a high of 25% or more (overall losses in Wisconsin public sector unions).*

- *Assume that the Supreme Court makes such a ruling in June 2018, after you have been elected and before you take office. What actions would you take, and what would you recommend, in order for the MTA to respond to this crisis?*

The response to the crisis doesn't begin after the ruling. It began three years ago, when we elected Barbara Madeloni to the presidency of the MTA. It continued with the fight and subsequent victory on

Question 2. It goes on now through the statewide work we are doing to fight high-stakes testing, the evaluation system and the bully principal.

**There is no magic pill.** There is no answer out there that we haven't thought of. There are no short cuts. Our ability to survive, and in fact thrive in the impending crisis grows stronger when our locals become the place where we walk around our buildings, talk and listen to each other, reach out to allies, identify our vision, problems and solutions together, take action and solve our problems collectively. I will continue to fortify the work of locals to build their collective power, further the work we've begun to end high-stakes testing, stop bullying principals, fighting against racism and austerity measures and harness that power to grow our statewide power.

Our members will respond yes, to the option of joining a union when they see themselves as the union.

**Three key issues:**

*What do you see as the three key issues the MTA faces, and what actions would you recommend to address them?*

The most immediate threat to our union is the Supreme Court case on agency fee. In my view, this threat makes the issue of continuing to build a rank and file movement the overarching issue for the MTA. This is how we will weather the storm. The barrage of issues that we face from austerity budgets, to the bullying evaluation system, to high stakes testing, have different levels of urgency to different locals from large, urban locals, to higher ed, to smaller more affluent locals. The MTA must fortify the organizing of the different locals who are being threatened by any of these issues.

**Electoral politics:**

*What are your thoughts about how the MTA should relate to the statehouse and electoral politics?*

Legislation, while important, is not the vehicle to change. Under the leadership of Barbara Madeloni, the MTA Government Relations Committee has put forth the most progressive legislation in its history. Yet, it gets watered down or dies in committee, despite our best efforts at lobbying.

It is, and always has been social movements that collapse systems of injustice. Movements create the change that legislation will then codify. Take high stakes testing as an example. If parents are unwilling to let their students take the tests, teachers are unwilling to administer the test and students are unwilling to take the test; **then there is no test**. That doesn't happen because of legislation.

When the president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association is judicious about when she visits the statehouse, legislators come to understand that her presence there is because of something big. That is when they stand up and take notice. It is our members who can develop relationships with their specific representatives and speak their truth to their elected official.

**EDU strengths and limitations:**

*What do you see as EDU's strengths AND limitations? What proposals do you have to strengthen EDU and address its limitations?*

As a founder of the EDU, I have witnessed our own transformation. We were the movement that got Barbara Madeloni elected. We have set the progressive agenda of the MTA through our new business

items. We have helped the Annual Meeting think critically about what internal democracy looks like. And when we act, we are effective.

We need to do two things to strengthen EDU: 1) build our own culture to be one where we mentor each other on how to build collective power and fight the fights in our own locals and 2) have a stronger presence in the statewide work that is being led by the MTA headquarters. We need to seize the opportunities to form and lead rank and file organizing committees to coordinate the developing statewide campaigns.

**What else would you like to add?**

Our goal is to help people break their isolation, believe in themselves and each other, and act together, in spite of fear. We have to build a vision for public education within our communities and fight to realize that vision. When we have problems we have to look to each other for the answers. When we do this we transform our union, our culture and lives. Our union is the way to gather the strength and power to reclaim what has been taken away from us.