

WINNING A RECORD CONTRACT



**A Case Study of the
2024 Contract Bargaining
Campaign at Bronx Defenders**

Climbing the Campaign Mountain

Bronx Defenders workers won a record contract by running a textbook contract campaign.

What's a contract campaign?

A contract campaign is a collective action plan with a beginning, middle, and end, working towards specific demands that we are trying to win.

A contract campaign has a target—someone who can give us what we want. And a contract campaign involves a series of escalating actions over time which progressively turn up the heat on the target and create the conditions for winning our demands.

Below is what is called a “campaign mountain.” This is a visual representation of some different phases of a typical contract campaign.

The campaign mountain helps us identify and plan in advance some of the ingredients we need to win, so that we can put them together in a way that maximizes our success.

Campaigns are critical to shifting the balance of power in our workplaces and industries. They also help us build confidence in each other and our ability to win when we are united.

They win in the short term, and they build our muscle for winning in the long term.

The Peak of Our Strength

Escalation Period

Resolution

Kick-off

Foundation

   @bxdunion



Introduction

The Bronx Defenders (BxD) is a legal services non-profit organization which provides representation to indigent residents of the Bronx in criminal, civil, family, and immigration matters. First organized in 2020, the over 250 members, including social workers, attorneys, investigators, advocates, and other staff, are represented by the Association of Legal Aid Attorneys (ALAA)—UAW Local 2325.

In 2024, members at BxD bargained a second contract with the employer which they successfully ratified in July after several months of negotiations.

Here is how they did it →



Foundation

Members' Demands

In order to develop their demands to present to management, the BxD Union elected a representative bargaining committee covering all areas of the office. The Bargaining Committee (BC) surveyed members and wrote up a draft of demands using the bargaining survey and other member input, which was circulated for membership feedback and criticism. The bargaining committee then revised the draft demands based on the feedback and sent out a final draft of the demands for membership ratification. **The demands were ratified by 93% of membership.**

	ALAA 3/18	BXD 3/18	ALAA 4/2	BXD 4/2	ALAA 4/30	BXD 4/30	ALAA 5/8	ALAA 5/22	BXD 5/22	ALAA 6/10	BXD 6/10	ALAA 6/13	BXD 6/13	BXD 6/20	ALAA 6/25 (Package Proposal)
1															
2	Salary														
3	Term	Demand	Response				Response		Response	Response				Response	Response
4	Salary	Demand				Response	Response		Response	Response				Response	Response
5	Longevity Bonus	Demand								Response	Response			Response	Response
6	Step Placement	Demand				Response	Response		Response	Response				Reject	Response
7	Economic														
8	PTO	Demand	Response	Response			Response	Response			Response	Response		Response	Response
9	Leave	Demand	Response	Response	Response				Response	Response	Response	Response		Response	Response
10	Professional Development	Demand							Response	Response	Response	Response		Response	Response
11	Non-Economic														
12	Supervision	Demand			Response	Response					Response	Response		Response	Response
13	Free Speech	Demand			Reject				Reject	Response				Response	Response
14	Telecommuting	Demand			Reject			Response			Response			Response	Response
15	Health and Safety	Demand								Response			Response	Response	Response
16	Accommodations	Demand			Response					Response				Response	Response
17	Union Representatives	Demand				Reject			Reject	Response				Reject	Response
18	Tentative Agreements														
19	1.8 Grievances		Proposal	Response			Response	Response	T/A						
20	Electronic Surveillance				Response	Response			T/A						
21	Arrangements	Demand			Response	Response			Response	Response	Response		Response	Response	T/A
22	Transit	Demand			Reject		Response		Reject	Response			Response	Response	T/A
23	Retirement	Demand			Reject	Response	Response		Response	Response			Response	Response	T/A
24	Pools	Demand			Response	Response			Response	Response				Response	T/A
25	Caseload + Workload	Demand											Response	Response	T/A
26	Withdrawn														
27	3.6 Labor-Management Committee		Proposal	Reject						Reject				Withdraw	Withdraw
28	Social Work Internships	Demand								Response				Reject	Withdraw
29	Student Loans	Demand								Response				Reject	Withdraw
30	Senior Status	Demand								Response				Reject	Withdraw
31	Staffing	Demand			Reject		Reject	Response		Response				Reject	Withdraw
32	Healthcare	Demand			Reject		Reject	Response		Response				Reject	Withdraw
33	Internal Communications	Demand			Reject	Response				Response				Reject	Withdraw
34	Trainings	Demand			Reject		Reject			Response				Reject	Withdraw
35	Mgmt Proposals									Response				Reject	Withdraw



Jumper Cables

Bargaining Updates

After each bargaining session, a rotating BC member would send an update to membership about what occurred in the bargaining session, including direct quotes from management’s lawyers about why they could not agree to their reasonable demands and other news from bargaining table. These emails also included a “bargaining tracker” with direct links to all of proposals—union and management—passed at the table, so that members could see directly for themselves the specific contract language.

Foundation

Choosing the Right Tools to Communicate Our Message

Social Media Campaign

In addition to the BC, the Union formed a “Contract Action Team” (CAT) which met weekly. One of the CAT’s first actions was to develop a sophisticated social media strategy highlighting the unhealthy working conditions in the workplace and the pay disparity between its workers and executives, which built broad support for the contract campaign. Later in the campaign, they turned to more traditional media and even a podcast to cover the BxD struggle.



BxD is proposing a rigid in-office policy.
What *amenities* does the office have to offer?

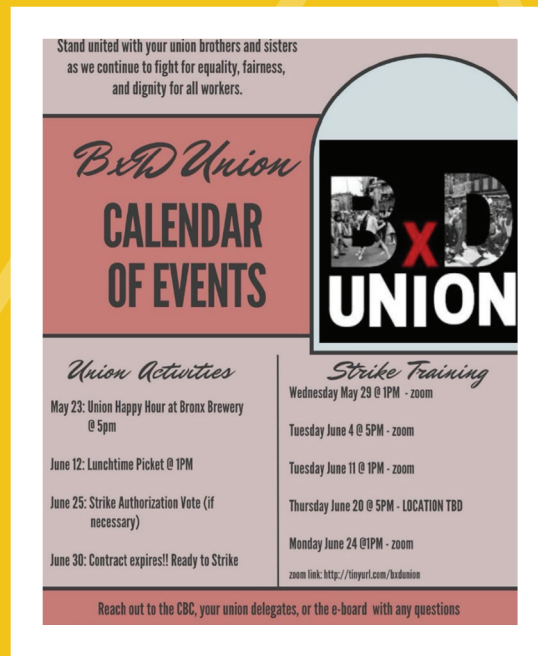
<p>RODENTS BOTH DEAD AND ALIVE</p> <p><small>Photograph taken 6/24/22</small></p>	<p>ROACHES ADORNING DESKS, SINKS, & MORE</p> <p><small>Photograph taken 6/24/22</small></p>
<p>LEAKS SCATTERED CONVENIENTLY THROUGHOUT OUR CUBICLES</p> <p><small>Photograph taken 6/24/22</small></p>	<p>BROKEN PLUMBING IN BATHROOMS, KITCHENS, & BEYOND</p> <p><small>Photograph taken 6/24/22</small></p>

THE BRONX DEFENDERS
REDEFINING DEPLORABLE CONDITIONS FOR WORKERS AND THE PEOPLE WE DEFEND

Are other NYC public defender offices spending this much on consultants?
Let's compare...

In FY 2023...
Legal Aid spent **2%** of its expenses on professional services...
BDS spent **4%** of its expenses on professional fees...
While **BxD** spent **8%** of its expenses on outside consultants.

Instead of investing its workers, BxD is spending two to four times as much as peer organizations on consultant fees.
BxD's workers deserve better.
Fair contract now!



Escalation

First Actions

As a first step, the CAT organized members to send emails to the executive management with a united message calling on them to bargain in good faith.

Strike Training

As negotiations heated up and the employer continued to refuse to agree to the Union’s basic demands, the CAT issued a “BxD Union Calendar of Events” with upcoming picket and strike authorization dates. Members printed and posted the calendar at their workstations, which both informed fellow workers about upcoming actions to participate in, but also put pressure on the employer. Additionally, the CAT gave strike info sessions and held several sessions with the membership to prepare them for what a strike would look like, educate them on what benefits they would receive from the UAW, and addressing any concerns or fears about a strike. Some of these trainings were held in the office conference rooms on off-time to show management that the membership was actively learning about going on strike. By doing so, they made their own meetings a show of power to management.

Practice Pickets

The Union organized a number of practice pickets outside of the workplace, drawing a supermajority of the members to the picket during the lunch hour. In order to ensure that these pickets would be a show of force, the CAT divided up the membership list amongst themselves and contacted and confirmed individually with each member that they would be able to attend. These pickets invigorated the membership and showed management that the union was ready to strike if necessary.

Open Bargaining

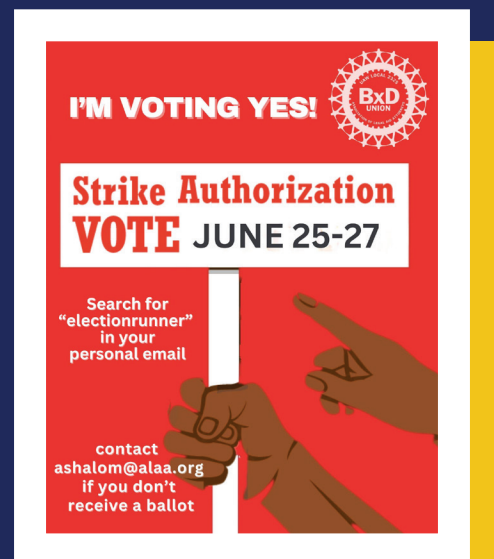
As bargaining dragged on with little progress, the BC, which usually met with management in person, requested several Zoom bargaining dates. On these days, the entire membership was invited to observe bargaining so they could directly see the way management was stalling negotiations. The Union also created a WhatsApp group for members so that they could engage in live discussion of management's tactics at the table while the session was ongoing. The CAT later used this WhatsApp group, which over 200 members joined, to send out announcements, live tweet in-person bargaining sessions, and turn out members to other union actions, driving further union engagement.



Strike Authorization Vote

The current contract was set to expire on June 30, 2024, and very little progress had been made at the table thus far. On the final week of bargaining before the contract expired, the BC asked the membership to vote in a strike authorization vote, conducted over three days. This vote was publicized widely with flyers across the office and on social media to sow the fear of potential disruption in management. Earlier in the month, the CAT conducted a “strike authorization survey” to gauge the membership’s readiness to strike. The CAT wanted to ensure an overwhelming and successful strike authorization vote to empower the BC to get the strongest contract possible. If any member who filled out the survey honestly expressing doubt or fear over striking, a member of the CAT followed up with them one-on-one to address their concerns and discuss the importance of voting yes on the

SAV. The message was simple: no one wants to strike, but by voting yes members give our BC maximum leverage, and even give them the best shot at winning a strong contract and avoiding a strike altogether. Additionally, during this time, the BC refined its messaging to membership and the public to condense all demands into a digestible format. The BC focused on three core widely felt and supported issues, which they spread and discussed in organizing conversations and via social media. The results of the strike authorization vote were powerful—93% yes, with 93% of members participating! The BC announced these impressive results simultaneously to management and to the membership in a bargaining session, expressing the unity of the membership and shocking management.

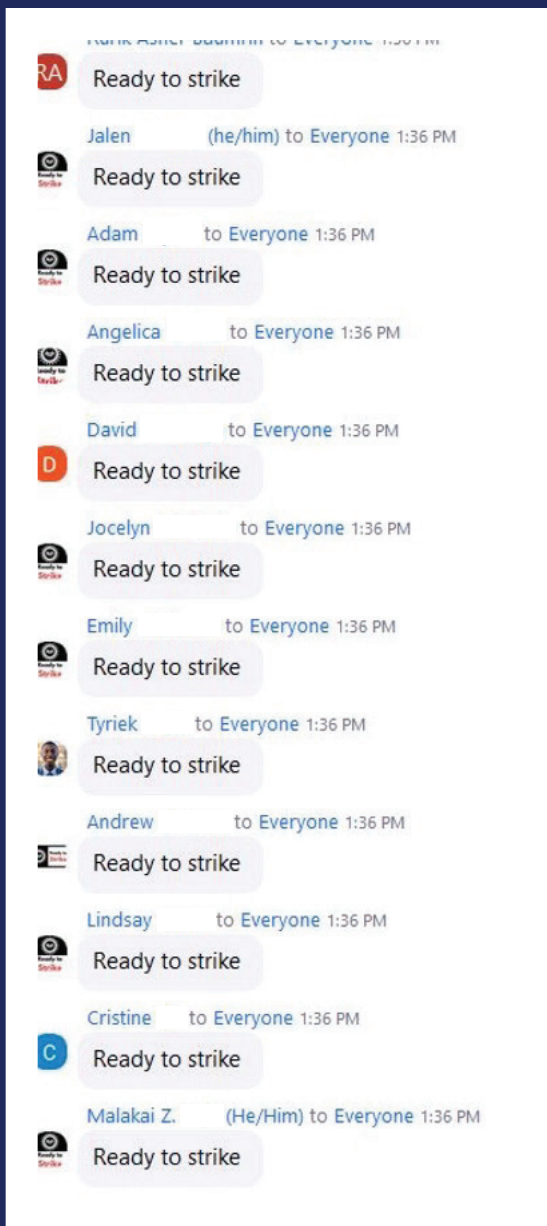


Peak of Strength

Issuing a Deadline

Announcing the results of the strike authorization helped make some movement at the table, but we needed to build more pressure on the employer to win what we deserved. Therefore, the committee then issued an unlimited strike deadline in a few weeks. Once that deadline had been announced, the CAT continued to organize members to escalate with practice pickets and by other means. Members all showed up in the office with “ready to strike” buttons and used “ready to strike” Zoom backgrounds. In a virtual staff meeting with executive management, dozens of members entered into the Zoom chat over and over “Ready to Strike” to support BxD workers if they should go on strike. As management began its strike preparations, the threat of a strike caused such chaos that low-level supervisors began to sign on to mass letters to the executive team calling on them to agree to the Union’s reasonable demands.

Press Release:
The Bronx Defenders Union
Announces Unlimited Unfair
Labor Practice Strike Beginning
Week of July 22, 2024



Highlights

By sticking together and running a contract campaign, we won:

- ▶ 8-10% general wage increases in the first year of the contract,
- ▶ a two-year agreement with a minimum 2% wage increase in the second year and the right to strike for more (!),
- ▶ a flexible telecommuting policy,
- ▶ a free speech provision,
- ▶ ...and more.

The final agreement was ratified by 91% of the membership.

By the numbers:

91%

Ratification of the final agreement by membership.

8-10%

General wage increase in the first year of the contract.

2%

Wage increase in the second year.



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