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Strong Community Campaign Wins Healthcare For Wallingford School Paraeducators

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Wallingford, CT

For the 190 paraeducators in the Wallingford Public Schools, the fight for health benefits started long before the recent round of contract negotiations began last July. In a contract survey conducted months earlier by their union, Sub-local 75 of UE Local 222, over half of the members said that gaining healthcare coverage – which their employer had never provided them – was the most important bargaining goal.

But with the annual cost of adding healthcare for paras expected to be around \$1 million, it was clear that a public campaign would be needed to gain support of local residents and convince the board of education. So as a first step, union leaders began to gather facts and individual stories about how the lack of health insurance affected members and their families. In the fall of 2007, lunchtime union meetings had been held at all 13 schools in the district, and paras with no healthcare began talking about how that affected them, and enlisting the support of those paras who had health insurance through their spouses.

The union, together with healthcare4every1.org [1], made a video in which several union members told their personal stories of the hardships, for themselves and their families, of life without health coverage. This video was then [posted on YouTube](#) [2] and shown on the local community news TV channel.

By January 2008, the union's building reps and bargaining committee were developing a strategy to mobilize the support of parents, teachers and other community allies. A public hearing was held in April, attended by 150 people. Paras testified about how not having health benefits affected them, and following the hearing the presiding panel of healthcare and community activists reported their findings on the need for health benefits.

Members circulated petitions in each school, outside supermarkets, and at public events, gathering several thousand signatures of residents and taxpayers in support of their demand for health insurance. Local media covered the union's events, and the local newspaper editorialized in support of healthcare for the paras. The newspaper even displayed the link to the union's YouTube video on the front page. Members wrote letters to the editor, wore stickers, made signs and took to the streets, picketing before and after school at one of the major downtown

intersections. UE Local 243 members from Sargent Manufacturing in New Haven, and UE Local 222 members from other communities, came to Wallingford to support the struggle.

Finally, after months of negotiations, the first bargaining breakthrough came on October 9 when board of education negotiators put on the table a proposal for phased-in healthcare benefits.

An overall tentative agreement was reached on January 21 and ratified by members on January 29, by a margin of 112 to 3. It provides for healthcare benefits to begin July 1, 2009. For the first year the school board will pick up 50 percent of the premium cost, and in each succeeding year that share will increase by 10 percent, until the fifth year of the contract, when the employer's share will be 80 percent. Wages will increase 3.25 percent each year of the contract. A new holiday, the day before Christmas was added, and longevity payments will increase each year of the contract. Life insurance will increase to \$40,000. Several important language changes codify the procedure for displaced employees to bid on other open positions; provide union leave; ensure protective safety equipment is provided and expand funeral leave to cover grandparents and grandchildren.

"I never thought I would see this day" said **Doreen Marone** after the contract was approved. **Becky Gattillia** and **Sue Palmer** both said they felt, "... optimistic and happy the town came to their senses. This is good – a lot of work went into this." **Sandy Kichuk** added, "Thank all the people who supported us – tell them how much we appreciate their walking with us and their being behind us and supporting us." She said the early morning demonstrations were "awesome," especially the fact that union members came from out of town to show their support. "One morning it was raining. Going back to bed would have been so much easier, but they were there!"

President **Annie MacDonald** thanked the union membership. "This is not something that happened because of one person. This was due to all of us." But she also noted, "Think how wonderful it would be if we didn't have to go to the table and fight for healthcare," and vowed to continue to work for the passage of HR 676, the federal bill to provide single payer healthcare for all.

The union bargaining committee consisted of President Annie MacDonald, **Saadia Butt, Pattie Gennings, Donna Horobin, Julie Knowlton, Sue Paquette, Tina Robinson, and Maggie Shabbott**. They were assisted by UE Northeast Region President **Peter Knowlton**, Field Organizers **John Woodruff** and **Colleen Ezzo** and International Representative **Carol Lambiase**.