Collaboration: There’s Plenty of Fight in It

By David Cicarella, NHFT President

There is a mistaken notion that collaboration means there is no disagreement, everything is wonderful, and it is the total “absence of conflict.” That is the furthest thing from the truth. Collaboration simply means that you continue to work through disagreements as amicably and professionally as possible. It does not suggest acquiescence or “giving in” arbitrarily. The agreement, i.e. the collaboration, is that both sides will not negotiate through the media, nor criticize one another publicly, or just quit and go home. The argument (and I have engaged in many over the past 12 years) will continue. Despite differences today, a relationship must exist for tomorrow. So while these discussions often become heated, we must remain at the table and continue to press our issues forward. Otherwise, we face decisions and policies where we will have no input.

There are those that claim we need to “get tough,” file grievances, etc. Unfortunately, too often that is the unscrupulous position of some union leaders at all levels (local, state, and national) as it is popular rhetoric and resonates with membership. The problem is that while this may look to be a position of power it is in reality one of weakness. Union leaders exist for the sole purpose of helping their members and successfully addressing their issues. They are not looking to keep or gain favor by talking tough, but, ultimately, damaging the relationship with management to a point that they cannot secure any “wins” for the membership.

I absolutely agree that a firm resolve and “fighting” to get policies we find acceptable and fully support is essential. We have taken a tough stance in the past on many issues. Some examples are: the very public victory against the Achievement First Dreamfield charter school, successfully pushing back on the 7 hour student day during the last 2 contract negotiation sessions (it remains at 6 hours, 15 minutes for K-8 and grandfathered with no additional time for high schools), keeping the existing medical plans for all veteran teachers in the system, and more. The Achievement First charter school fight was an example of when all collaborative efforts fail we moved to the nuclear option...a public fight whereby we rally the troops and hammer our point home. Collaboration does not preclude this. The “nuclear option” is always available, but as a last resort and on big ticket items that we refuse to waver on nor can accept any compromise.

Collaboration is, perhaps, more important now than ever. With an entirely new administration at central office, I have begun the arduous task of building relationships to re-establish the work of our school reform efforts – most importantly where we had a “seat at the table” for literally all decisions and policies. In fact, for a run of several years and at the height of our collaborative efforts, teachers would routinely ask “Did

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What is JANUS? By David Cicarella, NHFT President

**JANUS** is the Supreme Court case that ruled against workers unions, including teachers. The “Abood vs Detroit” case in 1977 ruled that workers cannot be compelled to join a labor union, but must simply pay a “fair share” fee for the services the unions provide such as contract negotiations, representation at disciplinary hearings, etc. Mark Janus has argued that this somehow violates his free speech and the Supreme Court in June 2018 has inexplicably ruled that he not only cannot be compelled to join a labor union (which we agree is a workers’ right) but also does not have to pay any service fee whatsoever and still be represented by the union. The Supreme Court has, in effect, legalized “freeloaders” in labor unions. While others pay for union services, these “freeloaders” can opt out of paying their fair share and force the rest of us to pay for the services unions provide to their members. Many ask how that is possible? How can this be considered fair? Our point exactly. The reality is this case is part of a larger, corporate movement to bankrupt the unions and remove the last significant force that will collectively bargain for fair wages, medical benefits, safe working conditions, and a workplace free from management intimidation for working Americans.

How has this affected the NHFT? We have essentially a 100% re-commitment of teachers opting to join the NHFT! Our union remains strong. This is a testament to the commitment of teachers to the NHFT and we can take great pride in our combined strength and resolve. While the union is compelled to represent “freeloaders” in disciplinary hearings, etc., they do NOT receive the following benefits which are reserved exclusively for union members:

- Representation in a contested Workers Compensation Claim
- Representation in teacher termination hearings
- Representation in an investigation by DCF
- Voting in all union elections (building stewards, NHFT Officers, Executive Board, etc.)
- Attending union meetings
- Attending union functions (holiday party, end of year party, etc.)

Freeloaders are NOT afforded the protections and services listed above.

**Reporting You Absences AESOP**

Just a friendly reminder that all absences (sick days, personal days, bereavement days, court days, etc.) are reported exclusively through the online platform AESOP. No further notification is necessary to administrators as they all have 24/7 access to AESOP.

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we vote on this?” We became accustomed to joint decision-making on just about everything. While we are far from that now, it is not unreasonable to expect a return to our position as equal partners in policy making of the NHPS. The NHFT is the largest and most powerful union in the city and we can leverage that to continue advancing both our professional concerns and “bread and butter” issues. We just need to build that relationship with a new administration. Veteran teachers will remember both our enthusiasm and anxiety at the dawn of school reform. One veteran steward shared his amazement at the amount of change we have implemented and our success at managing it. If there is one thing that resonates more than anything, it was our ability to negotiate and implement widespread, sweeping changes during the School Reform period here in New Haven. More change is coming and we need to return to our roots in navigating that change.

Veteran teachers will remember in 2008 when the reform winds were blowing the strongest, the NHFT’s mantra was to “Either get on the bus and help drive it, or get run over by it!” We have always been a proactive organization and continue to be so. We knew change was inevitable and our efforts positioned ourselves as state and national leaders in the reform efforts for the past decade. It is referred to nationally as the “New Haven Model.”

Knowing this year’s $26-million-dollar deficit would undoubtedly mean a reduction in force (RIF) for teachers, it was important to plan for this with central office, or be left on the sidelines with no input. Spewing argumentative and negative rhetoric will not solve the budget crisis. The proactive efforts allowed us to manage the 135 teacher reduction down to 35 layoffs which has been reduced to just 10 within the first month of this school year. While many teachers were moved to vacancies, and these transfers are never popular, the union’s number one priority is to save the jobs of its members. And my efforts to reach out and work with a new administration allowed teachers to have some say in determining their new assignments by utilizing the interview process.

Veteran teachers can recall and have endured one budget crisis after another. Each one presented its own challenges. This one is no different. We will face it together and work through it. Just as we have done in the past.