



Members of #FairWageOnstage.

When grassroots organizing meets union negotiations

# #FairWageOnstage

The grassroots #FairWageOnstage (#FWOS) movement scored a major victory in November 2016 when Equity signed a new agreement with the Off-Broadway League. We asked some of the leaders behind the campaign to share with us how a two-year process of organizing and advocacy resulted in this historic win.

While the motivation to seek fair wages lies in everyone's need to pay the bills from the work they do, the inspiration for the #FWOS campaign came at a January 2014 Equity Membership Meeting. Following a passionate discussion about the terms of touring contracts, members Carson D. Elrod and Nick Westrate found themselves in the elevator musing, "Why aren't we New York actors doing what those touring actors are doing?"

They reached out to their peers and began with a meeting of six actors at Elrod's apartment that soon expanded to bigger meetings of the group—now dubbed the "Off-Broadway Action Group"—at The Players club. Adam Green observed, "It ended up being necessary to give actors and stage managers a space to talk about economic insecurity within our profession—insecurity that happens while we're working."

"We came up with a long list of ideas," said Robert Stanton, "and kept circling back to low wages versus high cost of living." In November 2015, member Brian Meyers Cooper, head of the Equity Off-Broadway Negotiating Committee, reached out. "The crucial thing," noted Elrod, "was Brian asking us to come to the union and bring the conversations we were having in private into the union building."

In a marathon session, three members of #FWOS discussed their plan with Meyers Cooper, Senior Business Rep. Beverly Sloan and Business Reps. Stephanie Frey and Maria Cameron. Stanton said the trio presented 20 proposals, "but the three said they'd give up 19 of the items just for number one: a decent, living wage."

Realizing they needed a snappy name and memorable hashtag, Elrod proposed #LivingWageOnstage. Someone suggested #FairWageOnstage, and Stanton saw the value in substituting "Fair" for "Living"—recognizing "no one wants to be unfair. It's the 'F' bomb in a negotiation."

Soon, they had a logo, website and infographics (all designed by member Manoel Felciano) as well as an active online presence spearheaded by Westrate. "Working with no budget except for

the man-hours of passion to make a livable wage in the Off-Broadway arena," said Green, "we built an organizational, grassroots infrastructure, turned out (kinda) viral videos, got important publicity in major newspapers and websites and started a city-wide, if not national, conversation in our industry."

As negotiations began, Eastern Regional Director/Assistant Executive Director Tom Carpenter invited members to observe—in a show of solidarity—the negotiations team. First 20, then 50 members showed up. "It was crystal clear that the entire community was focused, awake, paying attention, and demanding that there be systemic change in priorities for how theaters pay actors and stage managers Off-Broadway," said Elrod.

Meanwhile, #FWOS organizing continued, "amassing 1,700 names, 500 of them interconnected via text message," according to Stanton, "in a network member Jeff Biehl built in case we would have to demonstrate or strike." These lines of communication were important in other ways; Green noted the structure of a network (as opposed to a hierarchy) became key to their tactics and strategy: "A lot of our internal decisions grew out of conversation and consensus within our group, trying to give everybody's opinion equal weight."

Over the summer, the group gathered over 1,100 signatures on a letter it hand-delivered to management while Westrate solicited video testimonials from members. "Over 200 members looked directly into the cameras of their phones or computers and told their community why a fair wage onstage was important to them," Westrate said. "They shared their financial challenges and their deep and abiding commitment to making work in the Off-Broadway theaters of New York." Those videos are still available to watch on the #FWOS website and Facebook page.

Stanton said that as negotiations continued and rumors of a strike began to swell, members of #FWOS connected with performers working Off-Broadway at the time "in order to hear their concerns, show our support and organize them."

Elrod underscored the importance of continuing to get more members involved in their union: "There is simply no power or point in a union if the workers who make the product don't understand their collective needs and their collective power and demand that the union be responsive to them. [#FWOS] was a beautiful case of membership uniting, standing up and demanding that the union do something, and the union listening very carefully and then aggressively advocating on behalf of those members in need."