

3 New Private Sector Shops Organize into Local 1180 Family

By Marci Rosenblum, Local 1180 Communications Director

If you build it, they will come.

While the expression comes from the book of Genesis, or the movie *Field of Dreams* if you prefer, it is applicable to CWA Local 1180's organizing of private sector groups.

Local 1180 started building the private sector division of the union with one shop of a few dozen members in 1999. That has now turned into a field of 18 private sector groups with the recent unionizing of three new shops — **Tutor Associates**, **The Trevor Project**, and **Caring Across Generations**.

Local 1180 became CWA's first public sector local in 1967, representing administrative employees in the mayoral agencies, Department of Education, Transit Authority, School Construction Authority, Health+Hospitals Corp., and the state's Unified Court System. Fifty-six years later, Local 1180 now represents approximately 1,000 workers in a variety of private sector organizations — and the number is growing.

"We have developed a reputation for providing outstanding representation for all members no matter where they work," said **Local 1180 President Gloria Middleton**. "Working hand in hand with CWA District 1, we can hit the ground running when it comes to organizing. Knowing that these workers really want to become part of the labor movement and have sought out the representation of Local 1180 makes a huge difference to being successful."

Tutor Associates' 92 members overwhelmingly voted to unionize with CWA Local 1180 on May 12. Tutor Associates tutors and proctors work with students to achieve their educational goals by assisting them with standardized and higher education testing, ensuring healthy habits, test registration, and receiving accommodations based on their needs.

"We are proud to incorporate members who are so committed to helping young people further their education, something that Local 1180 is such a strong proponent of," Middleton said. "We look forward to working with the elected bargaining committee to fight alongside members to win the best contract we can and make Tutor Associates the best workplace it can be."

Despite management's discouragement, 94.8% of New York City-based Tutor Associates members voted yes to join the union at the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) vote count.

On April 14, workers at The Trevor Project won voluntary recognition of their union. The Trevor Project is a nonprofit organization founded in 1998 that focuses on suicide prevention efforts among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning youth and offers confidential assistance by trained counselors.

With almost 350 members all working remotely, The Trevor Project is now one of the largest private sector shops at Local 1180, surpassing National Audubon Society in size.

"We congratulate the members of this organization on their inspiring union victory. We are excited to work with this dynamic, talented, and compassionate group of workers to achieve a fair contract and a safe and dignified workplace for all their members," Middleton said about the group whose members live across the country.

On June 7, a third group, nonprofit workers at Caring Across Generations, also won voluntary recognition of their union to join Local 1180. The 24 members, many of whom directly reflect the Caring Majority — family caregivers, disabled people, and aging adults — are committed to their organization's mission of making care accessible, affordable, and equitable so everyone can live and age with dignity. As workers wrote in their union vision statement, signed by 95% of workers, "The formation of this staff union will empower us to continue to pursue and promote the visionary ideas that drive our work."

Caring Across has been fiscally sponsored by National Domestic Workers Alliance, whose workers also won voluntary recognition of their union in 2020 and joined Local 1180. Caring Across is currently becoming an independent organization from NDWA and staff saw the need for a seat at the table with management during such a critical time of organizational transition.

"Our organization was founded on the principle that everyone deserves a say in the choices that affect their lives, and our union will ensure that right for all of us who do this work," said **Antonia Marián**, Caring Across Communications Manager. Her colleague **Ja-Rai Wang**, Senior Communications Manager, agrees.

"All people deserve a say in their workplaces. Joining together with my colleagues will enable us to build a stronger organization and model the more equitable world we are working towards," she said.

Middleton said it takes determination from workers who want to unionize at any place of employment to get their co-workers to understand the benefits and advantages of having the strength of the labor movement in their corner — especially when management does everything it can to hinder the process.

Nicole Maloof explained how the action happened at Tutor Associates.

"Most of us live here in New York City, but there are a good number of people who left the city and teach remotely. The whole process began last August when a couple of coworkers reached out, informing me that some tutors were thinking about organizing," she said.

Maloof was definitely interested as she already was working on another unionizing campaign at that time. Workers held their first meeting at a noodle shop in Chinatown. That's when the journey began.

"We gathered a small group of coworkers and talked very openly about the problems in our workplace. We all realized that a lot had changed. We used to have significantly more in-person contact with one another before the COVID-19 pandemic. In the meantime, the physical office closed and we felt that any support we used to receive had disappeared," Maloof said.

"Our pay and hours fluctuate a lot, so it is nearly impossible to get access to consistent health care coverage. We have no paid time off and we are expected to give an hour of unpaid work for every hour of paid work. We decided that we wanted things to change," she said.

The rest of Tutor Associate's story comes directly from Maloof.

"We got in touch with the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee (EWOC) who linked up with an organizer I was already working with on the campaign in Philly. He got us on the right track and helped us form a small organizing committee. With his guidance, this small group of workers began the path of unionization.

"We had to map out our workplace. We started talking to coworkers we each had relationships with. As luck would have it, one of my coworkers had discovered the full employee list with everyone's contact info. We got to work reaching out to everyone and began the long process of listening to people's concerns, introducing the idea of unionizing, educating everyone about unions, and helping our coworkers work through their fears of retaliation.

"If sincerely asserting one's needs prompts a fear of punishment, what does that say about a person's workplace? These fears were an indication of the at-will employment status we had at the time — our bosses had unilateral control over everything and we had no legal protections, recourse, or say in anything. Rather than shrink away, this was all the more reason to take action together and fight for more power and protections."

It took about three months of building up coworker relationships, and developing trust and mutual understanding before Maloof and other organizing leaders were able to reach nearly all of the tutors and establish a supermajority of vocal support.

"We looked into a handful of unions to potentially affiliate with, doing research as tutors do. That's when we met Leslie [Fine, Local 1180 Organizer] and discussed potential affiliation with CWA Local 1180. I can't say enough how happy everyone is with how things worked out. I think the CWA approach was the optimal fit for us.

"We became even more systematic with our approach to organizing. We expanded our organizing committee to about 10 people and divided up our entire workplace into manageable turf, coworkers who we each followed up with and built relationships with. Through direct outreach, we helped our coworkers deepen their own understanding of what they cared about and prepared people to make the leap of change. We asked our coworkers to take on small, concrete actions that aided the organizing process in some way. The organizing committee alone could not lead the way to unionizing; it required everyone's participation.

"At that point, we still had one group of coworkers, the proctors, we needed to get on board. This was a challenge because we typically don't work with them directly. We tried calling and texting with little luck, so a group of us went to the testing site directly to try and speak with some of them in person. This worked! This small

group of proctors helped us get in touch with the rest of the proctors who we managed to get on board as well."

The organizing committee then drafted a vision statement of what they imagined their union to be based on the principles and concerns their coworkers voiced. A supermajority of them approved and signed that vision statement, which they then presented to their bosses.

Not surprisingly, management ignored their announcement of unionizing and did not respond to their request for voluntary recognition or neutrality. Maloof and her coworkers filed a petition for a union election with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB).

"Our bosses tried to weasel their way out by claiming we were independent contractors and not their employees! We quickly gathered the necessary proof that we were their employees and handed over this information to a CWA lawyer who rebutted their claims. Management immediately dropped their argument, and we received our election date from the NLRB. The organizing committee made sure that everyone understood the steps for the mail-in ballot process.

"Ballots were mailed out in mid-April and we followed up with everyone to ensure they received their ballot so we could help people request duplicate ballots if they needed them. Then we followed up again to ensure everyone mailed in their ballots. As annoying as we were, the proof was in the pudding. The vast majority of the ballots were mailed within 10 days of receiving them.

"After going public to management with our decision to unionize, and up to the election deadline, management stopped all real-time communications with us and sent a series of anti-union emails. We responded by requesting that they stop doing so, as this was our rightful decision to make. In these emotionally manipulative emails, they insisted we are a family, that they try hard to keep us happy, and that a union would get in the way of our great relationship. Keep in mind, a week earlier they tried to claim we weren't even their employees!

The election closed on May 11, and ballots were counted the following day. The organizing committee, one additional tutor, Fine, and the CWA lawyer all attended the ballot count in person, management didn't show their faces; only their lawyer attended. As we watched our NLRB agent painstakingly open up all the double-sealed envelopes, validate, and confirm the votes, management's lawyer scrolled through TikTok.

After two hours, the election was decided. Tutor Associates won — 55 "yes" votes to 3 "no" votes!

"We know this is just the beginning to building our union as we transition to the negotiating process. We will be signing membership cards in the coming weeks and meeting with our CWA Rep to discuss our contract campaign. In the meantime, within a week of our win, our bosses fired three staff members who are not part of our bargaining unit, and directly blamed the union for their decision!

"Management is now claiming poverty and the need for cutbacks, but we know that even if there is less money than in the past, management is spending a pretty penny on things that don't matter. A slow season is no reason to short-change workers. It's not simply a crisis of revenue, but a crisis of priorities.

"We definitely have a battle ahead of us, but we are ready for the challenge!" Maloof said. ■



Nicole Maloof



Antonia Marián



Ja-Rai Wang