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HIGHER EDUCATION

NEEDS

UNION STRENGTH

by Albert Shanker

The life and death of public higher education is primarily a political issue. Survival depends on what legislators do. Survival depends on appropriations, on tax structures, on financial decisions. Survival is a matter of public policy.

In terms of influence, organized labor shapes public policy on education more effectively than anyone else. This is true not only of the American Federation of Teachers, which represents 70,000 members in our higher education division within a total membership of 550,000 professional educators. But it is also true of the AFL-CIO, which includes AFT members together with 15 million other trade unionists, and which acts as a powerful lobbyist and friend for student financial aid, state and federal aid to higher education, continuing education

President of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, Albert Shanker delivered this address at the Annual Conference of the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education on April 24, 1979 in New York City.

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programs, and a multitude of allied efforts in education.

In turn the labor movement is gaining influence on college and university campuses. Higher education faculty around the country are deciding whether or not to elect our union to represent them in order to improve their professional standing through collective bargaining.

Are there alternatives to unions and collective bargaining in higher education? Yes, there are alternatives.

Unlike the labor force in other countries, the majority of American workers are not unionized. Many may wish they could organize and negotiate contracts but may not be able to do so because of repressive activities by their employers. So we don't know whether these unorganized workers are acting on the basis of their free choice or not acting on the basis of their fear.

Having traveled across the country, I have to report that without question there are some institutions of higher education where there is considerable fear: of retaliation, of punishment, of termination, of bad references, and so on. I suppose that is one alternative to unionization.

Another is frequently discussed in the private sector of the economy, where companies such as Kodak and IBM make a paternalistic appeal to their employees. They claim that the company voluntarily provides benefits, not only in the paycheck but in all kinds of amenities, which are equal to or greater than what unions achieve only after a long, hard struggle. There are a few institutions of higher education that express that attitude, though also few who can afford to pay for expensive

non-union incentives.

Now there is a third alternative that is rarely discussed in the private sector but constantly talked about in the field of higher education. That is the concept of collegiality: the idea of some kind of managerial partnership between faculty and administration. I know that many of my colleagues in the labor movement would deny that any such management exists in reality. I hasten to say that I do not. I think collegiality does exist. But I also think that it's extremely rare; and that for every campus where it does exist, there are probably 200 where faculty praise collegiality and wish it would rub off on them, but where there is little if any collegial management.

Having stated that there are alternatives to unionization in higher education, I must also say that they aren't vital or viable in the greater, political sense.

First, let's not beg the question. Faculty should certainly be given the opportunity to decide for themselves whether they want union representation or not, free from intimidation. This process is inherently democratic, and it is also self-correcting. Where there is an institution with true collegiality, with equitably shared management, I doubt that a majority of the faculty would vote for a traditional collective bargaining relationship. On the other hand, a solid majority union vote at an institution which has claimed collegiality would make those claims suspect.

Most people who vote for a union as their collective bargaining agent generally do so because of some specific problems or dissatisfactions

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at the job level. "Yes I want more money, I want job security, I want due process and fair grievance procedures, I want company policies spelled out in writing, and if those policies are applied to me in a discriminatory fashion, I want an impartial person to decide my case . . ." and so forth.

But something else happens after those workers in various companies vote for the union, negotiate contracts, and employ a local staff to administer those contracts and handle grievances. When hundreds and thousands of those workers organize and form unions, the unions themselves organize on a regional or state or national level to advance further objectives in the interests of those workers, interests of which the members may not be directly aware.

For example, the auto worker may join the union because he hates the assembly line and wants better pay for enduring it. He reads about the Teamsters' settlement, and he says: "Well, we're not going to let them pull ahead of us; we're going to do just as well!"

But the meaning of the auto workers' union and its functions goes far beyond the immediate issues in a local contract. The United Auto Workers is involved at the national level in negotiations with the federal government. Often in cooperation with auto manufacturers, the union deals with questions of auto emission standards and their effect on sales, questions of energy, questions on tax structure, on imports and exports and how they affect employees in Detroit.

What happens in the auto industry applies elsewhere. It's a drastic

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mistake to define unionism and collective bargaining only by analyzing activities at the local level, the efforts to keep up with the economic treadmill and develop an agreement. Yes, that is essential, and that is why the members join the union. Yet not to recognize that this local union forms the basis of state and national organizations which pursue the interests of the employees and their institutions on a broader level is to misconceive the fundamental meaning of organization.

Let me cite a couple examples from my own experience. Recently the city of Cleveland faced a financial crisis. Teachers in Cleveland had not received salary increases for some time, so they went out on strike.

Some months before that, the leaders of our union in Cleveland had called me in Washington and asked me about the bankruptcy of the Penn Central Railroad. Penn Central went bankrupt in every city with a Penn Central station in it, and back taxes were owed to those cities by Penn Central. The federal government is helping to reorganize the railroad and the corporation. If back taxes were paid back soon, or at least remained a firm obligation, each of these cities would have money or would be able to issue bonds on the basis of those obligations in order to pay for teachers' salary increases.

So I immediately reached our legislative people, and they went to work to nail down the monies from the Penn Central Railroad. After the Cleveland teachers went on strike, a settlement was reached and financed by bonds issued on the basis of future monies coming from Penn Central taxes, which had been arranged in Washington, D.C.

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In New York City last year, the mayor took a stand against all the public employee unions. Why did the mayor finally have to enter into contractual agreements with city employees? Because the public employees were all affiliated with national labor organizations, and the national organizations were able to convince the Administration in Washington that it would be unwise for the federal government to extend loan guarantees for New York City unless their labor contracts were negotiated and completed. Then the Administration could assure Congress that the labor issues were settled and that further financing could be used to provide for the normal operations of the city.

Now for a moment, consider some of the political concerns of higher education, which is in serious trouble. There are problems with simultaneous declines in enrollment and financial support. There are problems created by the opening of college opportunities to a great many more students in recent times, with a corresponding deterioration of the academic and the economic values of a college degree. There are problems with compulsory affirmative action and quotas, in hiring new faculty and in admitting new students.

There are increasing attacks of public opinion against higher education. Is it so necessary? Can't you learn by experience? Do students learn anything practical? Why can't they get good jobs after graduation?

Then there are the social and economic problems. For the first time in our country's history, we have the likelihood that the standard

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of living of our citizens will decrease. There is no question but that the next decade or two will bring diminished public consumption because of dwindling energy resources. Consequently, feelings of weakness and loss will intensify, leading to shifts of public treasury dollars into military defense, with the perception that this may be a pre-war situation.

Given those combinations, we're also witnessing a national tax-cut and budget-cut fever. While people are enjoying less and less materially each year, they're asking themselves questions. What am I going to give up? Do I want a smaller house, or less extravagant clothing, or cheaper vacations? On that same checklist, people are going to have the choice to give up all kinds of services, including higher education, public schools, libraries, parks, and a host of others.

And the decisions as to what is going to be given up will be made in a political arena, with various powerful forces contending and fighting against each other to see who gets a piece of what's left.

Now there is another force in that arena that should be considered. Almost all of the elementary and secondary school teachers in this country are organized. They contribute money to their unions for political action, they work in political campaigns, and their voting records are often surprisingly consistent with their union's recommendations (about an 85% correlation among teachers in New York City). As a result, their leaders have access to the political leaders in state capitols and in Washington, and those political leaders are sensitive to the teachers' political strength. The president of the union talks to the President of the United States.

So if everyone else is organized--public school teachers, health care workers, other public employees--and if people in higher education choose not to become organized, what portion of our shrinking public resources will be devoted to higher education? I'm not talking about what the next contract for the faculty will achieve, or whether the faculty share a feeling of collegiality. Whether a faculty has collegiality or confrontation with their administration is irrelevant to the current political, social, and economic situation of this nation in terms of the future of higher education.

We are about to engage in a huge, tough fight over resources. Higher education is expensive, and its resources are resented by many people. Try to explain to these taxpayers how the work load of a professor compares to the life of a factory worker. It's not going to be easy to make that case.

My conclusion is that there are no pragmatic alternatives. Higher education faculty and staff must organize, and for their own long-term good, the administration at those institutions should be supportive. Collective bargaining at the local level is the means for organizing people to deal with their own local problems. But more important, it is the building of a strong state and national force to deal with the political and economic problems that the members of the profession and their institutions are about to face in the coming period.

The only remaining question is whether higher education people are going to organize their own independent higher education group or

whether they're going to affiliate with a larger, established union. Then the question becomes one of how much power an isolated organization can muster as opposed to an organization which is allied with other groups in a more powerful structure. The answer is simple. If every single faculty member in the state of New York belonged to one association, that group couldn't begin to compete with the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), representing 200,000 teachers in all the election districts in that region.

How do you prevent the elementary and secondary school teachers from going for the jugular, from going after the money previously earmarked for higher education? There is only one way: you have to become part of them. Then "they" becomes "us"—our members, part of our organization, part of our governance. You can't take from us and give to them any more than you can steal from an elementary school teacher to give to a high school teacher or steal from a high school teacher to give to a guidance counselor. That's because we are all one organization, one movement.

This analysis of the labor movement derives from the motivating reasons for the formation of the Teachers Union by people like John Dewey back at the end of World War I. Dewey was fond of shocking teachers and professors by telling them not to ignore their economic well-being, that they had the same right to be concerned with their economic needs as any other working people. But Dewey also advised that because the students in public schools at that time were children of the working

classes, teachers had to identify with the struggles and aspirations of their parents. And so Dewey advocated that teachers join the trade union movement.

The labor movement has always been a powerful friend of education. Today higher education is not the only major institution that's in trouble, but it is in trouble, and the problems will get worse in the next few years. What will happen in higher education will be decided on a field of a certain type of battle. That battlefield will be political. To wage that battle, higher education will need all the help it can get from organized labor, including the major teacher unions.

Of course it is not only a matter of brute power. Those in higher education have the best possible arguments for their share of public appropriations. It is the brainpower of our country that has made us prosper: we need higher education to develop and cultivate this most essential resource. But without sufficient political power, these arguments won't mean much to the prosperity or poverty of higher education.