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Non-Faculty Unionization at Institutions of Higher Education

Abstract

[Excerpt] The decade of the 1980's was a difficult one for the labor movement as membership and bargaining power declined for most unions in most industries. Higher education, however, provided a much more congenial environment. Faculty unionization expanded slowly but steadily at public sector institutions, although these gains were partially offset by private sector membership losses in the wake of the Yeshiva decision. In addition, there was a flurry of organizing activity among non-faculty employees, particularly clerical workers.

The clerical worker organizing of the 1980's resulted in many highly visible successes for the labor movement. Particularly noteworthy were NLRB election victories at Yale in 1984 by the FUE/Hotel Employees, at Columbia in 1985 by the UAW, and at Harvard in 1988 by the HUETW/AFSCME. Large units were also organized in the public sector, including the California State University System in 1982 by the SEIU, the University of Iowa in 1984 by AFSCME, and several Ohio campuses including Toledo in 1986 by the CWA and Cincinnati in 1988 by the SEIU. The importance of clerical unions in higher education was further demonstrated by a number of widely publicized work stoppages, including first contract strikes at Yale and Columbia and three major strikes in 1988 at New York University by an AFT local, at Wayne State by the UAW, and at Michigan State by an independent clerical union.

The National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions has monitored this clerical worker union activity with great interest, publishing the results of a survey of the nation's largest universities in 1987 and offering a panel discussion of the subject as a key part of the 1989 annual conference. In the spring of 1989, they resolved to assemble a directory of clerical and support staff contracts and bargaining agents. Although the original intent was to focus on clerical workers, a question was added to the survey on other unionized non-faculty units including professional/technical and blue collar. This Directory summarizes the information compiled to January 1, 1990.

Keywords

unions, labor movement, organizing, higher education, clerical staff

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Comments

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Non-Faculty Unionization at Institutions of
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Background

The decade of the 1980's was a difficult one for the labor movement as membership and bargaining power declined for most unions in most industries. Higher education, however, provided a much more congenial environment. Faculty unionization expanded slowly but steadily at public sector institutions, although these gains were partially offset by private sector membership losses in the wake of the Yeshiva decision. In addition, there was a flurry of organizing activity among non-faculty employees, particularly clerical workers.

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The National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions has monitored this clerical worker union activity with great interest, publishing the results of a survey of the nation's largest universities in 1987¹ and offering a panel discussion of the subject as a key part of the 1989 annual conference.² In the spring of 1989, they resolved to assemble a directory of clerical and support staff contracts and bargaining agents. Although the original intent was to focus on clerical workers, a question was added to the survey on other unionized non-faculty units including professional/technical and blue collar. This Directory summarizes the information compiled to January 1, 1990.

This survey was initially mailed to approximately 3000 colleges and universities in June 1989. Non-respondents were mailed the questionnaire again in September 1989 and May 1990. Ultimately, usable responses representing 2190 campuses were received.³ Information was reported on the forms with varying degrees of precision and detail. In some cases, follow-up phone

calls to clarify inconsistencies were made but, for the most part, the information was reported as received. The Center recognizes that there may be inaccuracies in the data, and that many non-faculty bargaining units may be missing from this initial Directory. Corrections are invited as the Directory will be updated periodically. We would especially like to hear from anyone who knows of bargaining units which are not reported. In spite of the inevitable logistical problems in a project of this sort, I trust that the Directory will prove useful to practitioners and academics concerned about collective bargaining in higher education.

Non-Faculty Union Representation

The non-faculty bargaining units reported in this Directory represented a total in excess of 250,000 workers in institutions of higher education in 1989-90. This exceeds the total number of faculty represented by 26,851. However, faculty bargaining agreements covered 1007 campuses in 1989-90, while this survey uncovered non-faculty agreements at only 775 campuses. Overall, 35.4% of the 2190 campuses responding to our survey reported at least one non-faculty bargaining unit. As with faculty, public institutions are more heavily unionized than private institutions, and two-year colleges report a higher proportion of unionization than four-year colleges. Collective bargaining agreements for non-faculty units were reported by 50.5% of the public campuses and 11.6% of the private campuses. Unions represented non-faculty employees at 48.0% of two-year college campuses and 26.8% of four-year college campuses.

Geographic Distribution

Non-faculty unions are highly concentrated geographically. Eighty-nine percent of the campuses reporting non-faculty collective bargaining are located in four regions: New England, Mideast, Great Lakes and Far West. As reported in Directory Appendix Table 1, over 50% of campuses responding to the survey reported non-faculty unions in the far west, the mideast and New England, with just under 50% reporting unions in the Great Lakes. The other regions have far lower rates of union penetration. The lowest levels of non-faculty unionization are in the south, with a combined 4.4% of campuses represented in the southeast, south central and southwest. Information for individual states is summarized in Appendix Tables 2 and 3.

Although this pattern of unionization is similar to that for workers generally, the geographic concentration is far more striking. When compared to faculty unions, however, the pattern is no longer exceptional. Seventy percent of campuses with faculty bargaining agents are located in the four regions, reporting disproportionate levels of non-faculty unionization. The ranking of the nine regions by number of campuses organized is virtually

identical for faculty and non-faculty, with only the eighth and ninth positions switching places.⁴

Types of Bargaining Units

As mentioned above, the survey requested information on clerical and other non-faculty bargaining units. Because unit description was left up to the individual completing the questionnaire, a broad range of categories were reported. For the sake of this discussion, responses have been divided into six types of bargaining units: clerical, professional, technical, health care, blue collar and police. The information reported refers to institutions rather than campuses because some specific bargaining units are organized on only one campus of a multi-campus institution, while others represent workers in a particular category on all campuses.⁵

Approximately two-thirds of the institutions reported single non-faculty bargaining units, while the other one-third reported multiple units. Of the 218 institutions with single units, 194 had clerical locals while 24 had blue-collar locals.⁶ Of the 127 institutions with multiple units, the breakdown was as follows: 116 clerical locals, 52 professional/technical locals, 29 health-care locals, 99 blue-collar locals, and 49 police locals. At the multiple unit institutions, it is common to have more than one blue-collar local with divisions often based on skill (e.g., food service, custodians, electricians, engineers, laborers, etc.).

The most notable feature of the survey results related to bargaining unit is the predominance of clerical worker locals. At institutions with single units, 90.0% reported clerical unions, while at institutions with multiple units, 91.3% reported clerical locals. Although white-collar workers are less likely to be union members than their blue-collar counterparts, in society at large, it appears that at institutions of higher education the unionization of clerical employees surpasses the unionization of blue-collar workers by a substantial margin.

National Unions Which Represent Non-Faculty Employees

Unlike the case of faculty for which three national unions can stake a legitimate claim to jurisdiction, there is no union which has firmly established itself as a specialist at representing non-faculty employees in higher education. Twenty-seven different national unions have been identified which represent subgroups of these workers at one or more institutions.⁷

Among white-collar workers, there are sixteen unions with bargaining units. The unions which appear most frequently are AFSCME, with white-collar units at 76 institutions, and SEIU, with white-collar units at 63 institutions. Both of these unions have

substantial membership among public sector white-collar workers and thus, can legitimately claim appropriate bargaining expertise. The two major education unions also have a strong presence: the AFT represents non-faculty white-collar units at 41 institutions, and the NEA at 37. Other unions with multiple white-collar units include: the OPEIU, with a long tradition of representing professional and clerical workers, at 22 institutions; the IBT, long-established as the nation's premiere practitioner of general unionism, at 13 institutions; the ANA with 12 nursing units; and two unions which have made a concerted effort to break into white collar organizing in recent years, the UAW, at 10 institutions and the CWA, at eight.

Among blue-collar workers, there are 23 unions with bargaining units. Leading the way, once again, are public sector unions, AFSCME at 30 institutions and SEIU at 26. The union with the third highest number of units is the IUOE, representing stationary engineers in the boiler rooms of 19 institutions. Four other skilled trade unions (IBEW, IBFO, GCIU, CJA) represent small units at a combined total of 15 institutions. Other blue-collar unions include: the FOB which represents police at 12 institutions; the IBT with nine assorted blue-collar units; and HERE with food service workers at six institutions.

Summary and Conclusions

It is clear that unions have established themselves among non-faculty employees at institutions of higher education. The first Directory of non-faculty bargaining agents answers a lot of questions about the extent of unionization and the types of units which exist. A reasonable picture of the geographic distribution of non-faculty units, the relative mix of public sector and private sector units, and information on both two-year and four-year institutions now exists. It appears that clerical employees are more heavily unionized than other workers in institutions of higher education. It is evident that many different unions have organized units on college and university campuses.

The Center's intention is to continue to refine and analyze the data. It is hoped that practitioners and academics with information will help NCSCBHEP expand and improve the Directory and share their insights with them.

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