

## **No Illusions; Organizing the Academy**

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### **I.**

**In the spring of 1980, I was assigned to direct the final phase of a three campus union recognition election for 3,200 graduate teaching and research assistants employed by the State University System of Florida. The day after I arrived, every graduate assistant received a letter from the university administration detailing the horrible consequences to their careers and the collegial nature of the universities if a union was formed. What I found most interesting about the letter was that it was identical, down to the grammatical errors and curious locutions, to a letter that had been sent to the registered nurses in a five hospital organizing campaign in Denver, CO that I had worked on the previous year. I was amused.**

**The following Monday, several of our stewards returned from departmental meetings where chairpersons and well prepped anti-union graduate assistants hit them with hostile questions on everything from academic freedom to the whereabouts of Jimmy Hoffa. Visibly shaken, several of them were ready to quit the campaign. I wanted to go find a Republican lawyer and punch his lights out.**

**My point is simple. We should have no illusions about academic employers' hostility to the unionization of their workforce. Whether it is tenure track faculty, laboratory researchers, adjuncts, or graduate assistants who are trying to exercise their rights to organize and bargain collectively, college and university administrations will use every tool available, both legal and illegal, to thwart those efforts. It is not a coincidence that the managers of Cornell, Penn and Temple used the same law firm—Ballard, Spahr, Andrews and Ingersoll—to fight graduate employee unionization. The firm's own website promotes its union avoidance capacity and record, as well as its elite political connections to both the Democratic and Republican parties.**

**Both the urge to organize among university teachers and researchers and the zeal to thwart it on the part of administrators is readily explained. The corporate university, which has emerged in the last 40 years, is embarked on a campaign of labor market flexibility that has as its end the destruction of the historic role of the faculty in both teaching and research. While the number of tenure track faculty positions has declined arithmetically relative to both undergraduate and post-graduate enrollments, the numbers of contingent teachers and researchers has grown geometrically. The general trend for all, but the most privileged academic employees, has been toward declining real wages, reduced benefits, heavier teaching and research loads, deteriorating working conditions, and the commoditization of education and scholarship. If it doesn't produce a surplus or a profit, it doesn't count. This is not only a threat to the academy; it is more seriously a threat to a democratic society.**

## **II.**

**The logical response to this process is union organization. That is the easy answer. The hard question is how do we organize? I believe that there are four keys to successful academic organizing.**

**First, organizing must be based on issues. It must be rooted in the concrete material and professional needs of the workers who are being organized. This requires us to analyze each specific target with care. We must determine if the wages, benefits, workloads, working conditions, and opportunities for professional development are inadequate to the expectations of the teachers and researchers in the proposed bargaining unit. We must, in a relatively short period of time, make a determination if the ideals of the original core group of activists reflect the needs of the majority of the workers. We must further determine if those needs can be met within the existing power relationship. If they can, the administration will meet some of those needs to maintain its power over academic labor. To be blunt, organizing is about power. The goal of organizing must be to increase union density and workers' control of the labor market.**

**Second, organizing any element of the academic workforce requires a very large committee of activists. In addition to being large, the successful committee will have solid structures of accountability, an elaborate division of labor, and significant amounts of training. We are working with very talented people who have very little time. Therefore, the organizing campaign must be built around many small, manageable and meaningful jobs. For every department representative or steward engaged in direct organizing, there must be at least one other person engaged in support activities such as mapping the unit, research, visibility, literature, media relations, community mobilization, mass actions, logistics or building the social dimension of the union. That last often means simply feeding the activist volunteers on time.**

**This in turn means developing a leadership cadre that can use planning tools systematically, be responsible for specific elements of the campaign, conduct regular activist and membership meetings that promote involvement, communicate a clear vision to every constituency in the university and the community. The leaders must be willing to be held accountable for both achievements and shortcomings. The leadership team should be composed of those who get things done. They will require a significant amount of education and mentoring. The first generation of faculty and graduate assistant unionists had experience in the civil rights, anti-war, feminist and labor movements. That is less true today, thus education and training are critical. That is the central role of the staff. Our goal as professional organizers must be to make ourselves redundant once the first contract is won.**

**The third element of the successful organizing campaign is massive 1-on-1 communication with every member of the bargaining unit. It sounds simple, but it is very hard to do right. The first task to be accomplished is to make a solid map of the workforce that identifies the primary work groups within the bargaining unit and where they connect. In an era of hyper-specialization and electronic isolation, good mapping of the workplaces, the campus and the community are essential. Without good mapping, literally thousands of hours of rank and file organizers' time will be wasted.**

After mapping the next task is educating the volunteer organizers. They must be taught the key lesson that organizing is listening, not preaching. They must learn to identify and agitate the self-interests of the bargaining unit members. They must be taught persuasive communications. I believe that every organizer should understand Aristotle's Rhetoric. That is true whether organizing bartenders and booksellers or philosophers and physicists. These skills must be accompanied by good assessment tools and reporting procedures. The best 1-on-1 contact is wasted if it is not properly assessed according to hard criteria, recorded accurately and analyzed as part of developing a moving picture of the campaign's progress.

Recently there has been some discussion of where and how to communicate and about invading people's privacy. That is a false caution produced by living in an atomized culture. The key point is to talk to people about things that are important to them, to solicit their stories, to allow them to identify their needs and articulate their wants. Take them seriously. Do not treat organizing as a form of polling. Treat it as politics. Show the people, whom you are organizing, something they may not have seen before. Show them that they are citizens of the university.

The fourth, and increasingly important, element of successful higher education organizing is the total community campaign. This begins with doing a power structure analysis of the institution and the surrounding community. Next, the various campus communities—students, support staff, and particularly other organized workers on or near campus should have their interests connected to those of the organizing campaign. The other components of the teaching and research profession must be approached as well. As the members of this panel well know, they will not always respond as desired. However, they can be divided or neutralized. As for the administration, leave their fate to St. Jude-- the patron saint of hopeless cases.

The adjacent community must also be mobilized in order to surround the employer. In my experience, the AFL-CIO Voice @ Work approach is most valuable. The labor, political, religious, neighborhood, and small business communities must be approached. Their interests connected to the success of the struggle. Their resources mobilized by direct, planned, worker

**communication with them. Let's face it. Universities are lousy neighbors and we must take advantage of that. Universities, whether public or private, are voracious consumers of tax dollars and the community has a right to a say in whose interest that money will be spent. Universities are often the largest employers in their town or city and they must be held to community standards of employer conduct and responsibility. In this dimension, it is important to remember that the workers' own stories are the most persuasive arguments for support. This cannot be a one way street. The organizing committee must engage in the struggles of its community allies to the degree possible in the context of the organizing drive.**

### **III.**

**This is an ambitious agenda for any organizing effort, but it can be done and it has proven successful. Using this approach, our union, during the last four years, has organized the full time faculty at the University of Vermont and Eastern Oregon University, the academic and research professionals at the University of New Mexico, more than 5,000 adjunct faculty in California, Illinois, Michigan and New Jersey, and the graduate employees at Temple, Michigan State, Oregon State and the University of Illinois. We know we won the graduate employees' election at Penn and are using the Voice @Work approach to force the ballots to be counted and the bargaining to get started.**

**In organizing the academy we are teaching three important lessons. First, this country is a democracy. Second, all work has dignity and thus deserves respect. Third, and most important, when united academic workers have power greater than the trustees' hoarded gold.**

Presented to Organizing Research Network  
June 23, 2003 Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

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