

My Experience with a Faculty Union

By Terry Parssinen, Professor of History

I was a faculty member in the History Department at Temple University from 1970 until 1990. During that time the Temple faculty voted to establish a union. I believe that this happened while I was on a protracted leave of absence in London, 1977-79. In the early 1980s I was promoted to full professor and also joined the administration, first as an assistant dean and then, in 1983, as associate provost for international programs. In 1986, the union struck the university and most of the faculty went out on strike. As I recall, the most prominent issues were the behavior of a dictatorial president and faculty salaries. I resigned from my administrative position and joined the strike.

In my college, Arts and Sciences, most faculty members honored the strike, but some did not, including several departments. One such was the Department of African-American Studies, whose members all crossed the picket lines, and engendered much ill will among striking faculty members. The strike lasted for two weeks.

My most prominent memory of the ensuing four years was the increasing enmity between faculty and administration. Related to this was the growing importance of the contract between the union and the university which superseded all other relations. If a particular action, event, or payment was not specified in the contract it could not occur. My most vivid memory of this period is that one of my younger colleagues got an offer from another university, which came with a substantial salary increase. Our provost wanted to keep him and so she agreed to match the offer. When union officers discovered this, they insisted that the contract offer be rescinded, since it was not spelled out in the contract. The matching offer was withdrawn. Thus the union was in the role of attacking a raise offered to one of its members.

The contract prohibited certain kinds of reciprocal arrangements between faculty and administrators if they were not delineated in the contract. What I mean by the latter would be such actions as helping the admissions office recruit a student who has an interest in my area. Here at UT I am happy to volunteer several Sunday mornings a year to speak to prospective students and their families about offerings in my area—history—for which I am not paid. On the other side, I have several times needed to ask my dean(s) for last-minute travel assistance when I have been invited to speak at a scholarly conference. Another time I faced a deadline crisis in the publication of a book, and the dean, then Jeff Klepfer, gave me some money to hire a research assistant. These are examples of the sorts of reciprocal arrangements that would have been forbidden by the Temple contract.

Overall, I would describe the four years following the 1986 strike as the increasing “teamsterization” of the union/university relationship. (I had been a teamster for four years while a college student.) The bosses gave the orders and the union folks followed them, as long as they were specified in the contract. The practice of shared governance, as we know it, eroded. A level of distrust and hostility permeated these faculty/administrative relationships and it worsened. By 1990 the union was ready to go on strike once again, this time over the interpretation of certain aspects of the contract. I was fed up. If I had stayed at Temple, I had vowed not to honor the

picket line. As it turned out, I got a job at the University of Maryland that summer and left Philadelphia.

Let me make a final point. The unionization of the faculty at Temple was to a considerable extent caused by hostility to our president, a very unpleasant and confrontational guy. I have been a faculty member for 52 years at four different institutions, and I have worked under seven presidents. Ron Vaughn has been the best, by far. He has done many things in his 20-some years as our president to vastly improve the University of Tampa. Most recently, he kept this university humming along during the Great Recession, with increased faculty lines, increased salaries, while maintaining funds for research and enhancing some of our benefits. If you have been in contact with colleagues at other universities during the period 2009-16, you know that most universities suffered significantly, often cutting faculty positions, research funds, and shelving salary raises. Ron Vaughn has also worked positively with faculty groups, like the Senate, on such issues as Family/Maternity Leave. I understand that some faculty members may differ with him on one or another issue. But overall, is this a guy who is sufficiently mean-spirited and confrontational to drive us into the desperate action of setting up a union? I don't think so.