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New World, New Realities: The Changing Role of Faculty Unions in a Jesuit University

Michael J. Webber

With the emergence of the "corporate university," faculty unions can broaden discussion and improve understanding between faculty and administrators. The author discusses eight issues to focus such exchanges.

Introduction

Early in his presidency at Columbia University, Dwight Eisenhower is reputed to have greeted some faculty members by expressing his delight at meeting some of the "employees" of Columbia University. After a frosty silence, a senior faculty member is alleged to have replied that they were not employees of Columbia University -- they were Columbia University. This apocryphal tale nicely captures a major tension in contemporary higher education between faculty who still regard themselves as embodying the ideals of the university and administrators who increasingly see them as employees to be managed. My experience of this tension at the University of San Francisco (USF) has been mitigated somewhat by the presence of a strong faculty union. The union successfully advanced and protected faculty's interests in better wages and benefits. They have also negotiated contractual provisions that have enhanced job security and improved the conditions of employment. However, the union now faces new challenges brought about by the emergence of the "corporate university," and in this brief article I would like to open a conversation that spells out these challenges and indicate how unions (and other faculty organizations) might respond.

Let me confess at the outset that trade unions are "in the blood." My upbringing in South Wales was deeply affected by a working-class politics that was steeped in the spiritual morality and social equality of nonconformist religion rather than any of the more esoteric varieties of European Marxism. After a circuitous journey working in English heavy industry and Welsh horticulture that included work as a shop

steward, I moved into academia, completing my first postgraduate degree in Industrial Relations before moving to the United States where, to paraphrase Marx, I "withered away" into a sociologist. These reflections then are not "objective" (whatever that problematic term implies) but stem from a cultural, experiential, and intellectual appreciation of the labor movement that has shaped my perspectives on unionization in general and the faculty union at USF in particular.

Faculty Unionization at USF

While faculty unions have been an important part of public sector higher education in the United States, they have had relatively little impact on private universities and colleges. The current status of unions in the private sector has been shaped by the 1980 U.S. Supreme Court decision in the oft-cited *Yeshiva University* case. In a five-four decision, the Court ruled that the faculty at Yeshiva University did not have the right to collective bargaining because they were managerial employees. The test of such managerial status in the Court's view was that faculty had autonomy and primary control of the work process and that, as managers, their interests were not substantially different from the 'company's' interests. Unfortunately, the courts ignored Justice Powell's admonition that the decision was a "starting point" intended only to cover a specific set of circumstances, and they began to use *Yeshiva* as a blanket precedent that chilled faculty organizing efforts in private institutions of higher education for a number of years. However, there are signs of a thaw since a number of recent decisions by the NLRB (National Labor Relations Board) have

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affirmed the rights of private college faculty to organize.

The faculty at the University of San Francisco organized a union in 1973, seven years before Yeshiva. Our union, the USF Faculty Association (USFFA), is a member of the American Federation of Teachers (Local 4269, AFL-CIO). Over the past twenty-five years, the union has made impressive economic and non-economic gains for its members. Salaries and benefits for faculty have increased, though we have to ensure that they keep pace with the high cost of living in San Francisco. Faculty are also concerned with issues such as affordable housing, childcare, domestic partner benefits, and medical benefits for retirees. Besides these material issues, our collective bargaining agreement provides for a union shop, a full grievance procedure, binding contractual procedures covering specific criteria for promotion and tenure, and numerous other provisions concerning the conditions of employment. However, recent changes in higher education mean that issues such as outside employment, intellectual property, and the use of part-time labor may also be on the agenda in the future.

These gains were hard won. Union recognition, contractual rights, and stable collective bargaining came as a result of concerted faculty action including periods of industrial militancy and picketing in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Over the years, contractual agreements have extended employment protections for male and female faculty, particularly with regard to equitable pay scales and the criteria governing promotion and tenure. Many senior colleagues at USF took an active part in these struggles and are justifiably proud of their success in establishing the union. Indeed, for many, it was a defining moment in their professional and personal lives, and future generations of USF faculty will be forever grateful for their sacrifices. But nostalgia isn't what it used to be. Many of our founders are approaching retirement age, and waves of new hires in the last decade have fundamentally changed the demographic profile of the faculty at USF, bringing new issues and concerns to the fore. While the union needs to remember and celebrate its past accomplishments, it must also look at the future with sobriety, intellectual clarity, and tough-minded realism.

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The Corporate University

Higher education has long been a big business where market considerations have shaped the policies and actions of university administrators. In recent years, however, the forces of economic globalization have compelled colleges and universities, much like other corporations, to seek greater flexibility as they struggle to maintain profitability. Within the knowledge industry, colleges and universities now compete with each other by enticing prospective students with new degree programs, distance learning courses, and various financial incentives. But while acting more like corporations in the educational marketplace, universities are slowly having to come to terms with the fact that they are not the only education delivery systems in the market. *The Times Higher Education Supplement* recently reported that the government in New Zealand would soon allow IBM to grant fully accredited Ph.D. degrees in that country. Can undergraduate degrees from Microsoft University be far behind?

The term "corporate university" has also been applied to the ways in which corporations have penetrated higher education. Clark Kerr, in *The Uses of the University* (1963), argued that the production of "useful" knowledge was the core of the university's mission. In his view, 'useful' meant a contribution to economic and social growth that privileged scientific and technical disciplines over older traditions of scholarship. Kerr saw universities as knowledge factories and was an early advocate of forging associations with private corporations. These connections have now become commonplace and have taken the form of contract services, financial partnerships, curricula designed to meet corporate needs, and corporate-sponsored buildings, programs, or faculty lines. Jesuit colleges and universities have yet to scale the heights of some research institutions -- the Coca-Cola Professorship of Marketing at the University of Georgia, the Taco Bell Distinguished Professor of Hotel and Restaurant Administration at Washington State University, the Federal Express Chair of Information Management Systems at the University of Memphis, the General Mills Chair of Cereal Chemistry and Technology at the University of Minnesota, or the Lego Professor of Learning Research at MIT -- but doubtless some fund-raisers and deans

are salivating at the prospect.

Without critical reflection and clear boundaries, these corporate linkages pose some real dangers. As labs, departments, and research projects are purchased and co-opted by corporations, academic research programs can become compromised in favor of corporate agendas. Despite protestations of "scientific objectivity," there is the all too human temptation to shade results and fudge data, especially when large grants or contracts from corporate donors are at stake. More importantly, the whole tenor of university research becomes more applied or instrumental. This tends to marginalize research in some disciplines, particularly in the humanities, and also erodes the kind of disinterested curiosity that in the past has generated many important avenues of inquiry. Faculty are certainly well placed to teach skills that have direct business or professional application, and indeed some science faculty might argue that they have been doing this for years. But as Bertrand Russell reminded us, the narrowly utilitarian conception of education ignores the necessity of training students' purposes as well their skills. "Useless" knowledge may well in fact promote the contemplative habit of mind that is the hallmark of Jesuit education.

The idea of the "corporate university" also has a far more pernicious connotation. It is used to refer to the adoption of corporate-style values and techniques in internal management practices. For university administrators operating within a market economy characterized by fierce competition between many suppliers with little product differentiation and fickle consumers, strategic planning and accounting principles can be applied to academic programs and employment in order to increase efficiency and profits. One popular business approach to academe called "responsibility center management" (RCM) has been introduced at many colleges and universities (it was called "value centered management" at Michigan and "incentive management for growth" at Minnesota). This technique uses economic incentives as the basis of academic program decisions by making schools or departments (the "responsibility center") accountable for income and expenses via enrollments. If revenues generated by majors and student contact hours were greater than costs, the school or department could use the money at the discretion of the dean or chair. Any shortfalls necessitated attracting more students or

reducing costs, particularly closing "unprofitable" departments and programs.

Naturally, the language of the university has changed to accommodate this new corporate reality. Managerial terminology -- "flexibility," "productivity," "financial and human capital," "excellence," "cost benefit," "cost containment," "market niche" and (in the wonderful alliteration of recent USF secretarial evaluation guidelines) "constant commitment to continuous improvements in customer-service relationships" -- is now a regular feature of university discourse. However, it is the language of "budget crisis" that has had the most profound effect on the institutional culture of the university in recent years. With escalating costs and stagnant revenues, many colleges and universities face a precarious economic future. While these budgetary crises are frequently blamed on current revenue shortfalls, they are also the result of past resource allocation choices. But whatever their origins, prolonged use of the language of crisis has meant that budgetary considerations have come to govern university decision-making rather than educational goals or spiritual mission. Furthermore, from a union perspective, such a discourse may be used to justify restructuring, reorganizing, downsizing, outsourcing, or streamlining faculty work.

Faced with such budgetary and financial considerations, university administrators may have little patience with faculty claims to shared governance in the university. Administrators will want more flexibility to respond to new economic realities and contingencies and may come to see the faculty as hopelessly mired in turf disputes and petty academic jealousies. Crucial decisions affecting faculty work -- such as class size, workload, program initiatives, curriculum, and hiring -- may incrementally accrue to administrators.

Power is the key issue here. The corporatization of the university has decisively shifted power away from the faculty and toward administrators. The formal apparatus of sovereignty may remain, but faculty are participating less in real decision-making and also know much less about what is actually going on in the institution. In the past, faculty have fought hard for academic freedom and have won the right to speak and write according to the dictates of conscience without interference from political or university authorities. But we have been less willing to assert another

important dimension of academic freedom, namely our sovereignty over the educational process and our place in the governance of the university. The revocation of faculty responsibility for governance and educational innovation has so far met with only weak and sporadic resistance.

What Is To Be Done?

Unions can be vehicles for recapturing this element of our labor and shifting the balance of power on campus. Hitherto, faculty unions have confined themselves to economic bargaining, but it is time to broaden our compass and generate new ideas and new alternatives to redirect the academy. Let me briefly outline a few issues that the faculty union at USF and faculty unions more generally might need to address in the coming years.

First, firing faculty, even tenured faculty, may be rare but it is not illegal. Thanks to faculty unions there are sufficient contractual and procedural provisions in place to make this more difficult. Budget crises and declining enrollments may, however, cause management to demand the kind of faculty restructuring that may once again place full-time faculty in jeopardy. Faculty unions have to defend job security, but we also have to engage in broader outreach and dialogue with trustees, parents, and the general public on what it is that faculty actually do. Most faculty work very hard (language and writing instructors in grading papers, science instructors in preparing labs and lectures), enjoy teaching and research, and are not unrepentant materialists providing they can own a modest home and live with reasonable comfort. Improving our public relations image may make it less politically feasible to attack our job security and, more importantly, will elicit greater understanding of our central role in the academy.

Second, despite our claims to collegiality, full time faculty remain internally stratified. We are not only in different divisions and disciplines but have different work-force statuses (full-time and part-time) and may be divided by "academic capitalism" as the commercial value of some academic work privileges some faculty over others in terms of salary and prestige. At USF, faculty salaries are relatively uniform thanks to the contract, although deans can and do exercise some discretion over faculty remuneration in response to

tight academic labor markets in some disciplines. Nonetheless, this discretion has to be carefully monitored because increasing salary dispersion may indicate a gradual restructuring of administrative priorities as some divisions, departments, and faculties become favored over others.

Third, faculty unions need to be concerned about the use of part-time faculty. This issue has been widely discussed in recent years, and I will not repeat familiar arguments here. Nonetheless, faculty unions will need to negotiate procedures making it more difficult for administrators to arbitrarily utilize part-time faculty to undermine tenure, possibly through contractual language that establishes full- to part-time ratios. At the same time, faculty unions need to be concerned with wages and benefits of part-timers. Part-timers have become a kind of "*lumpenacademia*," an academic underclass who provide valuable labor under deplorable conditions. Indeed, some writers have compared them to workers in the *maquiladoras* since their cheap labor has become essential to university profitability. Full-time faculty need to recognize that the working conditions of part-timers pose a stark challenge to our professed concerns about social justice, especially within Jesuit colleges and universities.

Fourth, we need to broaden our understanding of the effects of new instructional technologies on the academic labor process. It is no longer just a matter of *changing classroom pedagogy or of relinquishing control of instructional delivery to management*. It also involves the creation of a whole range of new tasks and new occupations -- web designers, support technicians, system managers, etc. There has been an explosion of non-faculty professionals outside the faculty bargaining unit (and outside the purview of traditional faculty senates too), and faculty unions need to start organizing this emergent group.

Fifth, faculty unions should pressure universities to publicly disclose the salaries and remuneration of all employees, from vice-presidents to janitors, secretaries to deans. *Such disclosures might reveal waste, corruption, and duplication at higher levels but would*

also disclose the extent of labor exploitation of low-paid workers that might be taking place within the university itself. Such a measure would also build openness and trust, a necessary component of institutional loyalty and shared mission. If this were to lead to more open and transparent budgetary practices in other areas of university life, so much the better.

Sixth, faculty unions need to convince universities to halt the practice of outsourcing as a cost containment strategy. Contracting with outside vendors to do university work has economic appeal in times of budgetary constraint, but the work is often performed by poorly paid casual-workers, which should deeply offend our sense of social justice. Furthermore, where does this practice stop? Should we outsource library book acquisitions as they did with disastrous consequences at the University of Hawaii? And what does this say about building a committed and dedicated community on campus in the long run?

Seventh, faculty unions need to be concerned with the growth of university administrative units not related directly to teaching. This is of course an old chestnut, and faculties routinely complain about "the administration." But administrative numbers have climbed in recent years and it seems that, as Arthur Levine has written, "More admissions officers were hired to attract more students. More development staff was hired to raise more money. More student affairs professionals were hired to reduce attrition. And more financial staff were hired to control spending." Despite such growth, few faculty have noticed any improvement in the delivery of student or academic services.

Furthermore, in times of budgetary crisis, when faculty are being asked to cut the number of classes offered, teach larger numbers of students, produce more research, and serve on more committees, it is good for morale to see the hardships being borne equally by all.

Eighth, faculty unions need to cooperate with other unions on and off campus. By developing relationships within and outside the university, we can begin to move beyond just economic issues and work together to take a

more proactive and constructive role in shaping the future direction of the university.

Conclusion

There can be little doubt that USFFA has been very effective in improving salaries, benefits, and working conditions. But at a time when American labor unions are slowly gaining ground as they adapt to new worlds and new realities by adopting new strategies and visions, we too must move in a new direction. For better or worse, the corporate university is here to stay, but while it cannot be stopped, it can be shaped. Both sides will need to lay aside past injuries and outdated stereotypes and avoid the hardening of positions and dogmatic rhetoric that often accompanies the language of crisis in the corporate university.

More importantly, faculty unions will need to broaden their role in order to reassert the faculty's sovereignty over curriculum and pedagogy as well as their right to full participation in university governance that includes decisions over financial priorities. In addition, as Stanley Aronowitz has written, unions will need to become "institutions of alternatives as well as institutions of resistance." In abandoning old verities and narrow interests we must take responsibility for the future direction of the university by becoming more proactive in generating new ideas and alternative solutions to common problems. This entails preserving the best traditions of Jesuit education and suggesting what a social justice education in a global and multicultural world will look like, while insisting that social justice also applies to all those who live and labor in the university at home.

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Paraphrasing Ignacio Ellacuria, it is the nature of every University to be a social force, and it is the calling of a Jesuit university to take conscious responsibility for being such a force for faith and justice. Every Jesuit academy of higher learning is called to live in a social reality . . . and to live for that social reality, to shed university intelligence upon it and to use university influence to transform it. Thus Jesuit universities have stronger and different reasons, than many other academic and research institutions, for addressing the actual world as it unjustly exists and for helping to reshape it in the light of the Gospel.

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