

Faculty Unions

a
collective
student
shaft

(CPS) While newly-formed faculty unions battle with their administrations, students nationwide have found themselves left out in the cold on bargaining that will determine their class size, curriculum, tuition and academic freedom.

Declining enrollments, a poor job market and tight university budgets have put many professors out on the picket line, fighting in a new way for their academic lives. The faculties of more than 212 institutions have been organized into some kind of collective bargaining arrangement.

Student bargaining units have not grown proportionally. Only the independent student union at Stockton State in New Jersey has remained viable for any length of time. That union recently negotiated a contract with the American Federation of Teachers local to protect students during a threatened strike by New Jersey professors.

Much of the problem stems from the fact that neither students, faculties, nor administrations have been entirely clear on their roles in a framework traditionally more suited to industry than academia.

"Some hold that universities and unions by their very nature are incompatible," commented a faculty union leader at the State University of Buffalo. "A university operates on a collegial model, while a union is based on an adversary model with management and staff set against each other."

If students are to fit into this traditional adversary model, many have asked, whose adversary are they?

Students at the Fitchburg State College in Massachusetts were allowed to participate as a third party in faculty-administration negotiations. However, the students found that both the faculty and administration wanted them to bargain against the other party.

The issue was somewhat clearer when in 1970 teaching assistants at the University of Wisconsin bargained as principals in negotiations with the administration over length of appointment, job security, work load and class size. The same year part-time student employees at the University of Oregon were legally recognized as a bargaining unit in a dispute over working conditions.

Yet in both of these cases, students negotiated primarily as employees, a stipulation that most labor relations statutes require to authorize collective bargaining.

Some have seen the student's role more as that of a consumer-one who should be able to contract for a quality education at a reasonable price. However, labor relations experts have expressed fears that the precedent set by such a student-faculty-administration bargaining might spread to the industrial sector with consumers claiming a third party interest.

Students must have a clear conception of their interests before entering into collective bargaining, William McHugh, professor of Law at American University and an expert on collective bargaining, stressed in a National Student Association (NSA) publication.

"(Negotiations) require a fine sense of timing," wrote McHugh. "The presence of students throughout negotiations but with only a limited self-interest in the negotiations could seriously impair, if not destroy, the process."

McHugh says the "most practical" avenue of participation for students was a "problem oriented consultative" role after administration-faculty bargaining is over.

Most students feel this is not enough. This was expressed at the "Colloquium on College Student's Role in Collective Bargaining" held recently in New York. There, student representatives worked on defining exactly what the "community of interest" at their campuses was.

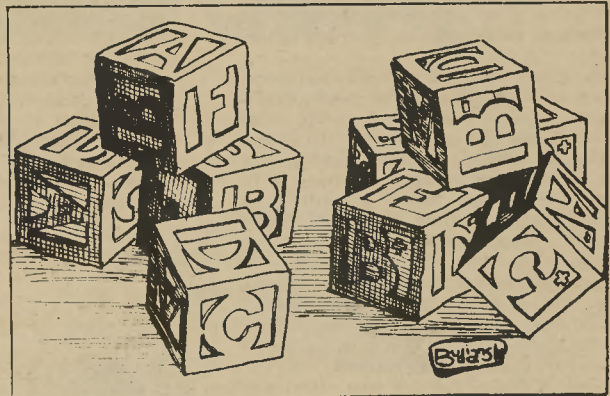
Although there was not much talk of forming independent student unions along the lines of Stockton State, students were "brought up to date on the state of the art of negotiating," according to one participant - former National Student Lobby (NSL) Executive Director Layton Olsen.

"Collective bargaining is a pretty tough game to play," said Olsen. "People are just starting to get through the rhetoric stage. The feeling was that you have to start organizing with the conditions you have in

your state rather than from a national perspective."

Olsen thought that individual organizing would be hampered by lack of financial backing for some time to come.

"Students are going to find it hard to find resources to do the Stockton State thing," he said. NSL is currently working on amending the National Labor Relations Board law to include students, and on developing information-position statements that would help students get a handle on the national legislation.



In California last year, significant legislative maneuvering was done by the University of California Student Lobby. For the first time the Lobby was able to tack onto a teacher union bill the stipulation that 1) students may be present at all faculty-administration negotiations and have access to all written agreements and transcripts, and that 2) prior to any final agreements, the negotiators must consider a report on the "educational impact" on students prepared by the student representative. The bill passed the legislature but was vetoed by Governor Reagan.

On another level, the Union Task Force at Temple University in Philadelphia has been working to organize and strengthen bargaining organizations on a state-by-state level. Originally formed at the NSA Congress last year, the Task Force has been largely self-funded by interested Temple students, according to coordinator Randy Miller.

Miller said that the Task Force was working to help start statewide student organizations as a preliminary to organizing bargaining units. In states that already had such strong organizations, committees to lobby for student rights with legislators and the state office of education should be formed, he said. The Task Force plans to report on its progress at the next NSA congress in August.

NSA, meanwhile, has been plagued by the same financial problems and lack of interest in unions that characterizes student attitudes toward collective bargaining in general. At its congress last summer, NSA resolved that it would become "the national collective bargaining agent on campuses subject to the approval of each individual campus."

NSA's plans for such national unionization as well as those for the preparation of "model contracts" between students and their schools have fallen through, according to Drew Olim of NSA, to a large extent for the lack of any good models.

"Until the faculty unionizes, the students don't react," he said. "And once collective bargaining is instituted, students are left out."

If students are indeed left out of the bargaining structure within the university, Olim believed that student-power organizing tactics from the mid and late sixties would probably have to be used to exercise leverage.

"I have a hunch it's going to get pretty hot as the economy deteriorates even further," he said. "The whole question of job security is going to be a prime one for faculty members."

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