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## Organizing and Representing Clerical Workers

### The Harvard Model



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**T**he private sector clerical work force is largely nonunion, simultaneously offering the labor movement a major source of potential membership growth and an extremely difficult challenge. Based on December 1990 data, there are eighteen million workers employed in office clerical, administrative support, and related occupations. Eighty percent of these employees are women, accounting for 30 percent of all women in the labor force. Among private sector office workers, 57 percent work in the low-union-density industry groups of services (only 5.7 percent union) and finance, insurance, and real estate (only 2.5 percent union). With barely over ten million total private sector union members, the labor movement can ill afford to overlook the thirteen million nonunion women who work in private sector clerical occupations (BLS 1991).

Concerned trade unionists are now searching for appropriate models for organizing and representing these workers. Two schools of thought have emerged. Some believe that clericals are like other workers and can be organized when job-related concerns predispose them to action. According to this view, private sector clerical organizing can proceed if and when unions devote sufficient attention and resources to the endeavor using conventional organizing techniques. Other unionists argue that clericals are different. Not only are they primarily women, but they also tend to be traditionally feminine and turned off by macho blue-collar unionism. According to this interpretation, a special approach is required regarding style, tactics, and/or issues to be addressed.

I will focus on one highly visible private sector clerical organizing victory: the 1988 union win among Harvard University clerical and technical em-

ployees. The Harvard case is, in many ways, representative of the success unions have experienced among university-based clerical workers in recent years using rank-and-file grassroots oriented campaigns. And, as a private sector campaign that confronted intense management opposition, it also offers tactical lessons that are relevant beyond the confines of academia. Perhaps most important, the Harvard case presents us with a distinct organizing and bargaining model whose relevance to other organizing efforts deserves careful evaluation: the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW) not only employed a grassroots *organizing* approach, but also devised a unique bargaining strategy that succeeded in institutionalizing and preserving rank-and-file involvement.

### ***How Organizable Are Clerical Workers?***

The available evidence suggests that clericals are just as likely to be pro-union as other workers. This conclusion is based in part on recent opinion polls and union-sponsored surveys that have consistently disclosed that unrepresented women workers are more positively disposed toward unionization than are unrepresented men. Reinforcing evidence is offered by Ruth Milkman, who has uncovered a secondary phenomenon: the propensity of women to support unionization increases as the proportion of women in the work unit grows (Milkman forthcoming). In other words, women in gender homogeneous work groups offer the most congenial target for union organizers. Because clerical work is predominantly staffed by women, this information should be encouraging to unions interested in organizing clericals.

Additional support for this optimistic assessment is offered by Phil Comstock, of the Wilson Center for Public Research, and Cynthia Costello. Based on thirty-eight thousand responses from nonunion women to Wilson Center surveys between 1982 and 1989, Comstock concludes that women workers are increasingly attracted to unions because the majority now work out of economic necessity and have a long-term attachment to the labor force (BNA 1990b:C-2). Costello's research demonstrates that women clerical workers are potentially as oppositional and militant as unionized male workers (Costello 1987).

Although there is general agreement among trade unionists on organizing potential, there is considerable disagreement about the best strategy for reaching clericals. Many concur with Comstock that organizing women clericals is not substantially different from organizing other workers. Comstock argues that the concerns of the "new women workers" are converging with those of their male counterparts. He points specifically to low-paid office workers who

are responsive to organizing because they "have job related complaints, [and] believe that 'something needs to be done' to improve their earnings, treatment and opportunities" (Comstock 1989:10). Comstock offers an optimistic assessment of the potential for traditional unions to organize clericals with standard approaches emphasizing issues of pay, benefits, and working conditions.

Others are skeptical of the ability of male-dominated unions to effectively address the concerns of women clericals. Milkman (forthcoming) and Costello (1987) see clericals organizing, in part, on the basis of gender ties. Similarly, Naomi Baden argues that unions must use approaches that are sensitive to gender differences. Female office workers are most likely to respond positively to women organizers who develop collective workplace leadership and emphasize the emotional and personal rewards of unionization (Baden 1986). Ruth Needleman adds that women expect more from unions than men, and they respond best to organizers who pay attention to the complexity of workplace relationships and who facilitate rank-and-file participation (Needleman 1988).

Even among those who agree that standard union approaches are inappropriate for women clericals, there is some disagreement over whether the work culture and values of clericals promote or hinder unionization. In a case study of a strike by clerical employees at a Wisconsin insurance company, Costello concludes that the women's willingness to fight management's sex discrimination practices reflects a more militant style than is usually attributed to clerical workers (Costello 1987). But Roberta Lynch of AFSCME disagrees. She views the "female" culture of clerical work as a hindrance to unionization. Clericals tend to be passive and traditionally feminine, and thus averse to strikes and other forms of direct action. Furthermore, they value their close working relationship with professionals and managers, and worry that a third-party union might create an uncomfortable adversarial environment (Lynch 1986).

Karen Nussbaum of 9 to 5, the National Association of Working Women, partially reconciles these apparently contradictory views. She notes that organizers must be patient because most clericals have no experience with unions. Trust must be cultivated in order to help clericals overcome their fear: of the unknown, of being ostracized by their boss or coworkers, of being mistreated or fired, of strikes, of unions as impersonal third-party intruders, and so on. Once clericals resolve to support a union, their commitment is firm because the process has been painful and they have exercised such great care in reaching the decision. When challenged, this commitment readily transforms into militance (Nussbaum 1986).

## ***Clerical Organizing in Higher Education***

One of the clearest indications of the potential for clerical organizing is the success unions have experienced among the employees of colleges and universities. Although many of the victories in this arena have resulted from a natural extension of the growth in public sector unions in the 1970s, unionization has also spread to clericals at private institutions. While precise figures are not available, it is probable that unionization levels among clericals at public universities are comparable to those of other state and local government employees. It is also clear that the clerical employees of private universities are more likely to be union members than are other private sector white-collar workers. Roughly half of the bargaining units were first certified in the 1980s, with very few university clericals represented prior to 1970. Remarkably, clerical workers now have union representation on 70 percent of the campuses where organizing campaigns were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s (Hurd 1989b).

Although on a broad scale unionization has spread rapidly among clerical workers in higher education, specific campaigns tend to move slowly. These workers are initially skeptical of unions and carefully evaluate the decision to support an organizing campaign. In response, most unions have adopted a grassroots approach in which the union staff member helps build a large representative internal committee; the committee then does the actual organizing. Most of the organizing is one-on-one, worker to worker. Although time-consuming, grassroots organizing builds a base of highly dedicated activists. Two successful examples of this style are the Columbia University campaign by United Auto Workers District 65 and the Yale University campaign by the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (Hurd 1989a, 1986; Ladd-Taylor 1985).<sup>1</sup>

If leaders of a preexisting staff association support union affiliation, a win is more likely. At Vassar College, for example, a staff association was formed in 1975 by clerical, technical, and professional employees to organize social events and, on occasion, to present concerns to the college's administration. By 1985 the association's leaders had become frustrated with the administration's lack of responsiveness and invited six unions to make presentations at

<sup>1</sup>It is not uncommon for a union to lose a first election, maintain a presence, then eventually win bargaining rights. This scenario is especially likely where management aggressively opposes unionization. At the University of Cincinnati, for example, SEIU District 925 began organizing in 1984, losing its initial representation election in 1986 by fifty votes in a unit of 1,400. The union filed for a second election in 1988 and won by 170 votes (Schneider 1990).

open lunchtime meetings. The leaders then decided to seek collective bargaining rights with the assistance of the Communications Workers of America (CWA). In a subsequent National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election, the membership voted 76 percent in favor of joining the CWA (Beluardo 1986).

Where a substantial portion of the work force is familiar with unions, reticence diminishes and organizing proceeds more quickly. Cuyahoga Community College is located in heavily unionized Cleveland, Ohio. When SEIU District 925 decided to organize the college's clerical workers in 1982, two bargaining units, representing the blue-collar workers and the faculty, already existed on the campus. Because of the heightened familiarity with unions there was less fear, and District 925 distributed union authorization cards only two months after its initial contact, quickly signing up 65 percent of the workers (Hill 1985).

Although diverse in many ways, most successful college and university campaigns share one important element: the clericals involved come to view the union as their own organization. At Vassar and Cuyahoga Community College, the organizing efforts were initiated and controlled by the clerical workers themselves, with the parent unions providing technical and legal support. At Yale, Columbia, and Cincinnati, the campaigns were based on the grassroots organizing philosophy, and the workers "assumed ownership" of their locals. College and university clericals are more likely to support unionization if they are convinced that the bargaining agent will be controlled by the membership. The specific parent union is largely irrelevant, with at least sixteen national unions and many independent locals serving as bargaining agents at campuses across the country. Although there are some cases where clericals view the union as a service organization and have neither demanded control nor asserted ownership, the typical university clerical union is created and thrives because of rank-and-file activism.

### *The Early Stages of Organizing at Harvard*

Harvard University's clerical campaign, the first in which a grassroots approach was fully institutionalized into the ongoing representational activities of a union, confirms the importance of the grassroots organizing approach.

Union organizing among white-collar workers at Harvard spanned nearly two decades. Early organizing led to elections in 1977 and again in 1981 at Harvard Medical School, both resulting in narrow defeats for District 65. District 65 affiliated with the United Automobile Workers (UAW) in 1981, and the UAW then assumed responsibility for the organizing efforts at Har-

vard. In 1984, the UAW filed for a third election at the medical school, but the university challenged the unit definition and the NLRB agreed, expanding the bargaining unit to include all of Harvard's clerical and technical employees (Golden 1988:40-41).

Kristine Rondeau went to work as a research assistant at the Harvard School of Public Health in 1976, and was a volunteer in the 1977 District 65 campaign. During the 1981 election she worked full-time as a member of the union's organizing staff. After the 1981 defeat she stayed with the UAW and became the lead organizer at Harvard. In 1985 Rondeau and six other staff members left to form the independent Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW) (Golden 1988:41).

For a year and a half the seven organizers (all former Harvard employees) operated on a shoestring budget funded primarily by donations. The HUCTW's perseverance during this difficult period was instrumental in winning respect from a broad cross-section of the clerical and technical employees and dissolving concerns that the union was an outside force (Solomon 1990). Although the HUCTW affiliated with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) in January 1987, it had established itself as the grassroots domain of Harvard clerical workers. AFSCME provided much-needed financial support, but the local was allowed almost complete autonomy (Golden 1988:40-42, 45).

Rondeau and her fellow organizers developed HUCTW's strategy, borrowing some tactics from the successful clerical campaigns at Yale and Columbia. Virtually all organizing was conducted one-on-one, usually over lunch. In these discussions, HUCTW's staff members and rank-and-file activists emphasized how a union could help individual workers confront their powerlessness. As Rondeau said, "You have to strengthen people as individuals, and you have to find a way for them to develop their own self-confidence. You have to find a way for them to express anger at being powerless yet somehow represent themselves in a positive way that works for them" (Green 1988:6). Each worker was encouraged to define her own issues, while the union provided the support and sense of community necessary to overcome isolation.

The organizing task at Harvard was enormous: thirty-seven hundred employees working in two thousand isolated offices and laboratories scattered among four hundred buildings. With AFSCME's financial support, the local's organizing staff was increased in 1987 to sixteen. Eight were former Harvard employees and the other eight continued to hold part-time jobs at the university. The organizers divided the campus into twenty-two areas, each with its own organizing committee. These area organizing committees met weekly over lunch with a staff member to discuss progress and strategy and to identify

potential recruits for a campus-wide organizing committee. Eventually, the larger campus-wide organizing committee included 450 members, with at least one from each building (J. Diamond 1988).

The organizers worked with the committee members to help them develop basic interpersonal skills, concentrating on how to form a relationship and how to listen. Committee members had to overcome their own fears and approach other workers to discuss the union one-to-one. Workers were not pressured, but were encouraged to support the union and to become involved to the degree that they were comfortable (Leavitt 1990). Member Donene Williams said, "There was a strong emphasis on doing it ourselves, and doing it our way" (Williams 1990a).

### *The 1988 Victory*

In December 1987, HUCTW staff and rank-and-file leaders decided that support was sufficiently broad and solid to initiate a card campaign. Members of the campus-wide organizing committee were given cards and went back to the workers in another series of one-on-one meetings to collect signatures. In March 1988 HUCTW filed for an election with the NLRB after signing up a majority of the unit (V. Diamond 1988).

The union's reliance on face-to-face organizing by Harvard workers was designed to build commitment prior to filing for the election and to provide the best possible defense against management's inevitable resistance efforts. Rondeau described the reasoning behind the philosophy: "They have to be intellectually and emotionally committed. Otherwise, when there's an anti-union campaign, you lose them" (Golden 1988:41). The preelection organizing merely reinforced the earlier attention to individual worker concerns. Organizing committee members kept track of all union supporters. Anyone who was wavering received diligent one-on-one attention at home, at lunch, and at work in a process one organizer called "polite yet ruthless" (Golden 1988:44).

The union's campaign encouraged workers to stand together to gain power. Its central theme was the "philosophy of voice." By emphasizing worker empowerment and involvement in determining the conditions of their employment in order to improve quality of life on the job, HUCTW was able to avoid confronting management on specifics. With democratic decision making as the key issue, stronger group identity was also facilitated (Leavitt 1990; Byrne 1990a).

This is not to say that specific issues did not arouse the ire of workers. Susan Manning identified pay as her key concern, while Bertha Ezell expressed

frustration that personnel rules had blocked her career advancement because she did not have the correct credentials (Weinstein 1988). For those with young children, affordable day care was a primary need and the union made a special effort to highlight this concern (Noble 1988). The union also focused on matters important to older long-term employees, such as pensions and health care (Feinberg 1987). The campaign was never limited to these specific issues, however. HUCTW's focus on empowerment offered each worker a potential solution to the problem most important to her or him.

HUCTW also emphasized how needs were interrelated and helped individuals realize that they were not just unionizing for themselves but for their coworkers as well. Pauline Solomon, for instance, said "From the beginning [the organizers] took the approach that if I wanted someone to support my issue then I should support their issue" (Solomon 1990).

Group support and cooperation was facilitated, in part, by the workers' common identity as women. Women made up over 80 percent of the unit and many viewed their job-related difficulties from a feminist perspective. Barbara Horell supported HUCTW because she did not want "to be relegated to undervalued 'women's work'" (*Chicago Tribune* 1988). Pauline Solomon's involvement was precipitated by concern for pay equity: "If you compared our skills with men doing work that required a similar level of education and training, we would be making much more money" (Solomon 1990).

The way pro-feminist union organizers defined certain issues also fostered gender consciousness among workers. The union focused on the affordability of child care, a major burden for low-wage clericals but a minor irritation for the mostly male faculty. Similarly, pension deficiencies were discerned as particularly severe because of the blocked upward mobility and substandard pay typically associated with the clerical and technical jobs held mostly by women. At union rallies organizer Joie Gelband would hop on a piano and sing to the tune of "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend": "A pat on the head can be quite condescending, but unions are a girl's best friend" (Warren 1988).

Because specific issues were secondary, it was possible to forego traditional campaign literature. Instead the organizers and committee members concentrated on building relationships among supporters to strengthen the feeling of community. Newspaper articles about the campaign were copied by the union and circulated to reinforce the notion that the HUCTW was doing something important. Newspaper articles, however, never substituted for personal contact.

Although traditional campaign literature was scarce, posters, bumper stickers, and buttons were integral to the campaign. This paraphernalia helped popularize two slogans that became central to the organizing effort: "It's not



Anti-Harvard To Be Pro-Union” and “You Can’t Eat Prestige.” The prestige associated with university employment is a barrier to organizing university clericals, and was especially noticeable at internationally renowned Harvard. The union slogans attacked this issue head-on, pointing out that on the one hand, to be rewarding a job must offer more than prestige alone, and on the other, that unionization need not undermine the institution itself. The HUCTW went to great lengths to convince workers that they could use the union to increase their influence, improve their work environment, *and* make Harvard a better university in the process (Golden 1988:47).

From the beginning of the organizing process, the HUCTW reached out to the broader university community and to potentially sympathetic organizations and individuals outside of Harvard, informing them of the clerical workers’ concerns and updating them on campaign developments. In 1988, when the university unleashed a sophisticated anti-union campaign in response to the union’s card-signing effort, the HUCTW was prepared and called on students, faculty, and community supporters to urge Harvard president Derek Bok to refrain from engaging in an anti-union campaign (Rondeau and Manna 1988). Bok received hundreds of letters and phone calls imploring him to permit a fair vote.

Shortly after filing, the union’s “neutrality campaign” went into high gear. Twenty-seven distinguished Harvard professors (many holding endowed chairs) issued a public statement urging “that the University management remain scrupulously neutral during the organizing drive” (Adams et al. 1988). The Boston City Council passed a resolution requesting that Harvard “refrain from anti-union campaigns and further attempts to delay a representation election” (Boston City Council 1988). Students signed petitions; church, civil rights, women’s, and labor organizations sent representatives to visit Bok; and hundreds attended a candlelight vigil outside of Bok’s home (J. Diamond 1988). Although Harvard continued to wage war on the union, the “neutrality campaign” clearly put the university on the defensive.

Harvard’s carefully crafted anti-union campaign balanced on a fine line between academic free speech and union busting, as the university attacked the union with what the *Chicago Tribune* called a “velvet scalpel” (Warren 1988). The university emphasized Harvard’s record as a “progressive, responsive employer,” one that paid competitive salaries with good benefits, and offered quality child care (Weinstein 1988). The administration attempted to appear objective, factual, and academic. Four booklets titled “Consider the Facts” and numerous letters stating management’s case were sent to each employee. Throughout, union representation was portrayed as inappropriate

for Harvard's white-collar workers because of the rigidity and needless conflict that would result (J. Diamond 1988).

The university held 120 "captive audience" meetings on work time. Although attendance was technically voluntary, recalcitrant employees frequently received notices of meetings with an added message that their supervisors "have been made aware of the day and time of these meetings and join [the administration] in encouraging you to attend" (*Harvard Crimson* 1988b). Clerical and technical employees opposed to the union joined together as the "Staff Support Action Committee" to assist management's campaign (Weinstein 1988).

The administration relied heavily on supervisors to assist their effort. A 104-page briefing book, full of such information as lists of legal anti-union statements (and their unlawful counterparts); strikes at other universities; examples of restrictive and undesirable clauses from "representative" AFSCME contracts; and the positive aspects of pay, benefits, and working conditions at Harvard, was prepared for supervisors (BNA 1988). Supervisors were informed that the university had the right to fire those supervisors who were uncooperative (*Harvard Crimson* 1988a).

President Bok attempted to remain above the fray. He had established his own academic reputation in the field of labor-management relations, writing books and articles that in some cases were explicitly critical of management efforts to resist unions. But as an administrator facing an organizing campaign, Bok saw the situation in a different light. A few weeks before the election he sent a four-page letter to each employee, using somewhat tortured reasoning to explain his position:

[Unions are] a good thing for America and for working people. . . . However, I am not at all persuaded in this case that union representation and collective bargaining will improve the working environment at Harvard. . . . [Unions have] resisted efforts to allow supervisors and employees to vary the way they work in response to their special needs and capabilities (BNA 1988).

The union did not wither under management's onslaught. Hundreds of copies of the university's briefing book for supervisors were printed by the union and distributed to its members. A video was produced simulating an anti-union meeting to prepare members for the captive audience events (Hart 1988). The anti-union propaganda was undermined by HUCTW's grassroots strategy: organizing committee members talked individually with coworkers about the administration's intimidation efforts (Williams 1990a).

In the end, the HUCTW prevailed. The final tally in the May election was 1,520 "yes," 1,486 "no," with 41 challenged ballots, only 3 less than required

to overturn the election. The union was ecstatic. Kristine Rondeau proclaimed, "We want to make this a model for women everywhere" (J. Diamond 1988). Ecstasy did not cloud reality, however. HUCTW representatives declared they would take one day off and then resume organizing the people who voted no (BNA 1990a).

Management interpreted the union's get-out-the-vote tactics as "harassment," "threats," and "systematic interrogation," and seven days after the election they (management) filed technical objections to the vote with the NLRB (Fatsis 1988). The union responded by staging a protest at Harvard's June 9 commencement (United Press International 1988) and by requesting that supporters call or write Derek Bok and ask him to "reconsider this intentionally divisive behavior" (HUCTW 1988).

Although the administration persisted with its appeal, NLRB Administrative Law Judge Joel Harmatz dismissed all charges against the union on October 21 (Harvard College JD (BOS)-257-88). Harvard decided to halt its legal challenge at this stage and forego appeals. On November 4 President Bok announced that the university would recognize the union. He also promised to pursue a "constructive and harmonious" relationship with the HUCTW (Butterfield 1988).

### *The HUCTW Contract*

With the election outcome settled, the HUCTW was determined that its emphasis on grassroots participation would continue. The union's commitment to the philosophy of voice influenced its bargaining strategy, and its goal of worker empowerment eventually produced an agreement that incorporated innovative models of democratic decision making. Union certification was followed by a burst of organizing and the addition of many new members. HUCTW leaders adopted a cautiously conciliatory posture, reminding the university that they desired to work cooperatively to improve Harvard. President Bok's appointment of Harvard professor emeritus and former U.S. Secretary of Labor John Dunlop as chief negotiator signaled a softening on management's side as well. The two sides agreed to forego formal negotiations for ninety days. Instead, they established two eight-member transition teams (one for each side) that held regular meetings. This allowed the two parties to learn about each other, while simultaneously permitting the animosity created during the election and appeal process to cool (Bureau of National Affairs 1990a).

During the ninety days, the union surveyed members and prepared contract goals and objectives. In February 1989, the HUCTW distributed a list of

bargaining objectives to all of the clerical and technical workers. Included were standard union concerns such as an improved salary structure, expanded benefits, fair transfer and promotion policies, and health and safety protection, as well as less common objectives such as a family policy, employee participation, and mutual respect and cooperation. To handle negotiations, the union held an election to choose sixty-five negotiating team members (HUCTW 1989; Williams 1990a).

The first set of discussions focused on devising a unique participatory structure for the formal bargaining. Nine separate bargaining tables were established to deal with separate sets of key issues: salaries and job classifications; pensions and retirement; family policy, child care, and elder care; affirmative action; health and safety; health and disability benefits; personnel practices; education and career development; and employee participation. The elected members of the union negotiating team each served on only one table. Each table met at least once a week, although some tables met more frequently as the two sides approached final agreement (Williams 1990a; BNA 1989a).

The bargaining format was also unusual. The typical adversarial approach of offer and counteroffer was shunned, and lawyers were excluded from the negotiations. At each table general discussion of the issues under consideration was followed by a review of various options for dealing with the concerns of both sides. Specific contract proposals were debated only after a reasonably thorough understanding of mutual interests and conflicting objectives had been achieved. This approach was possible because of the union members' commitment to Harvard, and because John Dunlop recognized that the union was interested in constructive changes (BNA 1989a).

Although negotiations proceeded amicably, the HUCTW did not abandon its aggressive side. The union continued to organize nonmembers, and the rank and file actively participated in a contract campaign that culminated in a series of rallies workers enthusiastically supported (average attendance was nine hundred) (Williams 1990a).

Negotiations were a resounding success. The two sides reached agreement on June 25, 1989, and the contract was ratified June 29 with 94 percent voting in favor (Bureau of National Affairs 1989c). The contract itself was remarkable. It not only offered sizeable economic gains to the members, but also dramatically altered workplace relations by giving workers more of a voice.

The HUCTW estimated that members would receive average pay increases of 32.5 percent over the life of the three-year agreement.<sup>2</sup> More astonishing

<sup>2</sup>Calculated from data included in HUCTW 1989; Harvard Vice-President for Finance

than the substantial wage gains were the considerable improvements in a broad range of fringe benefits, including health insurance, dental insurance, disability, and pensions. Nonmonetary protections were also achieved, including an agency shop, strong affirmative action and equal opportunity language, and health and safety protections (HUCTW 1989). As the *AFL-CIO News* pointed out, the contract broke "important new ground in a number of key areas" (AFL-CIO 1989). Harvard agreed to scholarships for child care, a cooperative effort to expand affordable child care options, a thirteen-week maternity leave period, an extensive family leave program, and a referral service for elder care (Harvard University and HUCTW 1989a:16-17).

But the contract's most unusual feature was its extensive reliance on joint labor-management teams. The family policy section included a union/university committee to administer the child care scholarship program. Health and safety committees were called for in each school or administrative unit. A joint committee was established to promote affirmative action and antidiscrimination programs. Three separate committees were set up to study and implement changes in the job classification system. And, the first substantive section of the contract outlined an extensive employee involvement program (HUCTW 1989).

The contract established a participatory system featuring the Joint Council (JC), "intended to be a forum for the discussion of all workplace matters which have a significant impact on staff" (Harvard University and HUCTW 1989a:4). Each school and administrative unit was required to set up at least one JC. In essence the JCs were designed to provide forums for ongoing discussion and to resolve concerns that normally would be processed through contract provisions with specific work rules. The Harvard contract was devoid of such rules.

Each JC was required to have equal representation from the bargaining unit and management and a cochair selected by each side. Either side would be allowed to raise issues for consideration and every effort would be made to reach consensus on these matters. Consensus recommendations would then be passed on to the dean of the school or a top management official of the administrative unit. If consensus could not be reached or the relevant dean or administrator failed to act, the issue would be referred to the University JC (UJC). The UJC was empowered to seek the assistance of a mediator. In no case would the individual JCs or the UJC have the authority to modify the

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Robert Scott estimated that the cost of pay hikes would total less than 25 percent due to turnover (BNA 1989b).

collective bargaining agreement (Harvard University and HUCTW 1989a: 5–6).

The HUCTW-Harvard agreement also set up a separate system to address specific contract violations normally handled through standard grievance procedures. The agreement also defined a dispute much more broadly than in most contracts, thus allowing for subtle issues of “harassment” or “personality problems” to be resolved under this procedure. A worker (or workers) experiencing workplace-related difficulties would first be required to attempt to resolve the situation informally with the supervisor. The HUCTW and the personnel office would assist if necessary. If informal resolution proved impossible, the case would move to the Local Problem Solving Team (LPST), made up of an equal number of management and union representatives from each school or administrative unit. The LPST would attempt to reach a consensus solution. If *it* failed, it would refer the case to the University Problem Solving Team (UPST). If the UPST was also unsuccessful, it could choose to select a mediator. The mediator would attempt to facilitate an agreement, and if this were not possible she or he could make a final decision. However, this arbitration power was limited to disputes that involved interpretation or application of the contract (Harvard University and HUCTW 1989a:7–8).

A final remarkable aspect of negotiations was a cooperative effort to rewrite the personnel manual. After deleting all sections of the old manual that would be covered in the contract, the personnel practices negotiators discussed a variety of preexisting rules and regulations for possible changes. Among the topics considered were hours of work, holidays, vacation, sick pay, layoffs, breaks, and disciplinary policy. In most cases, reaching agreement on specific rules was reasonably easy and policy changes were undramatic. More difficult and especially important to the union was integrating flexibility throughout. Ultimately, the introduction to the negotiated manual made clear that it was “not intended as a rigid rule book applicable to every situation and workplace in a highly diversified University” (Harvard University and HUCTW 1989b: 2). According to Joie Gelband, who represented the HUCTW at the personnel practices table, “The whole purpose of the manual is to promote flexibility and the whole issue of mutuality—that it’s in the best interest of everyone for the employee and supervision to reach agreements” (Gelband 1990).

Both sides praised the agreement. Derek Bok declared, “We look forward with increasing confidence to a positive relationship between Harvard and the union.” Kristine Rondeau was ebullient: “It’s the prettiest contract you’ve ever seen. It’s got great economics and cooperative labor-management relations, and it addresses the concerns of working women” (Cooperman 1988).

The tone of the language in the contract and personnel manual reflected the harmony evident in the public statements from former antagonists. The contract preamble stated:

It is our common purpose . . . to work together to advance the long-term role of Harvard University as a premier center of learning. . . . We have learned that we share a commitment to the processes of reasoned discourse in resolving problems and issues that may arise. . . . We are optimistic about [the] future” (Harvard University and HUCTW 1989a:2).

Similarly, the personnel manual proclaimed: “The University and HUCTW share the view . . . that participation and creative problem-solving are basic features of the relationship” (Harvard University and HUCTW 1989b:2).

Among the union leaders and rank-and-file activists, the most important contract provisions were about employee involvement. As Kristine Rondeau said when the agreement was announced: “From our first step in organizing Harvard back in the seventies . . . our union’s goal has been to get our members on the other side of Harvard’s doors into the rooms where decisions affecting workers’ lives are made. We stand on the verge of making that goal a reality” (PR Newswire 1989). While the joint councils and other committees were viewed as pivotal by local leaders, they conceded that most rank-and-file members placed higher value on the wage and benefit improvements (Williams 1990a; Leavitt 1990; Byrne 1990a).

Both the union and Harvard’s administration praised the contract’s flexibility, which was achieved in three ways. First, the contract established a decentralized employee involvement plan allowing each school or administrative unit to retain its own autonomy and focus on its own problems. Second, many aspects of the relationship between management and workers (such as discipline) were omitted from the contract and consigned to the personnel manual, with the qualification accepted by the HUCTW that the manual offer only guidelines that might not be applicable to every situation. Third, the contract was largely devoid of work rules, a feature that was the university’s highest priority. Vice-President Scott noted:

The deans indicated that the highest priority in negotiations should be given to retaining flexibility of administration by avoiding work rules such as seniority, bumping, limitations on hiring, transfer rights, job guarantees, prohibitions of layoffs, etc. (BNA 1989b).

Another aspect of the contract that appealed to both management and labor was the absence of a standard grievance and arbitration system. As noted, individual workplace problems were to be handled by joint labor-management teams rather than by individuals; the definition of a grievance was broadened,

and the procedure encouraged consensus by its reliance on mediation in combination with arbitration.

In essence, the management assessment of the contract was remarkably similar to that of the union's leadership. According to John Dunlop, Harvard decided to pursue "a long-term vision rather than any short-term advantage" and to promote "employee participation and individual initiative in a spirit of trust and open communication" (Bureau of National Affairs 1989b).

### *Implementing the Contract*

After three years under the contract, the union retains its commitment to the participatory system. The UJC has been constructed and twenty-seven JCs have been formed by schools and administrative units. The JCs meet biweekly and, in effect, continually negotiate over working conditions. In addition, the UPST and nineteen LPSTs have been set up, although they typically meet only when there is a specific complaint requiring attention.

The JCs have proven to be the most important component of the participatory system. The experience to date has been mixed, with "one-third doing great . . . , one-third making progress . . . , and one-third requiring close attention" (Williams 1990b). In most cases union representatives have been better prepared than management for JC meetings and have initiated topics for discussion. How effectively a JC functions tends to be determined by the attitudes of the management representatives. The successful JCs share a common characteristic: management representatives and the dean or administrator involved are self-confident managers who do not view sharing power as a threat (Williams 1990b). In instances where management still believes that it should be fighting the union, the JCs are making very little progress. James Healey, a professor of industrial relations at Harvard selected to mediate HUCTW contract disputes, concedes that "there are islands of unspoken resistance, where administrators give lip service to the concept but then act in a way which subverts the process" (BNA 1990c:C-5).

Even where JCs are staffed by recalcitrant management representatives or where communication is poor, the HUCTW retains its commitment to the process. HUCTW activist Marilyn Byrne observes, "A lot of what the JCs have accomplished is subtle, in the realm of gaining credibility by showing management that we are committed, are reasonably intelligent, have initiative, and can contribute to the decision-making process" (Byrne 1990b).

The successes offer the union cause for optimism. Among the improvements initiated by JCs are new or refurbished staff lounges in individual schools, more desirable summer and holiday leave policies for library employees, better



work sharing when vacancies arise, steps to reduce workplace inconveniences during construction, and revised hiring procedures (Gelband 1990; BNA 1990c:C-3). The HUCTW views the University Health Services JC as a model; barriers have been broken down between doctors and support staff and a positive atmosphere has been created by focusing on the mutual goal of providing high-quality health care. A specific innovation developed by the Health Services JC is an orientation program for new physicians coordinated and delivered by support staff who are HUCTW members (Williams 1990b).

So far, the LPSTs have played an auxiliary role. Each LPST has been involved in only a few formal cases. The university-wide UPST has recommended solutions or assisted in about twenty-five individual cases, three of which eventually went to mediation before being resolved (BNA 1990c:C-4). The HUCTW, however, believes that the greatest measure of success in the problem-solving process is that 350 complaints have been resolved *informally*, either directly by the employee and supervisor or with the assistance of a union representative and personnel officer (Williams 1990b).

In sum, the participatory system is considered to be a qualified success by the union. That the problem-solving process is working is evidenced by the limited reliance on the LPSTs, resulting from the resolution of difficulties at the lowest levels. The experience with employee involvement in decision making through the JCs has been uneven due to pockets of management resistance. Nonetheless, much has been accomplished, partly because the union has taken advantage of the relatively open system and undefined nature of the process to set the agenda for many JCs. As a result, specific improvements have been achieved that would normally be possible only during contract negotiations. Given the unit-specific nature of these gains, it legitimately could be argued that many never would have occurred under a traditional bargaining relationship.

In explaining the HUCTW's ongoing commitment to the participatory system, local president Donene Williams notes that "JC work is slow, the consensus decision making process is slow . . . [But] the flexibility to reach a consensus decision together gives our contract its strength" (Williams 1990b). Marilyn Byrne adds, "I don't know if it's the kind of process that can work in every environment. For union members it requires a large obligation" (Byrne 1990b). Because extensive rank-and-file involvement is required, HUCTW leaders view continued union diligence as essential. Kristine Rondeau warns that "a union that's not well organized shouldn't even think about doing this" (Bureau of National Affairs 1990c:C-5).

Significantly, the participatory system negotiated at Harvard actually has served to foster union involvement. Union membership has expanded and

commitment has remained remarkably high. Seventy-three percent of the unit now belong to the local, and nearly 15 percent of members actively participate in union affairs. Approximately one hundred serve on JCs, sixty on LPSTs, and forty on special joint labor-management committees (BNA 1990c:C-5). As of 1992, many of the union representatives to the JCs also serve on HUCTW organizing committees. There are five organizing committees with twenty to thirty members each who attempt to organize new employees and long-term employees who have not yet joined. Organizing committee members also serve as a communication link to the membership as the HUCTW continues to eschew literature in favor of one-on-one contact. In addition to the organizing committees, the union structure includes 4 officers, 13 executive board members, and 108 elected union representatives. The elected representatives' primary duties are to assist informally in the problem-solving processes, and to meet one-to-one with members to answer questions concerning rights under the contract (Williams 1990a; Leavitt 1990).

The extensive member involvement explains local leaders' confidence that the HUCTW is prepared to meet all challenges. If management's commitment to meaningful participation wanes, the union is ready to respond. According to Rondeau, "If we ever really need [contract guarantees], we'll fight hard. . . . If they fight us, we'll fight; if we have to do it the old-fashioned way, we'll do it as well as anyone" (BNA 1990c:C-5). But it is clear that the HUCTW does not want to do it the old-fashioned way. The union eschewed a rule-based relationship because of its conviction that no one set of rules would apply to all of Harvard's workers and workplaces (Williams 1990b). The members are convinced that the system is working because "employees and supervisors are talking, and using moral reasoning rather than rules to solve their problems" (Gelband 1990).

### *Learning from Harvard Clerical Workers*

The labor movement has cause to celebrate the Harvard organizing victory, but was it any more than just an isolated NLRB election win? The HUCTW contract has some appealing features, but what difference should this make to workers not employed at Harvard? Although the case is exceptional in some ways,<sup>3</sup> and the clerical work force will not unionize en masse because of what

<sup>3</sup>The prestige of Harvard and the lure of Cambridge (a mecca for leftists) combine to attract a relatively young, well-educated group of clerical workers who are highly mobile and politically progressive (*Chicago Tribune* 1988; Weinstein 1988). Furthermore, Harvard is not a typical employer. Even prior to unionization it offered its employees relatively good pay, benefits, and working conditions. Harvard's liberal traditions and contacts with the labor movement made it more susceptible to outside pressures than many private sector employers.

happened in Cambridge, an evaluation of the experience reveals several important lessons for unions.

The Harvard case confirms that clerical workers generally and university clericals in particular respond favorably to a grassroots organizing approach. The clerical and technical workers at Harvard clearly wanted a union that encouraged their full participation. Specific tactical aspects of the campaign helped to reinforce the union's philosophy of voice. The HUCTW focus on empowerment allowed workers to define their own issues, and offered them a credible *process* for solving problems, achieving fair treatment, and attaining influence. Similarly, the decision not to use traditional campaign literature served to reinforce the grassroots campaign since committee members themselves became the conduit of information.

Because of the skepticism clerical workers feel toward unions, it is essential that organizing campaigns reflect a clear understanding of the concerns of the workers. At Harvard this meant emphasizing voice and building an extensive grassroots structure. Workers responded positively when they could embrace the union as their own. In contrast to organizing constructed upon worker dissatisfaction, the process at Harvard created a positive environment from which worker empowerment evolved. The organizers did not sell the union to the workers, but rather sold the workers on their own potential. The HUCTW broke new ground by taking the logical next step and institutionalizing participation through the bargaining process and the contract itself. The experience demonstrates that the grassroots approach can produce not just a union victory, but an excellent first contract.

The union built power through its enduring attention to organizing, which continued even after the contract was ratified. The ability to be both adversarial in certain instances and nonadversarial in others meant that the HUCTW could bargain from a position of strength and also maintain its commitment to worker involvement. Those portions of the contract that institutionalize participation through JCs, LPSTs and other joint labor-management committees will undoubtedly appeal to clericals (and other white-collar workers) who are seeking respect and influence through their unions. The participatory system enhances the clericals' close association with professionals and managers, whereas a *purely* adversarial union could interfere with workplace relationships. The model of labor-management cooperation propagated by the agreement could prove to be an effective organizing tool in other campaigns. The desire of clericals to seek justice while preserving harmony in the workplace has at last been fashioned into a contract that can serve as a prototype. The example of the HUCTW agreement lays bare management's claim that

unionization necessarily creates a rigid, rules-based, adversarial environment poisoned by third-party interlopers.

To return to the debate raised early in the chapter regarding the appropriate strategy for organizing clerical workers, the Harvard case also lends support to those who argue that special approaches are required. The women at Harvard responded to a campaign that displayed female leadership and what Kristine Rondeau has referred to as the “feminine model of organizing” (BNA 1990b:C-1). Most of the organizers were women, a collective rank-and-file leadership system was developed based on interpersonal bonds, and the self-empowering rewards of unionization were emphasized.

The Harvard experience could be interpreted as consistent with the views of those who describe clericals as traditionally feminine and concerned with maintaining good relations with their supervisors as well as those who argue that the clerical work culture is conducive to the expression of militance. This seeming contradiction was best reflected in the way that the HUCTW dealt with the prestige issue. Rather than allowing the close working relationship between clericals and professors to become an impediment to organizing, the HUCTW attacked the issue head-on. Status concerns were turned into an advantage as the workers embraced the concept that “It’s not anti-Harvard to be pro-union.” This slogan also sent the message that the HUCTW was not a typical adversarial union.<sup>4</sup> Although the work culture was not oppositional, this model created an environment that allowed women clericals to become strong union advocates.

Although the Harvard case may be most relevant to organizing and representing university clerical workers, key aspects are generalizable to other workplaces. Particularly instructive is the tactical response of the union to the university’s sophisticated union resistance activities. Reprinting and distributing Harvard’s supervisors’ manual, for example, served to demystify management’s campaign. Even more important was the union’s reliance on regular one-to-one contact with supporters as its primary response to management’s efforts. This grassroots approach helped resolve doubts before they got blown out of proportion. In addition, the effort to reach out to the broader community of women’s organizations, labor unions, religious groups, and political allies served two functions: It put management’s anti-unionism in the limelight

<sup>4</sup>Similarly, the union handled the faculty skillfully. By reaching out to the faculty and asking *only* for neutrality so that a reasoned choice could be exercised in the best tradition of the academy, the HUCTW persuaded faculty to remain silent and thus largely defused this potential barrier. On campuses where the faculty are unionized, more openly courting their active support can be quite helpful.

and put Harvard on the defensive. Simultaneously, it helped tie the clerical workers into the broader labor and social movement, diminishing the feeling of isolation that can be so debilitating in the face of management's anti-union onslaught.

Clearly, no one model is appropriate for every union and every group of workers, and the Harvard case does not prove that traditional organizing and representation methods cannot be successful. Nonetheless, unions would be well served to consider the innovations reported here. The HUCTW's success in institutionalizing participation after the organizing phase ended, and its flexibility in pursuing cooperation with management while maintaining tenacious membership commitment to the union are especially noteworthy.

It would be a mistake to conclude that the participatory model of organizing and representing workers followed at Harvard should only be implemented in clerical campaigns or in other settings where women workers predominate. In fact, the HUCTW success presents a serious challenge to traditional union methods. It is increasingly difficult to "sell" unions today, and most would benefit from certain aspects of the HUCTW model, regardless of the occupations or demographics of their constituencies. Developing rank-and-file involvement and collective leadership, letting workers define the issues, and promoting worker empowerment are all essential to a long-term strategy to outlast management and fulfill the goal of organizing the unorganized.