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Richard W. Hurd
Cornell University, rwh8@cornell.edu

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The Unionization of Clerical Workers in Colleges and Universities: A Status Report

Abstract

[Excerpt] The 1980s have presented a myriad of problems for the labor movement as membership and bargaining power have declined in manufacturing, construction and transportation. Attempting to come to grips with the new reality of an economy dominated by the service sector, unions have expanded their organizing efforts among white collar workers. In the process, they have discovered a particularly receptive clientele among the clerical employees of colleges and universities. This paper identifies factors which influence the outcome of clerical organizing drives on campus, estimates the extent of organization among these workers, and summarizes recent developments including strike activity. It is based, in large part, on interviews with over fifty union officials, and on a survey of nearly 300 university and college personnel administrators.

Keywords

unions, labor movement, organizing, higher education, clerical employees

Comments

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NEW DIRECTIONS IN COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

B. THE UNIONIZATION OF CLERICAL WORKERS IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES: A STATUS REPORT

Richard W. Hurd
Associate Professor
Whittemore School of Business and Economics
University of New Hampshire

The 1980s have presented a myriad of problems for the labor movement as membership and bargaining power have declined in manufacturing, construction and transportation. Attempting to come to grips with the new reality of an economy dominated by the service sector, unions have expanded their organizing efforts among white collar workers. In the process, they have discovered a particularly receptive clientele among the clerical employees of colleges and universities. This paper identifies factors which influence the outcome of clerical organizing drives on campus, estimates the extent of organization among these workers, and summarizes recent developments including strike activity. It is based, in large part, on interviews with over fifty union officials, and on a survey of nearly 300 university and college personnel administrators.

ORGANIZER INTERVIEWS

Although there is some targeting, most organizing campaigns are initiated in response to inquiries from dissatisfied clerical workers. As is true with other clericals, organizing is a slow process. University and college clericals are skeptical of unions and fearful of strikes, and carefully evaluate the decision to support an organizing campaign. When a substantial portion of the workforce has knowledge of unions through direct participation or involvement of a close relative, skepticism diminishes and organizing proceeds more quickly. In a similar vein, if leaders of a preexisting staff association support union affiliation, the rank-and-file are less resistant to the idea. At both Vassar College and Cuyahoga Community College, for example, the staff associations decided to seek a union to represent campus clerical workers. After relatively brief campaigns, the unions selected by the staff associations won handily — CWA at Vassar in 1985, and SEIU at Cuyahoga in 1983.

College and university clericals are more likely to support unionization if they are convinced that the bargaining agent will be controlled by the membership. Because of this common desire for "ownership" of the local, most unions have adopted a grass-roots approach with large organizing committees coordinating the activities of rank-and-file members who do the organizing one-on-one. Although this process is time consuming, it builds a strong base of highly dedicated union activists whose commitment seldom falters. Two well

known examples of this style are the Yale University campaign by the Hotel Employees and the Columbia University campaign by UAW District 65.¹

While the mass participation model is well suited to many single campus campaigns, particularly where there is ambivalence towards unions, it is not always necessary or appropriate. On large state university campuses and in multi-campus or systemwide representation elections, media oriented high-tech campaigns have proven to be an effective alternative. These campaigns rely on polling and opinion research to assess support for the union and identify issues important to potential supporters. They also use telephone banks, targeted direct mail, campaign specific newspapers, and radio and television advertising to get the union's message across. AFSCME, the recognized leader in this style of organizing, effectively applied these techniques in two major clerical victories: the University of California System in 1983, and the Iowa University System in 1984.

Public colleges and universities are easier to organize than their private counterparts for a variety of reasons. Budgetary data, lists of employees and other information are easier to obtain, facilitating the organizing process. In states where the Democratic Party is in power, political pressure can be used to assure relative neutrality from the university's administration during the campaign. Perhaps most importantly, public schools typically have not resisted unionization as resolutely as have private schools.

The attitudes of faculty members towards unions play an important role as well. Most clericals enjoy their association with faculty members and thus, have few serious complaints with their direct supervisors. Faculty opposition tends to make unionization a difficult choice for clericals who do not want to be ostracized for supporting a union. On the other hand, where the faculty is sympathetic clerical organizing is much easier.

On a related point, some union officials complain that the prestige associated with university employment is an impediment to organizing. Because most university and college clericals are proud of their jobs and their association with faculty, organizing campaigns typically target the university administration as the source of work-related problems. A high level of dissatisfaction with the administration is seen by many organizers as a pre-condition for a successful representation election.

Many organizing campaigns focus on women's issues such as pay equity, child care, and maternity leave. The prestige issue is sometimes turned on its head with union supporters pointing out that clericals receive little notice or credit while faculty, professional staff, and students are all accorded social status because of their involvement in higher education. The feminist tilt of university clerical unions is in clear contrast to other clerical organizing where traditional trade union issues dominate.

SIMILARITIES WITH OTHER CLERICAL ORGANIZING

Two published scholarly articles on the unionization of white collar workers are useful supplements to the organizer interviews. An article by Hurd and McElwain (H-M)² on determinants of organizing success among private sector clericals is summarized in Table 1, while an article by Maranto and Fiorito (M-F)³ which analyzes the impact of union characteristics on representation elections in white collar units is summarized in Table 2.

Both studies confirm that fear of strikes is an impediment to union organizing success among white collar clericals. H-M concludes that a strong and vital union movement in an area contributes to organizing success among

TABLE 1

ENVIRONMENTAL VARIABLES WHICH SIGNIFICANTLY AFFECT VOTES
IN NLRB ELECTIONS AMONG CLERICAL WORKERS

<u>Negative Impact</u>	<u>Positive Impact</u>
Size of Unit	Union Membership in State
Strike Activity in State	Growth in Union Membership in State
Stipulated Election	Employment Growth in Industry
Ordered Election	
Clerical Employment Ratio For Industry	
	<u>No Impact</u>
	Election Delay
	Voter Turnout
	Clerical Wage in State

Source: Richard W. Hurd and Adrienne McElwain, "Organizing Clerical
Workers: Determinants of Success," Industrial and Labor Relations
Review, April 1988, v. 41, pp. 360-373.

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TABLE 2

UNION VARIABLES WHICH SIGNIFICANTLY AFFECT VOTES
IN NLRB ELECTIONS AMONG WHITE COLLAR WORKERS

<u>Negative Impact</u>	<u>Positive Impact</u>
National Control of Bargaining	Union Democracy
Union Dues	Direct Benefits Provided by Union
Union Propensity for Lengthy Strikes	Union Rivalry
	<u>No Impact</u>
	Union Wage Level
	<u>Mixed Impact</u>
	Union Jurisdiction

Source: Cheryl Maranto and Jack Fiorito, "The Effect of Union
Characteristics on the Outcome of NLRB Certification Elections,"
Industrial and Labor Relations Review, January 1987, v. 40,
pp. 225-240.

clericals, a result consistent with the observation by organizers that familiarity with unions is beneficial. The grass-roots, mass participation approach to organizing seems appropriate based on M-F which finds that democratic unions are supported by white collar workers, while unions characterized by centralized power in the national union tend to be opposed. The potential negative influence of management resistance strategies is corroborated by the H-M results which reveal the dampening effect of legal challenges in stipulated and regional director or board ordered elections. On the other hand, H-M demonstrates that clerical workers are unlike other private sector employees in that representation election delays do not reduce union support, a result consistent with the slow moving organizing process which builds strong commitment as described in the interviews.

Finally, the conclusion by M-F that union jurisdiction has no clear impact on white collar workers is certainly consistent with the experience of college and university clericals. There are at least 13 different national unions with collective bargaining agreements covering campus clerical workers. Two of the three faculty unions, the AFT and the NEA, have established clerical divisions which have a fair number of units in higher education. These clerical units are often established on campuses where the parent union also represents the faculty — thus the AFT has separate units for faculty and clericals at the Vermont State Colleges, and similarly for the NEA at Youngstown State in Ohio.

Unions with a primary jurisdiction among government employees have also organized many clericals at public educational institutions with AFSCME leading the way. On the other hand, the only major union to specialize in organizing private sector office employees, the OPEIU, also has been active with at least 15 campus units in the greater New York City area alone. The clerical divisions of other unions are also involved, especially SEIU District 925 and UAW District 65. But even within these two unions, there is no clear jurisdictional integrity. Thus, while District 925 represents clericals at five institutions, various locals of SEIU have organized units at more than 20 others. And while District 65 has organized clericals at several universities in the Northeast, the UAW proper represents units close to home at Wayne State and Northern Michigan. Other unions with no clear jurisdictional interest have succeeded in organizing college and university clericals, particularly in those geographic areas where they have a strong membership base. Thus, the CWA represents units at the New Jersey State colleges, the Hotel Employees have units in Connecticut at Yale and Quinnipiac College, the Teamsters have a local at the University of Chicago, and the Hospital and Health Care union negotiates for Temple's office employees.

This crazy quilt of union activity among college and university clericals perhaps best reflects an observation made earlier. These workers are most comfortable with a union controlled at the local level, and thus, the parent organization is largely irrelevant. From their perspective, the union is defined as the organizer and the local organizing committee. A strong local reputation for a specific union is apparently more important in most campaigns than any image associated with the national union. Ironically, the first known clerical unit on campus was established in 1946 at the Center for Degree Studies, a junior college and correspondence school in Scranton, Pennsylvania, by the strongest union in the state — the United Steelworkers. Forty-three years later the Steelworkers are at it again, now attempting to organize clericals at Pennsylvania State University.

ANALYSIS OF ORGANIZING CAMPAIGNS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In the spring of 1986, a survey was distributed to the personnel administrators at the 100 largest public and the 50 largest private universities in the United States, and to their counterparts at the 142 accredited four-year

colleges and universities in New England. Repeated mailings and follow-up telephone interviews secured completed surveys for all 150 institutions in the national sample, and for 141 of the 142 schools in the New England sample. Descriptive data from the national sample were reported and interpreted a year and a half ago in an issue of the NCSCBHEP Newsletter.⁴ Subsequently, the information gathered from the New England survey was combined with data available from other sources and subjected to statistical analysis. Detailed econometric testing was performed on a subset of the sample consisting of New England's 124 four-year colleges and universities with a 1986 enrollment of 500 or more. The results of these tests are summarized in Table 3 and discussed below.

Student enrollment was entered as a proxy for the size of the potential clerical unit. Although this variable has no impact on clerical organizing success, estimation of a separate equation revealed that larger universities do attract more organizing activity. Apparently, unions have targeted campaigns based on the size of the unit without strict attention to organizing potential. As expected, clerical organizing is more successful at public universities than at private universities, likely for the reasons explained in the summary of the organizer interviews above. Likewise, the state unionization level has the expected positive effect on success, undoubtedly reflecting a higher level of familiarity with unions.

The presence of a faculty union has a significant positive influence on clerical organizing success. The magnitude of the impact is surprising, with the likelihood of clerical organizing success increasing by 64% where the faculty agent is the AFT (in comparison to "no-agent", *ceteris paribus*), by 52% where the agent is the NEA, and by 41% where the agent is the AAUP. The declining order of magnitude is consistent with the three faculty unions' respective degree of integration into the broader labor movement and, therefore, the level of support they would likely offer to the organizing efforts of other workers.⁵ The degree of magnitude may be a bit misleading as the variables are likely capturing two separate factors — although the prior existence of a faculty union undoubtedly provides a supportive environment for clerical unionization, it may also reflect difficult conditions on campus which are conducive to the unionization of all workers. Estimation of a series of additional equations revealed that the two factors are roughly equal in their effect; they also demonstrated that the prior existence of a clerical union has no impact on faculty organizing.

Universities are defined as "status" institutions if they have selective admissions standards and confer doctoral degrees. Thus, this variable measures the status of some institutions relative to others, rather than the prestige of university employment relative to other clerical jobs. The magnitude of the impact of status on clerical organizing is also rather astonishing — among four-year colleges the likelihood of success increases by 40% at colleges and universities qualifying for the status designation (*ceteris paribus*). This result lends credence to those organizers who argue that prestige can be used as an issue in representation campaigns. Status institutions typically attract better educated, more highly skilled clericals who thrive on the challenges they face working with with professionally active scholars. Unionization is an avenue for them to seek recognition and respect for their contributions to the academic community.

On a related point, those organizers who perceive prestige as a barrier may be confusing the status issue with the impact of faculty unions. Status has a significant negative impact on faculty organizing efforts. This lack of faculty support for unions may well be an impediment to clerical organizing success. The results reported in Table 3 indicate that among campuses with identical faculty

TABLE 3

ENVIRONMENTAL VARIABLES WHICH SIGNIFICANTLY AFFECT
ORGANIZING SUCCESS AMONG CLERICALS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

	Estimated Effect on Likelihood of Organizing Success of a One Point Change in <u>Observed Variable</u> *
<u>Positive Impact</u>	
Public Sector Institution	.28
State Unionization Level	.07
Status of Institution	.40
Presence of Faculty Union:	
AFT	.64
NEA	.52
AAUP	.41
<u>No Impact</u>	
Enrollment	

* The estimated effects are based on the assumption that all other factors are held constant. Six of the seven variables are dummies so a one point change is from 0 to 1. Only state unionization level is measured as a percentage, so for that variable a one percentage point change would have the estimated impact.

Source: Richard W. Hurd and Adrienne McElwain, "Organizing Activity Among University Clerical Workers," Industrial Relations Research Association, Proceedings of the Forty-First Annual Meeting (December 28-30, 1988).

bargaining agents (or absence thereof), institutions with the status designation should offer more fertile ground for clerical organizing.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Union representation of college and university clerical employees continues to expand. There were three notable union victories in 1988: at Harvard University, 3400 clerical and technical employees selected AFSCME as their bargaining agent, at the University of Cincinnati, 1200 clericals chose the SEIU as their representative, and at Adelphi University in New York, 275 clericals elected OPEIU Local 153. These three victories share a common evolution. At Harvard, clerical organizing history spans two decades, including two defeats for District 65 in representation elections among medical school employees in 1977 and 1981. The lead organizer for AFSCME at Harvard, Kristine Rondeau, was involved in both of those earlier efforts, as an employee in 1977 and as a UAW District 65 organizer in 1981. At the University of Cincinnati, the campaign by SEIU District 925 began in 1984 and included a representation election loss in 1986. The OPEIU victory at Adelphi University culminated a twelve year effort marked by previous election defeats in 1977 and 1982. 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 the university administration aggressively opposes unionization and where the union relies on the grass-roots mass participation approach to organizing.

Although precise estimates are impossible, the available evidence indicates that total union membership among clerical workers in higher education is now roughly equal to faculty union membership. In the private sector, clerical employees have apparently surpassed faculty in the extent of unionization. With evidence from the New England survey, it is possible to make reasonable estimates of the degree of unionization among clerical workers at the region's four-year colleges and universities. Nearly 20% of clerical employees at private institutions and about 80% of those at public institutions are represented by unions. These figures compare to unionization levels of 11% in the private sector and 61% in the public sector for the region's total labor force. From the national survey, similar estimates of unionization at the nation's large four-year colleges and universities are possible.⁶ About 25% of clerical employees at private institutions and nearly 40% of those at public institutions are represented by unions. These figures compare to unionization levels of 16% in the private sector and 43% in the public sector for the nation's total labor force. The comparable national figures for faculty are 5% in the private sector and 37% in the public sector.

These estimates of clerical unionization should be interpreted with caution for at least two reasons. First, unions have targeted large universities for organizing, so levels of union representation among clericals at these schools probably exceed levels at smaller institutions. Second, New England has experienced a disproportionate share of clerical organizing generally and higher education organizing specifically. There are vast areas of the country with very little evidence of clerical unionization in higher education, particularly the south (except Florida) and the west (except the three Pacific coast states).

Although fear of strikes hampers organizing activity among clericals, once unionized, this reticence towards direct confrontation seems to dissipate. In 1988, there were three major strikes among university clericals: a five-week strike by a UAW local at Wayne State University in Detroit (their fourth strike in eleven years), a three-week strike by an AFT local at New York University, and a two-week strike by an independent local at Michigan State University. Estimates of strike activity of unionized clerical workers are compared with data on faculty strike activity in Table 4. Although the evidence on clerical strikes is

TABLE 4

STRIKE ACTIVITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

	Percentage of Union Members on Strike Annual Averages	
	<u>1970-84</u>	<u>1980-84</u>
U.S. faculty (all colleges and universities) *	2.33	1.32
Estimated U.S. clericals (large colleges and universities)	3.96	2.04
Estimated New England clericals (four year colleges and universities)	9.30	7.99

* Source: William Aussieker, "The Changing Pattern of Faculty Strikes in Higher Education," Journal of Collective Negotiations in the Public Sector, 1985, v. 14, pp. 349-357.

based on two non-representative samples rather than the total population, by all indications, university and college clerical employees are more likely to strike than their unionized faculty counterparts. Strike activity in the last two years has exceeded the levels reported in Table 4 with an estimated 4.75% of unionized clericals at large national colleges and universities involved in strikes in 1987 and 7.77% in 1988. To put these figures into perspective, 4.4% of all unionized workers in the U.S. were involved in strikes or lockouts in 1981, the last year for which data are available. Although the exact level of strike activity in subsequent years is unknown, the number of strikes involving 1000 workers or more has declined substantially during the 1980s. By all indications, then, in recent years clericals in higher education have been at least as likely to stage a work stoppage as unionized employees generally.

The increasing importance of pay equity is apparent in various aspects of the activity of clerical unions in higher education. The 1988 strike at Michigan State resulted, in part, from disagreement over implementation of a classification study with direct comparable worth implications. The successful 1988 organizing campaign at the University of Cincinnati by SEIU District 925 focused on sex-based wage discrimination. Also in 1988, the Maine NEA affiliate successfully capped a five-year legislative campaign which included a job evaluation study conducted with the assistance of the National Committee on Pay Equity, and eventual state funding for pay adjustments for clerical and professional employees of the University of Maine System. The issue of pay equity has become the order of the day with some attention to it in most organizing campaigns and many collective bargaining agreements.

In spite of recent victories and increased militance, a number of factors point to a decline in the rate of growth in union membership among these workers. The continuing decline in unionization elsewhere in the economy and the stagnation in union membership among faculty both point to a less supportive environment for current and future organizing campaigns. Increased management opposition will present another formidable impediment to organization in both the private and public sectors. Furthermore, parent unions are reducing their subsidies to clerical worker organizing, and the pressure to become self-sufficient will likely force clerical divisions to reduce their organizing efforts and concentrate on servicing existing units. To assist established locals in their bargaining activities, several national unions have formed coordinating committees for their university and college clerical units. These committees will facilitate the spread of innovative contract agreements particularly, in the area of job evaluation studies and pay equity.

FOOTNOTES

1. See Richard W. Hurd, "Bottom-Up Organizing: HERE in New Haven and Boston," Labor Research Review, Spring 1986, v. 8, pp. 5-20; and Richard W. Hurd, "Learning from Clerical Unions: Two Cases of Organizing Success," Labor Studies Journal, Spring 1989, v. 14, pp. 30-51.

2. Richard W. Hurd and Adrienne McElwain, "Organizing Clerical Workers: Determinants of Success," Industrial and Labor Relations Review, April 1988, v. 41, pp. 360-373.

3. Cheryl Maranto and Jack Fiorito, "The Effect of Union Characteristics on the Outcome of NLRB Certification Elections," Industrial and Labor Relations Review, January 1987, v. 40, pp. 225-240.

4. Richard W. Hurd and Gregory Woodhead, "The Unionization of Clerical Workers at Large U.S. Universities and Colleges," Newsletter, National Center for

the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions, v. 15, no. 3, July/August 1987.

5. Similar equations were estimated for the national sample and the order of magnitude of (significant) coefficients was identical — AFT, NEA, AAUP.

6. Because of clear geographic bias in the sampling of two-year colleges, estimates of the degree of unionization of clericals at these institutions would be quite misleading and thus are omitted.