Librarians and Trade Unionism: A Prologue

HERBERT BIBLO

The history of library trade unionism has a chronological pattern of development that is easily defined. The first wave of unionization started during World War I, but the main thrust faded by the mid-1920s. The Library of Congress and three urban public libraries were involved in these initial efforts. The Library of Congress staff has always maintained at least one union since World War I, but two of the public library unions disbanded by 1923 and the other lasted until 1929. The second wave started in 1934 in the public library at Butte, Montana. A new local was chartered in Detroit as late as 1949. During this fifteen-year period, at least a dozen public library locals were chartered. Some failed, but unions in Cleveland, Milwaukee, Chicago, Minneapolis, New York and Detroit survived to form a base for the third wave of library trade unions which started in the early 1960s and continues to this date.

The history of library trade unionism has been explored by only a few: Berelson, Clopine, Spicer, and Goldstein are names that stand out since 1939. Berelson's article was a pioneer work, written in 1939 when the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was making its mark on American society. Industrial trade union activity was developing to new heights and aroused new interest in professional unions. Clopine and Spicer, on the other hand, wrote in the 1950s during a long hiatus in library union activity. Goldstein wrote his paper at the beginning of the longest and most enduring period of union activity in libraries. This period, beginning in the early 1960s, was a period of ferment: radical antiwar activities occurred on the campuses from whence new librarians came, radical librarians and library students rose at the Atlantic City ALA conference, the feminist movement developed, professional unions were becoming more acceptable, and teachers, nurses and doctors joined unions. This is the background

Herbert Biblo is Assistant Librarian, Reader Services Division, The John Crerar Library, Chicago.

OCTOBER, 1976
for the third wave of American library unionism experienced in the last ten years.

Despite some weaknesses, the pioneer writers in the history of American library trade unionism made a significant overall contribution to knowledge of the antecedents of today's library unions.

The early history of library unions has been generally a history of public library unions. Stimulated by economic factors related to World War I, the American trade union movement flourished. The first library unions appeared at this time. It would seem that the first union to include library employees was the Federal Labor Union, no. 14632, in Washington, D.C., chartered by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in February 1914. Library of Congress staff participation in this union was first reported in July 1916. In August 1916, the union's name was changed to the Federal Employees Union, no. 14632. The Library Employee Union of Greater New York, Local 15590, composed mainly of New York Public Library employees, was chartered by the AFL on May 15, 1917, and the Boston Public Library Employees Union, Local 16113, was chartered by the AFL on May 18, 1918. A chapter of the National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE), AFL was established at the District of Columbia Public Library in October 1918. Berelson also reported a union at the Free Library of Philadelphia in 1919, but there is no substantial evidence that this union local actually existed.

In 1920, there was a total trade union membership of 5 million in the United States. In the years following 1920, a combination of factors retarded the growth of unions. Employers were determined to resist the expansion of unions. A wave of nationalism—characterized by the refusal to join the League of Nations, the passage of restrictive immigration laws, the "Palmer Raids" (the arrest and/or deportation of alleged radical aliens), and the extension of Ku Klux Klan influence to Ohio and Indiana—swept the nation. In such a climate, employer associations found it easy to identify unions as un-American. The courts were hostile, and the other branches of government were not inclined to interfere with an economic mechanism that had brought the prosperity of the 1920s.

The social and political climate had such a chilling effect on unions that by 1930 the membership had declined to less than 3.5 million. Prior to 1930 all the public library unions were disbanded, and only the unions of the Library of Congress survived. During this first period, the unions pursued such goals as civil service status, salary increases, tenure, job classification and reclassification by legislative
Librarians and Trade Unionism

effort, publicity, and representations to public boards. Typical of the
demands of this period were those published by the Library Employ-
ees Union, no. 15590, which follow:

1. That there be standard entrance qualifications.
2. Standard examinations.
3. Public eligibility lists and appointments from those lists ac-
cording to standing.
4. Just proportionate ratings of efficiency and personality as in
Civil Service.
5. Yearly automatic increases.
6. Open efficiency ratings, to be seen by all members of the staff.
7. Promotion from the ranks.
8. Tenure of position.
9. Seniority of service recognized.
10. A Training School for Librarians administered by Board of
Education.
11. Public examination.
12. Positions to be open equally to men and women.9

In the context of the period in which they operated, these unions
achieved moderate successes. Federal librarians at the Library of
Congress and District of Columbia Public Library received salary
increases, as did the Boston librarians. Federal librarians were to
benefit from reclassification procedures initiated in this period.

The second phase of library unionism developed during the Great
Depression of the 1930s. While the pressures of economic need were
great, the social and political climate for unions had improved.
During the New Deal administration, the National Labor Relations
Act (NLRA) became law, and under this permissive legislation, the
large basic industries in the United States were organized by the CIO.
Until 1934, the only library union still in existence was at the Library
of Congress. On January 11, 1934, the AFL chartered Librarians’
Union, no. 19178, in Butte, Montana. This union activity was a direct
result of the library board’s threat to close the public library. The
library union recruited labor support and successfully campaigned to
keep the library open. It is reasonable to presume that the militant
unions of the copper miners formed the basis of the support for the
library. With its major objective secured, the Butte librarians’ union
disbanded on November 7, 1941.10 The mood of the times generated
other unions.
Several years later in May 1937, the Cleveland Public Library Employees Union was organized as Local 68 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), AFL. Reflecting struggles of the time between the AFL and the CIO, the local union switched its allegiance in August 1937 to become Local 48 of the State, County and Municipal Workers of America (SCMWA), CIO. There were other minor changes of identity. In 1946 SCMWA, CIO merged with the United Federal Workers of America (UFWA), CIO to become the United Public Workers of America (UPWA), CIO. The Cleveland local became Local 1954, UPWA, CIO. In 1949 the Cleveland union emerged as Local 1954 of the Government Workers Union, CIO, which was established to raid the locals of the left-wing UPWA. The UPWA was one of the left-wing unions expelled from the CIO in 1950. This kind of internecine warfare must have had harsh effects on library unions which had to face the 1950s, a decade remembered for the McCarthy era, which discouraged dissent and was generally hostile to unions. The Cleveland union surfaced again in the mid-1960s.

The Milwaukee Public Library Employees Union Chapter, Local 2, AFSCME, AFL was organized on September 1, 1937. In 1942 the Milwaukee union became Local 426, AFSCME, AFL; this union is functioning today. Grand Rapids Public Library Union, Local 164, AFSCME, AFL was organized in September 1937 and was disbanded in April 1938. The Chicago Public Library Union, Local 88, SCMWA, CIO was organized in October 1937 and, as a result of the previously mentioned merger with the UFWA, CIO, became the Library Chapter, Local 2, UPWA, CIO in 1946. This local has survived as the Chicago Public Library Employees Union, Local 1215, District Council 19, AFSCME, AFL-CIO.

Local unions were organized in public libraries in New York City, Detroit, Minneapolis, Atlanta, Newark, Boston, and Wayne County (Michigan) in the 1940s. It is interesting to note that almost all the attempts to build library unions were in the major metropolitan areas. Larger libraries had the built-in social organization that encouraged organization. Sometimes it was the existing staff association that voted to affiliate with a labor union. Success was most likely in a receptive environment which could include general labor support, sympathetic city administrations and/or library boards. Regionally, it could be noted that all the local unions were from the Northeast or the Midwest, with the exception of Atlanta. Where conditions were inhospitable, as in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the union did not last long.
Librarians and Trade Unionism

The librarians had expected other city departments to form locals; they did not. Clopine, quoting a former member of the Grand Rapids local, imparts a sense of the existing climate: "It left a few librarians in a very precarious position, since our Library Board, at that time, was made up of a very reactionary group of businessmen."11

It is not really important to discuss lineage in detail. Local and international unions came and went. When conditions were not propitious, the union dissolved and usually reappeared a few years later, since the environment which originally encouraged the union often still existed. However, the Butte union, which resolved the problem of the library's survival and disbanded in 1941, has not reappeared. In addition, Atlanta and Grand Rapids have never reorganized unions after their first efforts.

The union movement, until this time, was almost wholly a public library movement. The only exception appears to be the Library of Congress which, continuously since 1916, has had one or more unions in which its employees held membership. On January 8, 1945, however, the Librarian Shop, Howard University, Local 10, UFWA, CIO was organized. Organization of nonteaching personnel was rapid, and a contract between Howard University and Local 10, UFWA, CIO was signed, effective April 16, 1946.12 This contract seems to be the first collective bargaining agreement to cover a library staff in the United States. As such, it is a landmark in the history of library trade unionism. During the contract's existence, the Librarian Shop was responsible for a new classification and pay plan, adjustment of salary inequities, a grievance procedure, and raising librarians' salaries to new minimum scales. The UPWA, CIO, which was the successor to UFWA, CIO, was expelled from the CIO in 1950, and Howard University allowed the contract to lapse upon its termination on June 30, 1950. The first collective bargaining contract to cover a library staff became a victim of anticommunist hysteria.

Another effort to organize an academic library staff occurred at Yale University. Some preliminary efforts to organize a union on the Yale campus were made in 1934 by the AFL and in 1937 by the CIO. These attempts were unsuccessful. In 1940 the United Mine Workers were successful in organizing a union around janitors, campus police, and mechanics; however, the approach of this union did not appeal to the librarians. In May 1946, a group of librarians approached the New Haven representative of the United Office and Professional Workers of America (UOPWA), CIO. This union had had some recent success in New Haven organizing insurance agents and pro-
HERBERT BIBLO

Professional social workers. In September 1946, the Yale Organizing Committee, UOPWA, CIO was established. By 1948, some of the union proposals had been accepted by the library administration, but the Yale Organizing Committee came under attack by the United Mine Workers, and under this pressure, the committee disbanded in late 1948.13

As mentioned before, the early history of library trade unionism is almost exclusively a history of unions in public libraries. The public libraries (and, of course, the Library of Congress) had sufficient numbers of library employees with a community of interest to sustain a union. Academic, special and school librarians, whether they led or followed, were inevitably tied to the paths of their coworkers, i.e., the professors, teachers, scientists and research workers. The unionization of these librarians is a development of the 1960s but it had its origin in the 1930s and 1940s. It was in this period that the prototypes of the professional unions developed. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), actually organized in 1916; the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists and Technicians, CIO; the International Federation of Technical Engineers, Architects and Draftsmen’s Unions, AFL; and the Newspaper Guild were representative of some of the unions among professionals. The conversion of such professional staff associations in more recent periods—such as the American Nurses’ Association (ANA), the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the National Education Association (NEA), the House Staff Physicians Association—indicates that the prejudice against unions of professional workers is beginning to recede.

In the 1960s, all types of professional unions appeared to benefit from the improved atmosphere. The 1960s witnessed a new militancy on the campus, and a new political climate in the country. Many states passed enabling legislation giving public employees the right to bargain collectively. In January 1962, President Kennedy issued Executive Order 10988, which recognized the right of federal employees to bargain collectively with the government. The women’s liberation movement became a national force. Sympathetic local political forces, plus a strong labor movement, often were supportive of the public unions. All these factors tended to encourage a surge of unionization in areas where librarians would be involved. Professionals were becoming increasingly receptive to unionization.

The National Labor Relations Board’s (NLRB) agreement to accept jurisdiction in cases involving private academic institutions brought more librarians into the realm of trade unionism. In 1971, the first
Librarians and Trade Unionism

NLRB case that referred to librarians found that librarians have a community of interest with faculty and should be included in the bargaining unit with faculty. Several subsequent NLRB decisions reinforced this first ruling and clarified the definition of supervision. As there is no known case in the United States where academic librarians have asked to be excluded from a faculty bargaining unit, it can be assumed that where faculty unions exist, the librarians (except for those defined as management) are covered by collective bargaining agreements. Current reports indicate that 461 campuses are now covered by collective bargaining agreements. Three major unions are competing to represent the faculties in institutions of higher education. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) represents 43 campuses; the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), AFL-CIO, represents 138 campuses; and the National Education Association (NEA), Independent, represents 181 campuses. Although these three unions compete furiously in some elections, they join forces in other localities. An AAUP-AFT coalition represents one campus; an AAUP-NEA, nine; and an AFT-NEA, thirty-seven. This latter cooperative stance may be deteriorating. The New York State United Teachers voted to sever its affiliation with the NEA, but retained its ties to the AFT. There are, in addition, fifty-one campuses which have selected a variety of other agents, mostly local independent associations, but including one AFSCME affiliation, a union that we normally associate with public libraries.

There is the question of whether academic library staffs will resort to unions when the teaching faculty lacks interest. The trend is not in that direction; however, there are some exceptions. The staff at Honnold Library of the Claremont Colleges is represented by Local 30 of the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU). The bargaining unit represents professional, clerical and part-time student employees. The teaching faculty has not exhibited an interest in unions. Another exception is Local 1795, the Berkeley Federation of Librarians, AFT, composed of professional librarians. The local is more than ten years old, and its history includes one of the few strikes by librarians in the United States. The future of this local depends upon internal developments within the University of California system, now that the state has a new collective bargaining law. The abortive effort by District 65, Distributive Workers of America (DWA) to organize the professional staff at the University of Chicago Library has at least indicated another path. Although the union appeared to have won its case for a bargaining unit election.
after several years of hearings and appeals, attrition of the union membership within the library militated against a union request for an election. This direction may be an avenue for library staffs at large universities where faculties have no interest in unions but the librarians feel the need for improvement in their conditions of employment. The last ten years have brought large numbers of academic librarians into union ranks and even a larger number who are covered by collective bargaining agreements. As this phenomenon grows, less is heard about tenure and more is heard about unions, and librarians now could conceivably move on their own.

The influx of academic librarians into unions is still minor compared to the unionization of school librarians. Elementary and secondary school teachers are extensively organized in the United States by the AFT, AFL-CIO and by the NEA. While the AFT was first organized in 1916, its real growth started in the mid-1960s when it won some of its first collective bargaining agreements in the major metropolitan areas. At about the same time, the NEA revised its policy opposing teacher unionism and began to compete, quite successfully in many areas, with the AFT. The significance of this movement for librarians is that the school librarians are covered by these collective bargaining agreements. In 1962, the AFT had 56,200 members, and just ten years later, membership was up to 248,521. While the percentage of school librarians among teachers is small, the actual number of school librarians who become union members or are covered by union contract increases as more school districts negotiate contracts with the various unions. The Chicago Teachers Union, AFT has 720 school librarians in its bargaining unit.

Special librarians are not often considered to be susceptible to the process of unionization. But, like academic and school librarians, they are affected by the action of their coworkers. It is not generally known that the Newspaper Guild, AFL-CIO, represents library employees in approximately 100 collective bargaining units. Guild contracts generally contain some variation of the union shop clause, which requires union membership, after a probationary period, as a condition of employment. Several unions have earmarked the publishing industry as a target for organizational efforts. The first union contract between a publisher and its editorial/clerical employees was signed July 3, 1974 by Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc. with the Association of Harper & Row Employees (Independent). The union has since affiliated with District 65, DWA (Independent). The general librarian is part of the bargaining unit.
Librarians and Trade Unionism

Special librarians in the employ of the federal government were significantly affected by Executive Order 10988, which recognized the right of federal employees to engage in collective bargaining. Historically, federal employees utilized unions for many years to improve their conditions through lobbying with Congress and the Executive Branch. George F. Bowerman indicated in 1919 that a large number of librarians in Washington belonged to the Federal Employees Union; indeed, as many as forty librarians in the Department of Agriculture were union members. Today, the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), AFL-CIO is the chief union beneficiary of Executive Order 10988. More librarians will come under collective bargaining agreements as AFGE concludes increasing numbers of contracts with the federal government. As with school and academic librarians, it is too early to count actual numbers.

The recent elections at the Library of Congress must be considered a landmark in the history of library trade unions. The Library of Congress was the first library showing evidence of union activity. Unions have existed in some form since 1916, a period of sixty years. This is partly due to the fact that government union activity in Washington, D.C., was extensive and therefore supportive of union activities at all the federal agencies in the District of Columbia.

On March 24, 1976, it was announced that AFSCME would be certified as exclusive bargaining agent for the nonprofessional employees (except for those in the Law Library, Congressional Research Service, Federal Research Division, and Personnel Office). On April 24, 1976, it was announced that AFSCME would be certified as exclusive bargaining agent for the professional staff (except for those in the Law Library, Congressional Research Service, Federal Research Division and Personnel Office). The vote favoring AFSCME was 361 to 360.

The early development of public library unions has been described adequately by earlier writers. Although there were minor inconsistencies in early histories of library unions, a census of unions was compiled. Currently there are a large number of public library unions with collective bargaining agreements, but an up-to-date list is not yet available. Large urban public libraries, such as those of Brooklyn, New York City, Queensborough, Newark, Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle, have signed contracts with library unions. AFSCME and Service Employees International Union (SEIU), have organized most of the libraries listed above. While AFSCME represents the nonprofessional
employees at the Boston Public Library, the Boston Public Library Professional Staff Association (Independent) represents the professional staff. During the 1930s, the Butte (Montana) and Grand Rapids (Michigan) public libraries had experiences with unions.

There are also quite a number of smaller libraries that have union contracts with professional and/or clerical employees. Oshkosh (Wisconsin), Berkeley (California), Bloomfield and Morris County (New Jersey), Enfield (Connecticut), Hibbing (Minnesota), and Fall River (Massachusetts) are examples of such libraries with union contracts. Bloomfield and Morris County each have independent unions similar to the Boston Public Library. The Public Library of Youngstown and Mahoning County (Ohio) and the Buffalo and Erie County (New York) Public Library recognized existing staff associations as the collective bargaining agents for its employees. In Youngstown and Mahoning County, SEIU Local 627 represents the clerical employees.

The momentum toward library unionism is constant. Occasional strikes have been carried out in Contra Costa County (California) in 1968, and in Berkeley in 1971. AFSCME indicates that there are 18,000 library employees on its membership rolls; this is but one union of several that is organizing library workers. There seems to be little doubt that library unions are developing a potential to influence the direction of libraries and librarianship in the United States.

This third period of growth has exhibited several new characteristics. First, and possibly most important, is the collective bargaining contract. This has become the major tool for library and other professional unions. Librarians and other library employees from all sections of the profession are furthermore now subject to the unionization process. A third characteristic is that all libraries, large or small, and from all regions of the country (except the South), are susceptible to union organization. In addition, the unionization of library employees is firmly established. There are now five AFL-CIO unions (AFSCME, AFT, AFGE, SEIU, and the Newspaper Guild), two large independent unions, NEA and AAUP, and a myriad of local independent unions representing library employees. Finally, the splintering of librarians into so many different national and local unions hinders the development of library unionism as a factor within the profession. Where is our Library Union Round Table?*

*The Library Union Round Table was established in 1938 at the ALA conference in Kansas City. In part, its purpose was to coordinate the work of existing CIO and AFL unions, to act as a clearinghouse for information and advice for employees in forming new library unions, to work with the ALA to extend and improve library service, and to work for modern, democratic library personnel policies.
Librarians and Trade Unionism

All this is prologue. There will be many new developments before library unions mature and reach a plateau.

Some aspects of this study were supported by the Council On Library Resources and The John Crerar Library.

References


3. Ibid., p. 15.
4. Ibid., p. 30.
11. Ibid., p. 130.
12. Ibid., p. 114.
13. Ibid., p. 121.
This Page Intentionally Left Blank