The Effect of Collective Bargaining on the Employee-Management Relationship

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The title that was assigned for this article makes a very interesting, although probably unintended, point. The phrase, "employee-employer relationship" is one that I encounter very often. Stressing, in this case, the employee-management split neatly illustrates one of my major theses—namely, that most employed professionals lack any real authority in either professional or personnel matters. This is unfortunate. While it is obviously not inherently unprofessional to be an employee, neither does a manager, by virtue of hierarchical position alone, have any greater professional competence—although he or she does have more authority.

Without real authority, professional autonomy cannot exist, yet employed professionals today enjoy very little of it. They usually comprise a small part of a large organization or bureaucracy where most major decisions are made at higher levels, often remote from the professional's own work site. Broad areas of judgment once controlled by the professional and exercised in accordance with accepted professional standards are now sacrificed to the logic of mass organization. The individual professional has lost, or is in danger of losing, all control of the job, the nature of the work assignment, methods, pace, etc. The organization removes his or her control or so dilutes it that the individual contribution is small relative to the job and the total enterprise. Too often, the individual's advancement becomes dependent more on favoritism or politics than on professional achievement.

In this environment, it has become increasingly necessary for professional people to magnify their collective voice so that their professional and economic concerns are properly and forcefully placed before management and the general public. A very large

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number of professional people in the United States—about 3 million—have found that this can best be done through unions and the collective bargaining process.

The Council of AFL-CIO Unions for Professional Employees is an affiliation of approximately twenty unions that together represent more than 1 million professionals. Included in this group are musicians, actors, public school teachers, college professors, engineers, nurses, pharmacists, and social workers, among others. All have found not only that their unions have been necessary to help them to achieve adequate compensation for their professional skills, but just as importantly, that collective bargaining has been essential in helping them to exercise their professional judgment in the face of bureaucratic opposition. It might be useful at this point to define a few terms:

Union—A union is simply a voluntary association of employees who join together for the purpose of dealing with their employer over salaries, hours, and working conditions. I say “voluntary” because a union’s existence depends on the will of the membership. A majority must vote it in, and a majority can vote it out. In recent years, unionism has been the dominant force of organization for employed professionals.

Collective bargaining—According to Benjamin Solomon, collective bargaining is the term for a broad, flexible, adaptable relationship or process involving a group of employees and an employer. It is used in a variety of occupational situations, including many professional ones. Collective bargaining simply is a way in which a group can make decisions, marshall its power, and enter into a relationship with management. The way in which the process actually works out depends on the circumstance in which it is employed. There is no uniformity among blue collar groups—railroads are different from construction which is different from manufacturing and so on. And, of course, there are important variations in the use of collective bargaining by professional groups such as school teachers, journalists, actors, and engineers and scientists—as well as variations within each of these groups. We need to look behind stereotypes and not feel bound by so-called precedents. With all due respect for the experience of others, a group should examine the possibilities of collective bargaining in terms of its own experiences, cir-
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cumstances, interests and desires. The bromides about certain inevitabilities of unionism need to be viewed with reservations.²

In other words, collective bargaining is a tool used by a union to further its goal of improving conditions for its members. Each occupation and every profession that has used it has had to fashion this tool to its own needs.

Inevitably, the formation of a union will create changes in the way things are done, especially with respect to employee input. The union exists to serve the needs of the membership—initially to correct inequities, and subsequently to handle developing problems.

Initially, before organization can occur, the biggest change for the employees involved must be psychological, the realization of the professional's true position. The employed professional believes that he/she should be accorded the respect, deference and financial rewards that are usually associated with independent practitioners, but finds in reality that treatment is far different. The mere fact that he/she is an employee puts him/her in the position of being a supplicant, not an equal.

The fact that supervisors also have professional training, perhaps even degrees in the same field and from the same university, cannot alter the situation. There are inherent differences of interest between employees and those who employ them. Employers must make decisions about budgets, capital construction, staffing, and so forth. These matters will take precedence in their thinking. Employees, while interested in the health and welfare of the organization, are more immediately concerned with income, working conditions, career development, and job security. Manager-professionals are managers first, as they must be. Their decisions in professional areas, therefore, will not be based on the same priorities that concern the professional employee.

This employee-manager difference is a fact of life common to most organizations large enough to have a separate manager or managerial group. It flows inevitably from the structural decision to place administrative authority in the hands of a select few. Whether employees are professionals or not, they are not a part of management if real decision-making is carried on above them. The key test does not involve simply the ability to recommend action, but whether or not decisions must be approved by superiors.

I suspect that any apprehension about unionization currently in the
minds of nonmanagement librarians revolves around the possible effects the union will have on their professional status and on their professional dealings with superiors. I see the possibility for nothing but improvements; let me explain.

One of the big differences between professional employees and all other nonmanagement workers is that professionals come to the job with the belief that they will have a major role to play in determining their work situation. Unlike the crafts or production workers, professionals expect to help to determine the problems they will work on and the approaches toward their solutions. Unfortunately, the tendency in large organizations has been to move real authority to higher and higher levels within the hierarchy, thereby effectively removing much of the discretion a professional should have to do the job properly.

Another important characteristic of true professionals is a belief in the concept of peer review. The standards of the profession should be set, and performance measured, by those who are best qualified to do so: the body of professionals in the field. In most large organizations, however, such decisions are frequently made unilaterally by management only, and are not always based on predominantly professional criteria. Specifically, the bulk of the professional staff may be uninvolved in book-purchase decisions, or in planning special services; there may be outright censorship of library material exercised by higher-ups; there may be inequities caused by improper job classifications or rank; there may be strong disagreement about budget priorities; etc.

Collective bargaining changes the relationship between professionals and management by shifting the locus of decision-making authority. Negotiations become truly bilateral; areas of concern to the employees must be considered and any differences must be resolved before a contract can be signed.

The details of any particular contract will vary from group to group, but based upon our experience with professionals in many other fields, we would assume that librarians would address both "bread and butter" issues as well as professional concerns.

Clearly, upgrading salaries will be a major goal in an occupation typified by low incomes relative to education and training. I need not dwell on this except to make a point that may not be obvious. A union is in a good position to fight against sex-related salary differences. A 1973 survey found that the mean salary for female librarians was only 75 percent of the mean salary for male librarians, even though
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more than three-fourths of the survey respondents were women. Clearly, such a situation should not long continue to exist after the employees themselves get in a position to influence salary policies.

The record is clear. As shown by a recent U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics study, differences in earnings between men and women in both professional and managerial occupations were substantially smaller for union members than for nonmembers. Librarian unions will have the same effect because collectively bargained contracts invariably deal with jobs, not the gender of the people performing them. The negotiated starting salary for a particular position, for example, will be stated in the contract, and will be totally independent of the gender of the person who is eventually hired into it.

In a broader sense, the collective bargaining process yields much more than improvements in salaries and/or fringe benefits that may be better than what would have been obtained otherwise. The contract also formalizes policies and procedures. It is a legally binding document, the provisions of which cannot be changed either arbitrarily or unilaterally.

For example, the contract can deal with such subjects as job classification and promotion, all aspects of working conditions (including overtime), detailed grievance machinery for settling complaints, and purely professional issues (e.g., education leave and sabbaticals, or book-selection policies). Without a union, all of these areas are completely in the domain of management. Collective bargaining, on the other hand, requires that policies must be set with employee input.

Further emphasizing the enhanced bargaining position of a united professional staff is the provision in many contracts for third party arbitration to resolve disputes that cannot be settled by direct negotiation between management and union.

In a sense, collective bargaining requires greater efforts on the part of both management and employees. Both must define problems and interests precisely, and both must devote a certain amount of time to negotiation and administration of the contract. The changes may be just as great for librarians, who must readjust to a more active role in running the affairs of their library, as it is for managers, who must accept additional limitations on their freedom of action.

Many librarians are state or municipal employees, and in one sense, their ability to influence management decisions depends more on what happens outside the library than within it. Library budgets are limited by legislative appropriations. Furthermore, state and munici-
pal employees are not covered by federal labor statutes but are subject to individual state laws. The scope of bargaining for some librarians may be severely limited by these laws.

In each case—budgets and labor laws—librarians need the support and help of other members of the community. Organized labor has demonstrated strong support in the past for libraries and educational institutions. A librarian union will need, and can get, the assistance of other unions for the active lobbying that is essential to obtain the best possible legislation for libraries and librarians.

A few years ago, Karl Nyren stated: "Wherever the question of unions has arisen . . . librarians feel doubtful that they can even communicate with union people." This kind of view can be very self-defeating, indeed. If librarians insist upon perpetuating false notions of collegiality with superiors and if they strive to maintain elitist barriers between themselves and their nonlibrarian fellow employees, then they are inviting disaster. It will be the other, more realistic groups which will make their gains in bargaining with management, and the librarians will be out in the cold.

It should be noted that a realistic appraisal of the situation in no way demands any reduction in professionalism on the job. Indeed, the presence of a union-negotiated, and union-backed, formal grievance system as indicated above would only help to enhance the individual's autonomy and professionalism.

Librarians are not unique. Many other professional groups have similar needs and face similar problems growing out of the employer-employee relationship, and they are working to overcome them through their unions. No less eminent a man than John Dewey held membership card number one in the American Federation of Teachers, and the famous journalist Heywood Broun helped found the Newspaper Guild. Within recent years, Charlton Heston served as president of Screen Actors Guild, and currently, the prominent actor and singer, Theodore Bikel, is president of his union, Actors Equity. In each of these cases and many more besides, such professional people and their professional unions had little difficulty joining with other AFL-CIO-affiliated groups. To quote Kleingartner and Kennelly:

Librarianship constitutes a small profession; its members are dispersed geographically and work in many different institutional settings. These and related factors undoubtedly contribute to the
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dependency of librarians on the good will of others for their job and professional enhancement. As a profession, librarianship has been less vigilant in advancing its professional interests and in developing structures for collective action in the employment relationship than is true of most salaried professions.

It seems to us that the future of employee relations in libraries will depend upon the appropriateness and success of existing and changing governance structures in libraries. It will depend on the passage of new, and changes in existing, bargaining legislation. It will depend heavily upon the extent of professionalization and the projection of this development outside the profession. It will depend upon congruence in perceptions of the nature of the profession among librarians themselves, as well as among the public at large.6

Most importantly, if librarians want to exert some influence on the employee-management relationship, they must first decide what they want from that relationship. They will then have to determine who is in the best position to help them, and cultivate friendships. One thing is clear: librarians are in no position to go it alone.

References

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