

What Academics Can Do to Help Workers

By Richard B. Freeman and Joel Rogers

OVER the past half century, the United States has shifted from a mass-production manufacturing economy to a knowledge-based information economy. Coupled with a revolution in civil rights, that shift has drastically changed the nature of work and the kind of people who are working.

No longer is the typical employee a married, white male with—at most—a high-school education, who works on an assembly line and provides the only income for his family. Nearly half of today's employees are female, about a third are of color, well over half have at least some college education, and an overwhelming number work in offices, not factories. More people have jobs in doctors' offices, for example, than in auto plants.

At the same time, the social contract between employers and workers has changed. No longer can workers assume that their jobs are secure, that their wages will rise steadily, and that they will be promoted if they follow clearly stated rules. Measured in constant dollars, wages for most American workers fell during the 1970's and 1980's, and did not begin to recover until late in the long expansion of the 1990's. Deregulation of transportation, communication, and other major industries; the reduced proportion of unionized jobs; employers' increased reliance on subcontracting; and downsizing, mergers, and other kinds of restructuring have meant that many jobs are much less secure, as well as less rewarding.

U.S. labor laws have not kept pace with those changes. We have passed myriad civil-rights laws barring discrimination against minorities, women, the old, and the disabled. But we've done nothing to modernize the basic relationship between workers and companies, or to redress the growing dominance of employers over employees. Despite the diversity of current work arrangements—which range from temporary jobs with no benefits to permanent positions that include stock options—our labor laws offer workers only one way to deal collectively with their employers: belonging to a union. In fact, the laws offer even less, because they provide no effective sanction against employers who illegally resist workers' efforts to unionize.

The result is that workers have less representation in dealing with management, less participation in decisions, and fewer ways of dealing with problems in the workplace than they would like. Those are the major findings reported in our new book, *What Workers Want*, based on a series of large, national studies that we conducted on workers' attitudes.

We found that 44 percent of private-sector employees wanted a union or something very similar to represent them in dealing with management. That is, they wanted an organization of workers, with elected leaders, that bargained with employers about wages, benefits, and working conditions, and that referred disputes with employers to an independent arbitrator. At present, only 9 percent of workers in the private sector have such an organization, and in all cases that organization is a union.

Another 43 percent of our respondents said that they wanted to be represented by a somewhat weaker organization that would regularly consult with employers about problems. Such an organization might rely on volunteer representatives, or might give management the authority to resolve disputes, but it would protect its members from employers' reprisals when the workers raised problems. U.S. labor law makes no provision for such organizations.

It's true that many companies have sought to empower their employees by giving them some authority to manage themselves, and most companies have mechanisms for getting feedback from their workers. But outside the shrinking number of unionized companies, the law does not require employers to consult their workers when they make management decisions. So when, for example, I.B.M. and CBS took steps that reduced the value of their pension plans for many of their older workers, those employees had no say in the matter.

HIGHER EDUCATION faces comparable changes in the organization of work, and similar problems in representation. Although wages in academe are less unequal than in many sectors of the economy, disparities in salaries are growing. A few professors are getting rich beyond their wildest dreams, either through the commercialization of their research, or because they belong to the relatively small group of academic superstars that institutions compete to attract. Most, however, face growing class sizes and less-permanent employment. Roughly two-thirds of all classes are now taught by nontenured—often adjunct—instructors.

Furthermore, graduate school increasingly leads not to tenure-track positions in one's chosen discipline, but to a prolonged period of temporary jobs or research positions, at low wages. The changes are well known in the humanities, but they are also becoming more common in mathematics and the biological sciences.

The resulting frustration is evident in the

growing number of efforts by professors, graduate students, and staff members to form unions. But under the Supreme Court's famous *Yeshiva* decision, although professors at public institutions can join unions, their colleagues at private institutions cannot. Furthermore, administrators at private colleges and universities typically resist the attempts by students and staff members to unionize: It took staff members at Harvard University 15 years to get a union; at Yale University, it took close to 20 years.

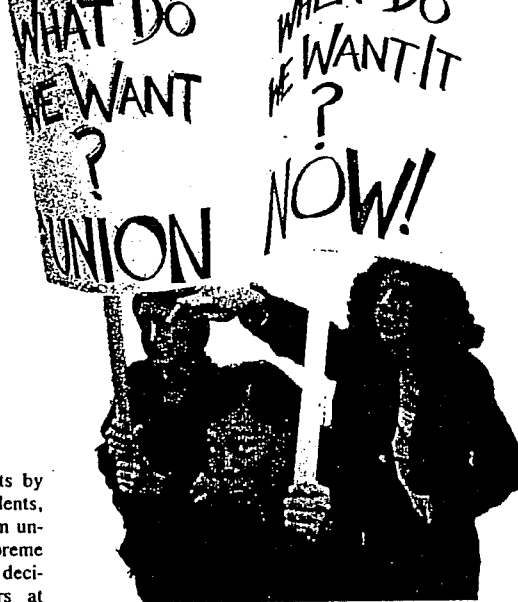
Although higher education is not without problems, it does offer some academics significantly better, and more-diverse, models of labor-management relations than is the case in other sectors. Most colleges and universities give tenured professors a share in the institution's governance. Faculty senates or councils consult with administrators on policies, and may deal with grievances or disputes. Though they may be dull, joint committees of faculty members and administrators decide many key issues. Tenured professors routinely make collective decisions about who their new colleagues will be (a right certainly not available to most workers), and deliberate about the standards they wish to maintain in employment—for the quality and output of research, or the hours to be devoted to teaching or community service.

Some institutions require administrators to give faculty members notice of decisions and an opportunity to respond to them. Others offer more-formal rights of consultation or truly shared governance. Those are all meaningful forms of participation or representation, and all stop short of collective bargaining.

Perhaps tenured professors are better off than most workers because administrators in higher education often have come up through the faculty ranks. Or maybe it is because academic managers understand better than those in other sectors what the workers in our studies told us: Giving employees greater representation and power not only increases their satisfaction, it also helps the employer.

An overwhelming number of the workers in our surveys desired cooperative relations with management, and believed that their increased participation would be good for the company's productivity and long-term success. The managers we talked to tended to agree, and most academic studies of the subject support the workers' views.

Unfortunately, our surveys revealed another point of agreement: Managers generally resist sharing power with workers.



UNION RALLY AT YALE U.

BUCK FRIEDMAN, BLACK STAR

Most managers thought that their careers would be harmed if their employees conducted a successful union drive—giving them an incentive to oppose unions even if they thought the workers or their company would benefit from unionization.

Our research shows that the vast majority of workers—and thus the vast majority of voters—favors giving workers the right to organize. But in the current era of low unemployment, the issue is not a high priority for most people. Neither business groups nor the unions would welcome a debate about fundamental reform. Business prefers to keep the current system, which gives it the upper hand over the unions. And organized labor, with its reduced membership and political power, fears that a debate would be stacked against it.

What can academics do to help modernize the relations between American employers and employees?

As a first step, faculty members should insist that administrators be neutral in any organizing drive—by graduate students, or staff or faculty members. They should urge administrators to extend to other employees some of the rights of consultation that tenured professors currently enjoy. And faculty members at public institutions should join their private-sector colleagues in an effort to overturn the *Yeshiva* ruling.

In addition, academics should speak out in favor of giving all workers rights of shared governance. They should urge that labor laws be strengthened to protect unionizing drives, and revised to make provision for other kinds of organizations to represent workers.

Such reforms would displease some employers, and even some union leaders who would rather not see new organizations competing with unions—but the changes would give us what most citizens clearly want. And that, after all, is the bottom line in a democratic society.

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