

Library Unionization and Its Ties to the Public Sector: History, Issues, and Trends

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Abstract

In the past twenty years, the economy of the United States has shifted from a manufacturing to a service orientation, particularly with the growth of the information industry, considered to be "pivotal to the efficient operation of (the service) economy."¹ As the number of service employees increases, and the membership of industrial unions decreases, organization and collective bargaining in the service areas, including libraries, has increased. This paper will focus on various aspects of library unionization: the history of library unions, including recent organizing and bargaining; the reasons why library employees seek to unionize, and the issues raised during bargaining; the outside factors which influence organization attempts and bargaining agreements, especially in public libraries; management's attitudes toward unions; the different perspectives and

needs of librarians and support staff; and some of the perceived and actual effects of unionization. Because many of the issues and conditions of unionization are not unique to libraries, particularly those issues affecting support staff, this paper will also look at similar issues in public sector and white-collar organization.

Historical Background

The history of library unionization is as old as the modern labor movement in the United States, and its growth parallels the growth of industrial unions, albeit on a much smaller scale.² The first library to organize was the New York Public Library in 1917, followed by the public libraries in Boston, the District of Columbia, and Philadelphia.³ These were "part of the general drive to organize workers"⁴ during and immediately after World War I. Many of these unions either disbanded or became inactive not long after their inception, primarily because of administration opposition or staff apathy, and they are consid-

ered to have had a "minimal impact in respect to achievements."⁵

The second wave of unionization did not take shape until the 1930's, again coinciding with increased general labor activity as a result of the Great Depression.⁶ As before, these unions gradually became inactive after World War II; "there was practically no library union activity during the 1950's and early 1960's. Data on total union membership in the United States show that membership declined between 1956 and the early sixties."⁷ At the same time, professional salaries increased an average of 6 percent per year between 1951 and 1955, causing little interest in unions or collective bargaining.⁸

Most of the unions still existing and active in libraries today were established during the social activism of the 1960's and 1970's; some examples are Los Angeles and Berkeley Public Libraries and Yale University Library. These unions are different from earlier ones in two major respects: first, "while still showing an interest in economic matters, (current unions) also display interest in matters relating to library administration and personnel policies" and second, "the formation and success of current unions seem to have been aided by protective state and municipal legislation," legislation which protects the rights of public employees to organize.⁹

Recent organization has taken place in the past five years, most notably the unionization at Harvard University and four Ohio public

library systems: Cuyahoga County Public Library (independent of Cleveland Public) and Stark County District Library (Canton) in 1985; Medina County District Library (Medina) and Cleveland Public Library in 1986. Harvard's clerical and technical employees voted to be represented by the United Auto Workers in 1987. The Ohio library employees chose to be represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), "an organization founded especially for office workers,"¹⁰ in coordination with 9 to 5, The National Association of Working Women, "the nation's largest membership organization for office workers."¹¹ Most currently organized library employees are represented by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), but the range of national representation is wide. Other unions include American Association of University Professors; American Federation of Teachers; National Education Association (NEA); Service Employees International; Public Employees Union; International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers; International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers; International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen and Helpers of American; and Hotel and Restaurant Employees.¹²

Why Unite?

Why do library employees organize? What do they want? According to Connie Metro, a library assistant and organizer at Cleveland

Public Library, the chief concern is to have "a say in the policies that effect us (library employees) and the community we serve at the library."¹³ This broad statement can be separated into two major categories; Level I goals and Level II goals. Level I goals are defined as "bread and butter" issues involving money, such as salaries, benefits, vacations, working conditions and job security. Level II goals are more long-run issues; "autonomy, occupational integrity and identification, individual career satisfaction, and economic security and enhancement."¹⁴ An Association of Research Libraries' survey listed several concerns: "in addition to salaries and benefits, union issues in ARL libraries typically included: 1) employee rights, 2) working conditions, 3) technological change, 4) job security, and 5) VDT-CRT environmental conditions."¹⁵ While Level I goals are usually held by all library staff, support and professional, Level II goals are almost exclusively held by librarians. The goals are reached in the several stages of collective bargaining: "the first is winning the right to bargain; next, bargaining over basic economic issues; and finally, reaching agreements on policy issues. They (researchers in collective bargaining) refer to this third state as 'professional unionism' . . . Each is responding to the need to change the working relationships . . . and recommending collective bargaining as an appropriate vehicle for change."¹⁶

As stated earlier, other issues which primarily affect women, such

as pay equity, child care, sexual harassment, and maternity/paternity leaves, are also factors in the decision to organize, as well as in any collective bargaining agreements. One of the difficulties employees, especially women employees, have in receiving equal pay for equal or comparable work is that "equity" is not always defined the same way. For example, a local government in Minnesota defined equity as "92 percent of the average of the male wage plus the female wage for any given job point value" because of the way the state law was worded. While the "concept behind pay equity and the fight for the economic equality of women is unarguable . . . it becomes extremely a difficult concept to translate into practical terms with a hostile city administration and an ambiguous law to back up enforcement."¹⁷ Unions argue that only through collective bargaining can salaries be made equal, that professionalism does not work; "Salaries are political. The historic wage gap between female jobs and male jobs is well documented. Librarians are the lowest-paid professionals for the years of education required and length of service in the work force. Professionalism as a single route to raising library salaries is not effective. The professionalism argument does not seem to raise pay for women's professions. The professional argument is useful to enhance autonomy and foster shared decision-making. Collective bargaining raises salaries."¹⁸

Although many of these issues:

equity, child care, sexual harassment, minimum salaries, and environmental and technological changes, are being debated in legislatures and in Congress, it is still largely up to the "generosity" and discretion of administrations to deal with them. When employees feel these concerns are not being adequately addressed by management, it may be that the "only way that (library) employees may have a voice in setting the conditions of employment, under which they will work," as well as "how services are to be established and delivered," and "determining how crises will be met, how decisions are going to be made" is by having a "collective voice" through union representation.¹⁹

While the number of libraries whose workers are organizing has increased, it has not been an easy road. "Union membership as a proportion of wage and salary employment has been drifting down over the last four decades . . . the number of union members has been virtually unchanged since 1985, while the nation's employment has been increasing. Therefore, the proportion of the nation's wage and salary employees who are union members, . . . has continued to drift downward."²⁰ This proportional decrease has moved unions to increase their organizing attempts to white-collar workers, office workers, and public sector service employees, including library employees. A prime target of these organization efforts are women. When Harvard organized in 1988, 83 percent of the

clerical and technical workers were women.²¹ In 1984, women made up 41 percent of the nation's workforce; today it may be closer to 50 percent.²² To attract these potential members, unions "have begun to take an interest in issues often perceived as women's issues such as child care and pay equity,"²³ which will be discussed at greater length later in this paper.

Library employees, because of their characteristics, are ripe for unionization; "library employees fit the profile of workers likely to favor collective bargaining. As a group, library workers are predominately female, work in bureaucracies, have relatively low paying jobs, and are uncertain about the potential for technology to routinize the work. Unions recognize the change in the labor force and that employees are concerned with the nature of their work, as well as their salaries."²⁴ This was not always so. Unions, in the past, have steered away from organizing where the majority of workers are women "because women are supposedly only temporary employees and secondary breadwinners in a family;"²⁵ however, research indicates that "among librarians, sex is not a determining factor in propensity to unionize."²⁶

Environmental Factors

Whether or not workers will organize is determined by various environmental factors and worker characteristics. When researching the organization of clerical workers, it was determined that "clerical workers (were) more likely to vote for

union representation in states where the unions have a strong presence, particularly if the union movement is expanding."²⁷ Other surveys indicate that "public librarians who were pro-union were most likely to 1) be employed in larger libraries, 2) have worked less years as librarians, 3) command lower salaries, 4) be politically liberal, 5) have had less administrative experience, 6) be employed in libraries without staff associations or in libraries where union representation was nationally affiliated, and 7) be union members."²⁸

The legal environment has also been an obstacle to the unionization of libraries. Because many employees work for public libraries or libraries in state-supported colleges and universities, they are considered public employees, and are subject to the laws regarding collective bargaining by public employees. In many states, collective bargaining by public employees has been restricted by state law; for example, the Ferguson Act in Ohio prohibited strikes in the public sector because of "numerous crippling strikes in the private sector following World War II."²⁹ The restrictions on public employees were considered necessary for the following reasons: "1) public employees provide unique and essential services; 2) private sector market forces are missing from the public sector; and 3) strikes may damage public health, safety, and welfare."³⁰

Opponents to this kind of government interference presented the

following arguments in favor of collective bargaining for public employees: "1) Public employees are entitled to the same rights accorded private employees; 2) The right of public employees to engage in collective bargaining is meaningless unless supported by some mechanism for clout such as a strike; and 3) Strikes are an effective extension of the collective bargaining process, do not occur frequently enough to justify their prohibition, and generally are not harmful to public health, safety, or welfare."³¹ Under these statutes, unions felt they operated "from an unfavorable position because public employers often (were) under no statutory obligation to negotiate. Frequently, recognition and negotiation (were) voluntary or discretionary . . . employers could just say, 'No, we won't bargain.'"³² In the past ten years, however, the laws have been changing; in Illinois and Ohio, laws have passed which permit public employees to bargain collectively, "obligate school districts and officials on all levels of government to recognize duly authorized unions and bargain on union contracts . . . (and give) nonsafety workers a legal right to strike if negotiations reach an impasse."³³

Professionalism

The issue of professionalism has also hindered union organization, especially of MLS-degreed librarians. "Because librarianship carries professional status, there is often a feeling that unions, with their blue collar overtones, are inappropriate vehicles for affecting change for

librarians."³⁴ This attitude has been coupled with the perception that librarians, "as white-collar professional employees, identify more with management."³⁵ Organizing is seen as "an expression of disloyalty, and by extension as unprofessional conduct."³⁶ There is also the perception that librarians are more concerned with the higher ideals of service and professionalism than with salaries and benefits. One author claims that this is a view perpetuated by employers: "by claiming this he (the employer) almost puts his employees on a pedestal, and I suspect that they are somewhat receptive to the idea. It puts a halo around their heads, and it sounds nice. It also makes a nice public appeal if the professional workers say they are more concerned about quality of service or how children learn than they are about the fact that they are still working for \$4,500 a year."³⁷

This attitude is changing as unions represent themselves as voices not only for money issues, but also for issues which would enhance the service and professionalism of librarians. As another author writes, "The effect of unionization on library professionalism, and ultimately library service, concerns both librarians and administrators. It is possible to negotiate contracts that enhance the role and authority of practicing librarians, as well as their salaries. At this moment in education, the union is in the vanguard of promoting professionalism. The challenge is to use the collective

bargaining contract to include a process for collaborative decision making on policies, goals, service delivery, and a peer performance evaluation system of administrators, in addition to one of employees."³⁸ As unions are willing to take on larger issues related to professionalism and service, librarians may realize that unionization does not mean disloyalty to the system, but can present an opportunity for a greater voice in increasing the levels of service.

Opponents to unionization of professionals, including librarians, point to the plethora of associations which serve the interest of professions on a national scope, such as the American Library Association (ALA), and the National Association of Social Workers. In some areas, the "lines between unions and associations will become increasingly blurred."³⁹ Library staff associations also claim "the ability to represent the job and professional interests" of library employees. However, neither category of library organization can engage in collective bargaining, ALA because it chose not to, and staff associations because they are predominantly social organizations.⁴⁰

ALA has chosen not to be a collective bargaining agent, even as other professional associations have become quasi-unions. Among these are the National Education Association (NEA), the American Nurses Association, and the American Association of University Professors. Conservatives in the 1960's sought

to make ALA a quasi-union believing it would "stem the tide of unions organizing librarians."⁴¹ ALA foresaw problems with becoming a bargaining agent, which did occur with other quasi-unions. Primarily, "ALA is viewed by some members as an association run by library administrators. Although ALA has a great diversity of activities, it does have a preponderance of library administrators in leadership positions."⁴² While ALA's membership is not exclusive to librarians, most of its members do have MLS degrees, and in 1979, 39 percent of ALA members were in management positions.⁴³ Because trustees and institutions can also hold membership, conflicts would arise. This is also true at the state level.

The Indiana Library Association (Federation as of 1991) shares its name with the Indiana Library Trustees Association—ILA/ILTA, severely hindering any collective bargaining power should this association choose to become a quasi-union. Professional associations which have taken on some of the duties and services of unions have also had difficulty keeping their voluntary status and projecting an image of protecting the common good as well as the desires of the profession. According to one author, associations/unions such as the NEA are "arrogantly political . . . pawning itself off as an association in those states where monopoly bargaining is not authorized . . . in 34 states, public school employees can be required to accept representation they do not

want and did not vote for."⁴⁴ While "being a special-interest group and being on the side of the public good is not necessarily a contradiction in terms . . . (they) are often portrayed by opinion makers—with some justification—as avaricious, egocentric, and holding the good of their members above the good of society."⁴⁵ "Unions (try) to control supply, exert market power, and enhance their own self-interest."⁴⁶

The potential loss of tax-exempt status, challenges from other unions and state laws, and the weakness of state library associations could be seen as detriments if ALA should follow NEA and the others into collective bargaining status. While "ALA has not opposed unionization . . . it (has) chosen (not) to represent librarians in collective bargaining."⁴⁷ ALA's lack of bargaining status would seem to point to a need for union organization in libraries should the employees so desire.

Management Factors

Management's attitudes toward unions and collective bargaining, however, can be the major factor influencing whether or not a library union is formed, or, if formed, survives. As stated previously, earlier library unions became inactive or were eliminated partly due to the opposition of the administration. In the private sector and in some public sector organization efforts, management has used various tactics to oppose unionization. At Harvard, the associate vice-president for human resources, Anne H. Taylor, received "marching orders" from the

administration to "inform employees about the negative aspects of unionization without attacking the union or dividing the community . . . the administration felt the union might bring conflict and rigidity to what she (Ms. Taylor) describe(d) as a collegial and flexible relationship that existed between the university and its employees."⁴⁸

Not all companies are so careful; "charges by unions against companies during organizing campaigns, including accusations of illegal surveillance of union sympathizers, discrimination against employees and refusal by the company to bargain . . . increased from 13,036 in 1969 to 31,167 in 1979."⁴⁹ Many of the charges are against people which the companies call consultants, but which unions call union-busters, who use "a sophisticated mixture of industrial relations and behavioral psychology."⁵⁰ One union, the Communications Workers of American (CWA) seeks to counter these moves in a brochure entitled "What are six things bosses always say when you try to form or join a union?", outlining some of the conversational tactics they feel hinder union organization: "1) Let's talk privately, 2) You can trust me, 3) I'm telling you for your own good, 4) We're just one big happy family, 5) Give us another chance, and 6) My door is always open."⁵¹

According to union organizers, these questions and the consultants "specialize in the manipulation of women . . . the consultants use tactics aimed at the fears and insecurities

peculiar to women workers—that women don't trust one another, have a need to please and are more afraid of violence than men, for example."⁵² An advertisement put out by one company presented a rather paternalistic approach to its opposition, using "Peanuts" characters and a "Happiness Is . . . Saying No to a Union" theme.⁵³

In the library community, management voices its opposition to unionization in the literature. The research for this paper indicated that a majority of articles and research concerning the unionization of libraries dealt with the possible loss of management prerogatives, management flexibility, staff productivity, and management control.

Have Unions Made a Difference?

Despite the opposition, many libraries have chosen union representation. Has it really helped? Have salaries or conditions improved? Specific instances, such as the contract won by the Los Angeles Public Librarians Guild and the University of Connecticut professional employees in 1985, report "significant gains" in salary, equity, and working conditions.⁵⁴ Information in the literature is ambivalent about gains, particularly monetary ones. While one side concludes that "unions appear to have a positive impact on the salaries of those job positions they represent,"⁵⁵ the other side states that in situations where unions bargain aggressively and successfully for higher salaries, the outcome may not be good for all employees.⁵⁶

The assertiveness of the bargaining unit may not be the deciding factor, especially in the public sector, where "pressures resulting from the budget deficit and funding cutbacks continue to challenge unions and management. These pressures have resulted in significantly lower wage adjustments in major collective bargaining agreements."⁵⁷ This has been especially true in the last ten years; when the average increase in wages from major settlements decreased from a range of 5.1 percent to 7.9 percent, to a range of 1.6 percent to 3.8 percent.⁵⁸ Even when salaries go up, hours may be decreased and positions terminated. There do exist union "utopias", such as Curry College of Milton, Massachusetts, represented by the American Association of University Professors, where collective bargaining agreements have provided significant gains. The librarians received faculty rank, including sabbaticals, research support, staff development, a cooperative day care center, generous maternity/paternity/adoption leave, and faculty pay.⁵⁹ When studying the overall monetary gains, the methods of research and the variables are so different, "there appears to be little consistency in findings."⁶⁰ Members, however, perceive improvement; "members are satisfied with the job the union does for them."⁶¹

Too often, it seems, unionization can bring conflicts between management and staff, between MLS-degreed staff and support staff, and between staff members of similar

rank. Unionization can enhance the adversarial and political relationship between labor and management; "it formalizes the employer-employee relationship, and from the time of organizing onward, a person is on one side or the other—there are not neutrals."⁶² According to McCahill, a former consultant for managers in collective bargaining, "the loss of management rights tends to happen rather gradually, but nevertheless these losses are real and will increase as the years go by . . . It is misleading oneself to assume that management's ability to manage will remain unrestricted."⁶³ It is the nature of collective bargaining to limit management rights; "in the place of unimpeded management rights is a contract which restricts both parties in the exercise of their respective rights and obligates both parties to act in responsible ways. As a subject of bargaining, management rights are regarded as both mandatory and permissive,"⁶⁴ and many times are itemized under a "list of permissive subjects."⁶⁵ Management view collective bargaining as a restriction of its "rights" to hire staff, transfer and promote, terminate, and reward merit,⁶⁶ although at the nine state universities in Florida, merit pay is included in the bargaining agreement, and is "specifically exempted from the grievance procedure."⁶⁷

This opposition is not unique to the higher levels of management. A survey of middle managers at four academic library systems expressed many of the fears that accompany

unionization: increased paperwork; less control with more responsibility; less flexibility; and more time spent on personnel matters.⁶⁸ Department heads also expressed problems with the bargaining system: "brought up in a world of hierarchical authority, their adjustment to collegiality and peer processes (brought about by the bargaining agreement) seems to have been difficult at best."⁶⁹ However, although the managers had many complaints and fears, the study indicated that "middle managers do not seem to have been greatly affected by the arrival of collective bargaining for librarians."⁷⁰

Much depends on the personalities and attitudes involved; negative attitudes foster negative responses. At the Fort Vancouver Regional Library in Washington, the poor relationship the union had with the director helped bring about votes of "no confidence," unratified agreements, and legal entanglements that lasted approximately two years.⁷¹ The director of Cleveland Public Library, Marilyn Gell Mason, views unionization differently: "Clearly, the employees exercised their rights. We feel we can work well with the union representatives, and we are approaching the chapter in a very open and positive manner."⁷²

Conflicts

Although unionization is based on collective goals and benefits for all workers, conflicts between members arises and can damage relations for some time. In 1985, Yale underwent a bitter "union struggle that pitted about half the support staff, who

were on the picket line, against the other half, who stayed on the job. One result has been near-permanent damage to the human relations of the entire support staff, with repercussions for the professional staff, which was technically, at least, not involved . . . The aftereffects on individuals were many: marital stress, problems with children, even nervous breakdowns, the anger and the hurt persist."⁷³

The conflicts between librarians and support staff can be derived from the difference in goals. In a study comparing three types of bargaining units; one with only librarians, one with only support staff, and one with librarians and support staff, it was determined that "there was not significant difference among the three types of bargaining units and their achievement of level one (bread and butter) goals;" but that there was a "significant difference (in) . . . their achievement of level two (higher) goals."⁷⁴ However, inter-member conflict must not be used as a reason against unionization; it can be used to increase awareness of the various employee goals and to establish a sense of mutual, long-term interest. The study concluded that "although librarians may not be as successful in negotiating professional-type working conditions in a mixed unit as they would be in a unit consisting only of librarians, the larger size and hopefully less divisive working climate (because librarians and support staff are in the same unit) can lead to successful negotiations for professional-type working condi-

tions."⁷⁵

There is also conflicting research concerning unionization's effect on library productivity. The traditional view of unions states that "although unions may benefit their members by creating non-compensating wage differentials, they also cause allocative efficiency losses and thus have a negative impact on the economy as a whole."⁷⁶

One study which supports this theory found "that librarians who were members of a union held less favorable attitudes toward service than their colleagues who were not members of the union . . . unionization may be causing a decrease in professionalism with the field . . . (it is) a negative and possibly destructive influence upon the profession."⁷⁷

Opponents of this view argue that, in the private sector, "Unions may well increase productivity in a number of ways: by reducing turnover, increasing morale and motivation, and expanding formal and informal on-the-job training."⁷⁸ When testing this assertion and the methodologies involved, Ehrenberg, Sherman, and Schwarz found that, outside of the increase in interlibrary loans in unionized libraries, "collective bargaining coverage, on balance, does not appear to affect significantly library output . . ."⁷⁹ These conflicting findings seem to indicate that further study on how unionization affects output measures is needed.

Conclusion

In spite of all the conflicting data

and the emotionalism, as in the rest of the economy, "unionization of librarians and library employees has become an accepted fact."⁸⁰ Despite the fears of management and the conflicts incurred by unionization, it is a force which is prevalent and which can be justified through the collective voice, for librarians and support staff, as well as for other workers in the public sector.

If nothing else, unionization can bring about changes in the way employees and managers communicate and develop. The "union experience," according to White, "teaches the skills needed to develop an idea, to work in coalitions to gain acceptance to the idea, and to use existing political or power structures to enact the idea. Employees can acquire leadership skills from the union experience, and by encouraging participation in the union, the potential exists for the employee to become more effective at changing existing library service conditions"⁸¹

The use of committees in collective bargaining can "generate a cooperative approach to shared concerns . . . and successfully ameliorate the traditional adversarial relationship between employees and management . . ."⁸² The key to this communication is the collective voice which is associated with unionization, whether the relationship is adversarial or cooperative. Many of the issues affecting library employees and other service workers cannot effectively be addressed through one-to-one communication. Todd's

statement can be applied to all library employees: "(It) is certainly the case that librarians who are employees have common interests with librarians who are managers. In terms of these common interests, the professional association serves both. But it is also the case that in some areas the interests of these groups diverge, and the adversary relationship provided by unions may provide the best means for dealing with these issues."⁸³

One member of the American Federation of Teachers, Albert Einstein, summed it up this way: "I consider it important, indeed urgently necessary, for intellectual workers to get together, both to protect their own economic status and also, generally speaking, to secure their influence in the political sphere."⁸⁴

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