

Unions, Faculty, and the Culture of Competition

By Victor G. Devinatz

In March 2000, the faculty at Illinois State University, a Carnegie II level research university, voted by a narrow margin to reject collective bargaining.

Although there was considerable support for the Illinois State University Faculty Association, an affiliate of the NEA and the Illinois Education Association, the union lost the representation election by a vote of 335 to 283.

This article seeks to explain why the ISU faculty rejected unionization and highlight some lessons from the unionization effort by examining the dynamics of the organizing campaign from the very first meeting in July 1998 until the representation election in March 2000.

Organizers began the campaign for collective bargaining at Illinois State because we believed forming a union was the only practical way to expand workplace justice, deal with major threats to academic labor, and preserve the pursuit of

truth in the academy, now under attack from a number of external sources.

A brief history of the ISU union organizing campaign demonstrates the importance and the difficulty of getting the union's message out to the faculty. More ominously, this history shows what happens when union opponents generate a message that runs counter to the union message and feeds into what I term the university's "culture of competition."

Following an initial exploratory meeting in July 1998, attended by six faculty members, organizers held a series of meetings with faculty throughout September. What emerged from these meetings was a small core of faculty members willing to undertake the rigors of a faculty organizing drive.

From October through the beginning of December, this core committee met once or twice a week to hammer out a platform for the fledgling Illinois State Univer-

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sity Faculty Association. A centerpiece of the platform was the need for a strong faculty union to protect the faculty's role in governance.

Beginning in the 1999 spring semester and continuing into the summer of 1999, the ISUFA created a system of departmental representatives and used this structure to assess all tenured and tenure-track faculty members to determine their initial reaction to faculty unionization and collective bargaining.

For departments that had no representatives, union activists telephoned faculty from the IEA office in both April 1999 and June 1999. Approximately 580 of the university's 680 faculty were assessed. The results: A little more than one-third were in favor of faculty unionization, one-third undecided, and a little less than one-third opposed to faculty collective bargaining.

The Faculty Association steering committee, encouraged by these findings, launched an authorization card drive in the fall of 1999. During the first few weeks of the card drive, cards authorizing the ISUFA to bargain on behalf of the signee were collected rather quickly and easily.

In the four-week period from September 14 to October 12, 1999, more than 150 authorization cards were signed, and by the end of this

period, the ISUFA had exceeded the 30 percent minimum required by the state labor board to file for an election.

But while it had taken only six weeks to collect cards from 30 percent of the bargaining unit, it took another six weeks to collect an additional 10 percent of cards. That slowdown, in retrospect, should have been a warning. By Thanksgiving, the ISUFA had collected cards from a little more than 40 percent of the eligible bargaining unit. In December, the union filed for a union representation election without any additional cards.

Recognizing that many of our colleagues were uncertain about the meaning of union representation, the ISUFA conducted a weekly forum series that included topics such as what unions can do for faculty, an open discussion of collective bargaining at ISU, collective bargaining in higher education, collective bargaining among physicians, and the use of interest-based bargaining by faculty unions and university administrations.

Through early February, the major problem confronting the ISUFA was trying to educate and mobilize a faculty that had little knowledge of collective bargaining. The results of the election showed that the ISUFA fell short in this effort. We did not persuade the majority of the faculty that a union

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would protect their interests and the interests of their students in these turbulent times.

What went wrong? What caused the Faculty Association's loss in the bargaining election? It is true that the union made a few tactical and strategic errors. But I believe the most significant reason for the union loss was that many faculty members bought into a consistent message from the administration and an opposition faculty group that reinforced the university's "culture of competition."

A majority of ISU faculty, it appears, came to believe collective bargaining would not lead to an improvement in either their departmental or individual situations. Rather, the oft-repeated threat that collective bargaining would bring standardization and the loss of flexibility across the university, unfortunately, resonated with too many of the faculty, already uninformed about unionization in the first place.

The anti-union message worked, in short, because a culture of competition dominates faculty life at ISU and is deeply embedded in the culture of the university—both at the departmental level and at the level of the individual faculty member.

At the departmental and college level, there is a continual

struggle over shrinking resources and a differential distribution of resources—photocopying and travel money, for example—among departments within each of the university's colleges.

For instance, in one department in the College of Arts and Sciences, faculty members are entitled to only 50 free photocopies for the entire semester with any additional copying paid for out of the faculty member's pockets. In the College of Business, by contrast, all photocopying related to a faculty member's teaching, research, and service is paid for out of each department's budget.

At the level of the individual faculty member, competition occurs over the comparative annual performance evaluation process, where each individual faculty member documents his/her teaching, research, and service activities in excruciating detail in order to appear more "productive" than departmental colleagues.

For example, as part of the performance evaluation process, teaching evaluations are calculated to the hundredth of a point (based on a 1 to 5 point scale), and faculty members' categorical rank (highest merit, high merit, merit, insufficient performance) in teaching may be determined by as little as a tenth of a point per question.

Based on the outcome of the

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performance evaluation process, faculty members compete on an annual basis for the small pool of money allocated for salary increases as well as the administrative equity money that is available for remedying compressed (and deficient) salaries.

In addition, faculty members across the university compete for the limited number of college research grants that are awarded each summer. Thus, although collegiality is stressed, the reality for ISU faculty members is one of competition in all areas of a faculty member's professional life at the university.

This culture of competition is intertwined with, and reinforces, a broader ideological orientation, known as "professionalism," which according to Meisenhelder "is grounded in an individualistic consciousness."¹

For the professoriate, professionalism requires that faculty respond to their work situation "through competition within themselves, other faculty, and, particularly, with other workers in order to secure the rewards of professional status."²

Unfortunately, professionalism in practice fails to address the problems facing university faculty as a collective. Faculty members continue to compete against each other for dwindling resources, and

because they view themselves "as a self-governing community of independent intellectuals," they often do not see the need to organize as employees on the job.

Refusing to view themselves as employees has other consequences, most notably the reluctance of faculty to form alliances with other university employees—non-tenure track faculty, clerical/administrative workers, maintenance workers, food service workers, other academic professionals—or with others in the teaching profession, such as primary and secondary school teachers, who are also viewed as competitors for the state's educational resources.

The ISU administration began its anti-union efforts one day after the ISUFA officially kicked off its campaign for a representation election on January 20, 2000. A four-page memorandum of "frequently asked questions" and answers about collective bargaining was distributed to all tenure-line faculty. In both tone and content, the memorandum appeared to be "neutral," "objective" and "informative."

But the answer to the second question—"What is negotiable under collective bargaining?"—referenced the collective bargaining agreement between the Board of Trustees of SIU and the Southern

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Illinois University Carbondale Faculty Association, concluding:

The agreement also included a section on Board of Trustee Rights including the following:

Section 1: As long as such actions and decisions are consistent with the other express Articles of this Agreement, it is understood and agreed that the Board, on behalf of the University, retains and reserves all of its powers and authority to direct, manage, and control all operations and activities of the University to the full extent of the law...³

The implication was clear: Even with a collective bargaining agreement, the Board of Trustees would retain the right to run the university as it wishes. Thus, the university attempted to undercut one of the union's major issues—the threat to shared governance by the current ISU Board of Trustees.

Up to this point, there had been little overt opposition to the organizing drive by the university administration and no organized opposition from any anti-union faculty groups. The only opposition to the ISUFA's campaign came from a small number of individual faculty members, from different departments, who appeared to operate in

a disorganized and independent manner. But this situation changed by the middle of February with the appearance of an anti-union faculty group, the Faculty for Shared Governance (FSG).

The group described itself as “a loosely-knit alliance of faculty members from all across campus” with “no formal leadership structure” or “official ‘steering committee,’” but with “an editorial board crafting and editing our memoranda.”

Three faculty members from different departments in the College of Arts and Sciences served as the public spokespersons for the group, which included a conservative economics professor, a self-described “pro-labor liberal” out of the political science department, and a former chair of the English department, who was a member of the American Association of University Professors. Eight faculty members from a variety of departments served as editorial board members. The FSG argued that none of its members was an administrator but all were “full-time, tenure-track faculty.”⁴

The FSG engaged in two major activities during its short life. It distributed “informational memoranda” to faculty through the university's E-mail system and organized “debates” between ISUFA representatives and FSG

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representatives in most of the university's colleges. FSG members did not appear to engage in much, if any, one-on-one contact with ISU faculty members.

In its memos, the FSG used the university's culture of competition to play on the fears of the ISU faculty. Conversely, the group also emphasized at times that unionization would foster additional competition among members, and thus lead to the damage of an otherwise harmonious community.

For example, the FSG argued that collective bargaining would interfere with and undermine the cooperation required between faculty, the university administration, and the Board of Trustees to have a meaningful shared governance system.

FSG memo number 7 attempted to show why collective bargaining is incompatible with shared governance:

But collective bargaining should not be confused with shared governance. If the structure of shared governance is relatively horizontal, the structure of collective bargaining is binary. Whereas the mode of shared governance is deliberative and cooperative, the mode of collective bargaining is legalistic and adversarial.... Collective bargaining replaces the ethos of

collegial decision-making with a legal contract. The very concept of bargaining implies negotiation between separate parties. While these negotiations needn't be rancorous, the adversarial structure of collective bargaining threatens the basic meaning of collegiality: "the sharing of authority among colleagues."⁵

In addition, the anti-union group argued that faculty unionization could not protect shared governance, claiming that "shared governance at SIUC is above the contract" so that "the continuance of shared governance at SIUC rests on exactly the same willingness to cooperate upon which it depends here at ISU."⁶

Besides emphasizing how faculty unionization would undermine and threaten shared governance, the FSG invoked the culture of competition at the university by arguing that collective bargaining would actually lead to worse conditions for the majority, if not all, of the faculty.

The group claimed "(t)he process of collective bargaining is one of give-and-take," and since "few faculty members are willing to participate," the bargaining team will be composed of faculty "with axes to grind" who will be required to make "trade offs." The implica-

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tion: The final contract will only serve the interest of a small percentage of the faculty, instead of representing the best interests of all faculty.

Once more using the SIU contract as a model, the FSG claimed the contract contains many articles that regulate “the minutiae of faculty life” such as “the number of office hours, the content of syllabi, and procedures for canceling an occasional class.”⁷

Furthermore, the FSG reinforced the university’s culture of competition by playing on the faculty’s fear that collective bargaining would interfere with departmental flexibility. That is, collective bargaining would not be sensitive to the varying needs of individual university departments.

The FSG argued that “the most important academic issues” to faculty are departmental issues that would not be handled well under collective bargaining. According to the group, standardization of conditions across departments would be “inevitable” with faculty unionization, and this “would actually diminish faculty voice on most of the issues that concern us.”⁸

Since “(t)he major concerns of members of one department often fail to resonate with their colleagues in other departments,” a

department’s faculty, as a minority in the bargaining unit, would not be able to muster the votes needed to pursue its issues through the collective bargaining process.

In addition, the group argued, because of the negotiated contract, the department would not be able to press its concerns “through ‘ordinary’ administrative channels either.”

This would be the case because the departmental chair would now serve as “a manager in charge of ensuring that the collectively determined rules are followed,” rather than as an advocate pursuing the department’s best interests in front of both the college and university administrations.⁹

Besides pointing out that the ISUFA would be unable to sufficiently represent the faculty’s major concerns at the departmental level, the FSG also claimed that the Faculty Association would be ineffective in lobbying for the faculty’s interests at the state capitol in Springfield because of the competition for resources between the different constituencies that the Faculty Association’s parent group, the Illinois Education Association, was responsible for representing.

The FSG argued that since the IEA “represents 93,000 primary and secondary school teachers” in Illinois, even if the ISUFA won the certification election, the number of

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IEA members at the university level (SIU and ISU) would be extremely small with respect to the number of IEA members who teach at elementary, middle, and high schools.

Based on the limitation of time and resources and the competition between the interests of the primary/secondary school teachers and the interests of the university faculty, the group claimed the IEA's priority in lobbying at the state level would be, out of necessity, the primary and secondary school teachers. The FSG concluded:

Think about it logically. Whose interests are likely to be a priority with the IEA lobbyists in Springfield? We think we know the answer to that one.¹⁰

The ISUFA presented convincing evidence that ISU faculty members were underpaid with respect to peer institutions and argued that higher salary increases were needed.

But the FSG claimed that these salary increases would come at a cost to the faculty because of competition over resources—the fixed amount of money allocated by the Illinois Board of Higher Education to the state's public universities. Therefore, according to the FSG, the only reasonable way to fund higher salaries would be through “internal

reallocation within ISU.”¹¹

The faculty anti-union group argued that there were a number of possible places salary increases could come from: “decreased administrative expenditures; reductions in funds for library or technological services, departmental and college contractual and travel budgets, and other academic-support areas; or a decreased number of tenure-track faculty positions.”

Because the university administration was in the process of reorganizing in order to make additional funds available for increased faculty salaries, the FSG claimed “support services would almost certainly suffer.” Once more invoking the “problems” with the SIUC contract, the group concluded:

Given steady enrollments, probable consequences include more temporary-line faculty positions, larger average class sizes, and higher faculty teaching loads. Nothing in the SIUC contract prohibits any of these effects from occurring.¹²

As for the administration, President Victor Boschini and Provost Alvin Goldfarb sent a carefully worded letter—not on university letterhead—to all tenured/tenure-track faculty. In the letter, which arrived by mail on March 6, two

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days before the election, the two leading university administrators counterposed the tradition of shared governance with that of collective bargaining.

Arguing that they were committed to achieving competitive salaries for ISU faculty with peer institutions, Boschini and Goldfarb pointed out that they had made significant progress within the last three years and that they planned to continue to increase faculty salaries in the future.

In a similar vein to the FSG, Boschini and Goldfarb appealed to the culture of competition, arguing that collective bargaining would lead to the standardization across academic departments and a loss of flexibility for individual academic departments to pursue their best interests:

We believe that collective bargaining arrangements tend to standardize and centralize relationships. The flexibility and open communication that currently exists (sic) in individual academic departments may be replaced by a “one-size-fits-all” contract. Each academic department at Illinois State has unique characteristics and needs. Faculty, working with department chairs, can champion these needs to college deans, adminis-

trators and governing bodies. A contract that places everyone under the same umbrella might circumvent that flexibility. We wonder, as many others have wondered, is this the right time for Illinois State to change its faculty/administration governance relationship?¹³

As the outcome of the election showed, the anti-union—culture of competition—message won out over the Faculty Association’s “culture of collegiality” message.

What went wrong and what lessons were learned from this organizing drive?

I think the primary lesson is that many faculty members will not support a unionization drive unless they feel a union will address the micro-issues that affect them in their departments.

Unlike the FSG and the administration who communicated successfully their belief that collective bargaining would negatively impact a wide range of micro-issues of concern to the faculty, the Association did a poor job of addressing these faculty members’ concerns.

Addressing these micro-issues is of crucial importance in any faculty organizing campaign because only a relatively small number of

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faculty members have an ideological predisposition toward supporting unionism or will be swayed by issues confronting the university or the profession as a whole.

Although the union did a good job addressing faculty members' concerns with respect to the issues outlined in the platform, I think the ISUFA should have been better prepared to answer detailed and technical questions concerning department level issues.

A typical response by union supporters to questions about departmental issues was "We will encourage decision-making at the lowest possible level in the university and will respect departmental autonomy and flexibility." In the final analysis, this response didn't convince faculty members who already had doubts about faculty unionization.

A second lesson from this campaign is that the union should not file for an election until a significant majority of the potential bargaining unit has indicated support by signing authorization cards.

Even though the ISUFA filed with a little over 40 percent of cards signed by bargaining unit members, many steering committee members believed we could win the election because we would retain virtually all of our support,

as well as pick up the support of a decent number of "undecided" voters at the last minute. But this didn't happen.

Absent a major crisis or tactical error by the administration, once the card drive is over, the union's major job is to consolidate and maintain the support of those who signed cards, in the face of opposition from the administration and any anti-union groups that might emerge.

While the union may gain a small amount of additional support from faculty members, the more serious possibility is the loss of supporters who signed authorization cards once the opposition campaign is launched.

This rule should be strictly adhered to unless there is convincing evidence that many faculty members are union supporters but are not signing cards because they feel intimidated, which is what happened during the Southern Illinois University organizing campaign.

But this was not the case at ISU. In my experience collecting cards during this campaign, only a small number of union supporters refused to sign cards. These were nontenured faculty who didn't sign because of fear of retribution if, for some reason, this information became public.

A fourth lesson is that the orga-

nizational structure of the union should be established before the certification election.

A major problem with the campaign of the Illinois State University Faculty Association was that we did not have active departmental representatives in many departments throughout the university. The success of union organizing campaigns depends on effective one-on-one communication within departments. These efforts are successful if those doing the convincing of fellow faculty members are actual members of the departments rather than faculty members from other departments.

A fifth lesson is that, if it all possible, a unionization campaign should be conducted around an issue or issues that a significant percentage, if not the majority, of the faculty feel has a significant impact on them. This is important, I think, because as I noticed at ISU, except for a number of members on the steering committee and some faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences, very few faculty members were ideologically committed to unionization.

Endnotes

¹Meisenhelder, 1986, p.382.

²*Ibid.*

³Stanford, 2000.

⁴"Who and Why?"

⁵Harris, 2001.

⁶"Has Shared Governance Broken Down at ISU?"

⁷"Promise Us Everything, Give Us . . .

One final, but crucial, lesson from the ISUFA unionization campaign: Organizing college and university faculty does not end with the holding of the certification election.

Many members of the steering committee viewed the certification election as the single defining event, believing that organizing ended once the certification election took place. These steering committee members did not realize that if the Association had actually won the election, the union would have to continue to organize the faculty in order to build a viable local union and obtain a strong first contract.

And what now? Summers suggests a wide range of activities that unions can engage in even after they have lost a certification election. One suggestion: Have the union act as the employees' voice on all employment-related issues that might arise in the workplace.¹⁴

The ISUFA is doing just this, continuing to engage in activities that let the ISU faculty members know the union is still alive and well while it is continuing to recruit faculty members to the organization.

The goal is to build toward another unionization campaign, culminating in victory. ■

What?"

⁸"Can You Hear My Voice?"

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰"Can the Tail Really Wag the Dog?"

¹¹"Would a Union Raise Faculty Salaries?"

¹²*Ibid.*"

¹³Boschini and Goldfarb.

¹⁴Summers, 1991.

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