

Entertainment Unions and Higher Education

by Lois Gray

My hope is that this article will provide insights from arts and entertainment unions that may be relevant to higher education unions.

My own career spans both fields. I originally aspired to be an actress and had won a scholarship to Northwestern University, the best theater school in the United States at that time.

But, at Northwestern, I decided not to become an actress when I learned how tough it was to break into the field. Instead, I decided to change my profession to education.

Nonetheless, I maintained a lifelong interest in theater. During the '60s I was recruited to research a proposed merger between the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA). From that involvement, I became intrigued with the unique structures and the accomplishments of entertainment unions. Later, in the '80s, I received a grant from the

U.S. Department of Labor to study labor relations in arts and entertainment, with an emphasis on the impact of technological changes.

The outcome was the publication of *Under the Stars: Essays on Labor Relations in Arts and Entertainment*. I directed this study in consultation with an advisory committee of management and labor leaders in the industry and learned a great deal in the process.

NEA President Bob Chase has noted that all of the participants in education—professionals, technicians, and clericals—share a strong individual as well as collective commitment to education. NEA aims to help its members as individuals and to enrich the profession, cooperating with management wherever possible to achieve these objectives.

Such goals and methods have their parallels in arts and entertainment. Professional development and recognition are also important to entertainers, so much

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so that the collective bargaining contract determines where and how each performer's name is placed—whether actor, director, cameraman, or grip. If you watch a movie and see a long list of names at the end, keep in mind that it took hours or even days of negotiations to determine the placing and size for each name.

Participation in decision making about the product and the quality of the product is also as critical to entertainment workers as it is to education workers. In addition, intellectual property and technological change are common concerns of entertainment and education unions.

Finally, job security is a bargaining priority for entertainment as well as education unions, but in the entertainment industry it is security as occupational identification rather than security in a specific job. Entertainers tend to be hired on a contingent basis—one short term job at a time. Very few have full-time permanent jobs.

Another characteristic the unions in the two fields have in common is the structure of their organizations. Entertainment unions have craft structures that are segregated by occupation. In general, education is also organized along craft lines, with teachers

organized in separate units from clericals and technicians, and K-12 teachers distinct from college-level teachers.

What is especially noteworthy in both education and entertainment unions is a democratic tradition that encourages a high degree of membership participation and volunteer involvement in leadership.

What lessons can we educators learn from the achievements of arts and entertainment unions?

Let's recognize, for starters, that the entertainment industry is growing, as is education. Entertainment is fast becoming America's largest export. There are more people making movies in the United States than making automobiles.

The entertainment industry is segmented by product and delivery systems—live performance, recording, motion pictures, broadcast—but ownership is heavily concentrated. Movies, recording, and television have overlapping owners.

A recent book by Ben Bagdikian predicted that by the year 2000 only six companies will dominate the global market for entertainment. Just a few companies, notes a current study by New York University researchers, already control most of recording, movies, broadcast, and publishing worldwide.

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broadcasting was strong in early years, but government regulation has virtually disappeared. Remaining are a few rules for broadcasting on program content, as well as some restrictions on ownership concentration. And there are small government subsidies for live performances and broadcasting public service information. But, for the most part, deregulation is the law of the land and the trend for the future.

Entertainment has been heavily impacted by technological change. Millions of jobs have been lost. This is not a new story. In the days of silent movies, every theater employed a piano player to entertain customers while they watched the silent screen.

This employment created the structure for the musicians' union, a structure wildly out of sync with today's world. In every small town in America, there is a local union consisting of people who identify themselves as musicians. Most of the members are not regularly employed as professional musicians, yet their votes control the national elections in their union, the American Federation of Musicians.

After the demise of silent movies, recordings replaced musicians on radio and in live performances. Then tape replaced musicians in nightclubs. Most recently,

synthesizers threaten to replace orchestras.

Despite the ill fortune of the musicians' union, entertainment remains one of the few growing sectors in the labor movement. Arts and entertainment, along with education, are the nation's most highly unionized sectors.

Entertainment unions are classified as "above the line" for creative performers and writers and "below the line" for technicians and manual workers. These designations are budgetary terms.

Above the line unions include the American Federation of Musicians, Actor's Equity, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, the Screen Actors Guild, the Writers Guild, the Directors Guild, and a few other tiny specialized unions for variety artists and musical artists such as chorus and opera singers.

Below the line workers are represented by the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees, the National Association of Broadcast Engineers, some small specialized unions such as the Scenic Designers union, and a number of traditional unions like the Teamsters and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

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cians, the membership, of “above the line” unions has been increasing—over the past 10 years, by 23 percent for SAG, 20 percent for AFTRA, 17 percent for the Director’s Guild, and 15 percent for the Writers Guild.

For performers, union membership is almost 100 percent in films and broadcasting. The demand for entertainment keeps increasing, and these unions, representing a high percentage of the total employment in their professions, grow right along with the industry.

In contrast, for “below the line” craft unions, membership has been stagnant. The exception is the International Alliance Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE).

Not long ago, the IA, which represents all the crafts in motion pictures and live entertainment and some in broadcasting, was shrinking in membership, reflecting technological displacement and growth of the nonunion sector.

The union was declining, in large part, because of its exclusive membership policies. Those of you who may have contacts with people who wanted to become a stage hand or camera operator know that it was almost impossible to be admitted IATSE.

But, in the 1990s, a new president, Tom Short, decided to launch a major organizing drive. Then, in 1995, President Short began to

restructure the union. Operating on a top-down basis, he issued directives and placed trusteeships over resisting locals, forcing them to open up.

Short’s predecessor had tried to make changes voluntarily, through persuasion. His only reported success came with the merger of the Hollywood local that handled live plants on sets with another that handled artificial plants.

That’s a sign of how difficult change was, with each local clinging to its own narrow jurisdiction. But Short pushed forward with a program of union restructuring and organizing the unorganized. The result: IA membership is up 33 percent over 10 years.

The Musicians union, clinging to its old structures, resisted efforts to restructure. It lost 44 percent of its membership in the same 10-year time period. NABET, the other technical union in the entertainment industry has seen its membership remain stagnant during these 10 years. The union is under serious pressure from employers in the industry, who are replacing permanent full-time workers with new technology and contingent workers.

The 1998 ABC strike, a very bitter battle, was inspired by ABC’s push to replace full- with part-timers. NABET members struck

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and, in effect, lost on that issue, with ABC winning the right to increase its temporary and part-time work force.

Charles Kerchner has stressed the need for organizations, especially education unions, to adapt to the changing patterns of their industries. Unions, he believes, must represent members in structures that reflect those of their employers. Otherwise, their bargaining strength is fragmented, and they stand weakly in the face of unified employers.

In the entertainment industry, segregation by craft often leaves workers just so fragmented. They find themselves divided, facing powerful owners, multinational corporations like Disney, Sony, Bertelsman, and Time Warner.

These multinationals can move operations from country to country. Unless the unions are able to coordinate their efforts on an international basis, they are left in the dust.

In the United States, employers in film and television bargain through an association that represents all the major employers: the Association of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). On the other side, each union negotiates individually—not jointly—with this association.

Recently, an effort to merge the Screen Actors Guild and AFTRA

failed a membership vote by the Screen Actors. Since 1940, these unions, which represent overlapping memberships of actors, have been trying to merge.

When actors perform in television, they belong to AFTRA; in films, they must be members of SAG; in live theater, Actors Equity (AE); in musicals, the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA), and, in night clubs, the American Guild of Variety of Artists (AGVA).

Entertainment unions, in many respects, are living in the past. In many sectors of the American economy, craft unions have gone out of business. They died when industrialization came along, and the craft unions attempted to organize each sector of an industry by craft.

The entertainment unions haven't gone out of business. But they do have structural weaknesses that threaten their future.

That is, it seems impossible for these unions to increase, or even maintain their strength, against powerful multinational employers so long as these unions maintain a structure of separate and often competing structures.

The title of my book is *Under the Stars*. One reason the entertainment unions are strong—and there is something in this that higher education unions might con-

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sider—is that the “stars” in the field of entertainment, men and women who earn fabulous salaries and do not need a union to represent them—still recognize the performer’s need for collective action.

Stars are strong supporters of their guilds. Even Ronald Reagan who, as President of the United States, broke other unions, even Charlton Heston and other conservatives in the Screen Actors Guild are very much committed to the need for a union in their profession.

As a result, no performer will work without a union contract.

Actors with less bargaining power than the stars (and the industry is a field crowded with wannabee actors) benefit from the collective strength they get from the support of the stars and from a strong tradition of union solidarity

in the industry.

Drawing on the experience of entertainment unions and looking for an equivalent power in higher education, can those of us in higher education enlist the backing of university Nobel Prize winners to support our demands for better pay and working conditions?

Or can we develop a higher education model that posits the strongest teachers and the most celebrated researchers as the strongest proponents of academic unionism, as they might already be the strongest voice for quality education, academic freedom, and faculty governance? ■