

The New Unionism Replaces the Old At Shawnee State

By Robert Forrey

The newest and one of the smallest of the Ohio public universities, Shawnee State University, is located in Portsmouth, in the southern or Appalachian part of the state, on the Ohio River.

Other Ohio universities may be bigger and hold more tradition than Shawnee State. But there is one area where Shawnee State stands unmatched: bitterness between faculty and administration.

This bitterness goes far back, all the way to the 1970s when Shawnee State was a two-year technical college. Faculty in that institution felt more like sharecroppers than college professors.

The situation led faculty to organize in 1977 and form the Shawnee Education Association, an NEA affiliate.

But the troubles at SSU continued. There were strikes in 1987 and 1990. New to Shawnee, I walked the picket line in the bitter 1990 strike.

Things did not get any better after 1990. In 1993, we were on the picket line again in what was called a "partial strike," prompting the chairman of the Board of Trustees to tell the campus newspaper that he was "outraged" by our union.

Negotiations reached an impasse again in 1997, and we were on the verge of still another strike after the administration invoked a statute passed by the Ohio General Assembly in 1993 that prohibited any negotiation on workload.

Every university in Ohio, except Central State, and, of course, Shawnee State, somehow managed to work creatively around this bizarre law. The Shawnee trustees and the university lawyer would not budge. They had a legal weapon and they were determined to use it.

The relationship between the university president and the Shawnee Education Association was so bad in 1997 that, in a survey

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After the faculty voted no-confidence in the president, the trustees responded by giving him a merit pay increase.

of our Association members, 95 percent of those who responded declined to give him a vote of confidence. This was his second vote of no confidence, the first one having been registered in 1994.

In the same 1997 survey, 76 percent of those faculty who responded indicated they would leave Shawnee State if they could.

The reaction from the trustees? After this expression of faculty no-confidence, the trustees gave the president a merit pay increase, not his first, furthering angering the faculty.

Not surprisingly, Shawnee State got abysmally low marks in the annual U.S. News and World Reports college rankings for 1997. Of 143 non-selective colleges in the Midwest, Shawnee was ranked close to the bottom.

Not long after the U.S. News ranking, the president announced his retirement effective at the end of the 1997-98 academic year. There was a collective sigh of relief on campus as his nearly decade-long reign of error came to an end.

What the president, the trustees, and the union had been doing during his tenure was acting as if it was the 1890s, not the 1990s. Exacerbating the president's reign of error, none of the parties would adjust to changing circumstances. They did not grasp that the game had changed, not only for higher

education but globally as well.

The old unionism of confrontation, strikes, and picket lines may have served a purpose—and in certain places and at certain times will continue to serve a purpose. But that will be the exception rather than the rule. We must learn to play by the new rules.

A fledgling university ranked 140th of 143 Midwestern nonselective universities can't have its administration and faculty at each other's throat and hope to survive.

When I was elected union president in November 1997, I asked myself how I and the other newly elected officers might help end the reign of error at Shawnee State. By that time two hopeful events had occurred that opened up new possibilities.

The first was the death in 1997 of Vern Riffe, the long-time speaker of the Ohio House of Representatives. Considered second only to the governor in power and influence in Ohio, the speaker represented the district where the university is located. Without the speaker, there would have been no Shawnee State University. He was its legislative father.

But the university paid a heavy price for this tie to one of the state's most powerful politicians. Part of that price was that most important decisions affecting the university

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were made by the speaker. He, ultimately, chose our trustees. He, ultimately, chose our presidents. And he, ultimately, was responsible for the infamous 1993 law that prohibited bargaining on workload.

The second hopeful event was the resignation of our unpopular president.

For the first time in the university's history, it would not be the speaker who would have the final say on who our new president would be.

But how much influence would the faculty and the union have in the selection? When the trustees began forming a presidential search team, the Shawnee Education Association respectfully requested representation on the team.

If the speaker had been alive, that request might have been denied, but the trustees agreed to the union's request: The Association was allowed one representative on the team. The faculty governance body, the University Faculty Assembly, was also allowed one member, so there were a total of two faculty on the search committee.

At some universities, the majority of the search team would have been faculty, but our union counted its blessings and then requested something more: We asked that the union executive committee be allowed to interview each candidate, just as other groups on cam-

pus would. The trustees, perhaps because they no longer had to clear a decision like that with the Speaker, agreed to our request.

Of the four presidential candidates our union's executive committee interviewed, one clearly seemed best qualified: Dr. James P. Chapman. His honest answers to our questions stood in sharp contrast to what we'd become accustomed to from administrators.

In our interview with him, we explained that the president of the National Education Association had been promoting a "New Unionism" and that we as a local chapter had committed ourselves to it. Chapman said he wasn't familiar with New Unionism, and I gave him the NEA Web address, where several of NEA President Bob Chase's speeches on the New Unionism can be found.

After our union executive committee interviewed all the candidates, Chapman was our unanimous choice. To our surprise, he was also the unanimous choice of the Board of Trustees. That marked the first time in the history of the university that the trustees and union had ever agreed on anything.

Not long after Chapman became Shawnee's president, in an interview with our union newsletter, he was asked about the disadvantages of collective bargaining from an

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administrative perspective.

His reply:

I personally don't see any disadvantages to collective bargaining. It should be an environment where the parties involved are seeking a mutually satisfying situation. That involves benefits and concessions on both sides. I feel collective bargaining provides a forum for equals to discuss what is mutually beneficial. The union gains strength through its membership and that balances its position with that of management.

That same issue of the union newspaper reprinted parts of an 1997 address Bob Chase had made to the National Press Club. Chase had noted:

After much soul-searching and self-criticism within NEA, we know it's time to create a new union—an Association with an entirely new approach to our members, to our critics, and to our colleagues on the other side of the bargaining table.

We do appear to be beginning a new era at Shawnee State. President Chapman is getting good reviews from almost everybody. He does not proceed without knowing how students and faculty feel about issues. He consults frequently with campus leaders, including those in

the Shawnee Education Association.

Perhaps most importantly, from our point of view, he does not view the union as the enemy.

President Chapman and the Association leadership have already had a number of informal constructive discussions, and, while we disagree on some important issues, the dialogue and the search for solutions and compromises has not once broken down.

To further encourage the growth of the New Unionism at Shawnee State, our union invited Bob Chase to campus to address faculty, administrators, and trustees. When I asked President Chapman to attend that banquet and speak before Chase, he readily agreed.

Almost every constituency on campus—students, union faculty, nonunion faculty, including adjuncts, trustees, administrators—attended the banquet where Chase spoke. Such a gathering would have been unthinkable before we began implementing the New Unionism.

In his speech, Chase said:

I know a little about your history, and the relationship between faculty and administration in your institution, and it has not been good. So the question is, What do you do? Do you

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do more of the same, only longer and harder? Well, if the 'same' is something that isn't working particularly well, then doing it longer and harder doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

It's time to look at some alternative approaches. And it also seems to me, without besmirching anyone who has been involved in past years, that now might be a good time to do that. You do have a new president of both the university and the union who are willing to move in some different directions, to look at some different approaches.

The response to Chase's visit was positive. Many of those who attended the banquet spoke appreciatively of the spirit that prevailed. More than one person at the banquet characterized it as historic.

We expect the real test of the New Unionism to come when our current contract expires, in the year 2000.

We hope within a year to have not only a president committed to cooperating with the union but other key administrators as well. We also have had changes on the Board of Trustees that bode well for greater cooperation with that body.

The chances of the New Unionism working out at Shawnee State have been increased significantly

by these changes in the administration and on the board, for the New Unionism cannot work unless there is New Management.

Cooperation is a two-way street. Bob Chase has said that what we are offering through New Unionism is not the white flag of surrender but the olive branch. At our banquet last November, he repeated that point: "We are offering cooperation, not capitulation."

There may be some in both the union and the administration who feel, perhaps even hope, that the New Unionism will fail, perhaps partly because they have built their careers, if not their personalities, around confrontation and animosity.

Certainly, the New Unionism will be severely tested in the months and year ahead. Who can say what will happen if the economy goes south and education dollars become scarce? The New Unionism might then be just a dream. Nevertheless, we have never seen this degree of optimism and cooperation on our campus.

We have begun discussions with the administration about what we believe is the chief threat to both our union and the quality of education at our university: the already heavy and increasing exploitation of un-unionized, unintegrated, and underpaid adjunct faculty, who under Ohio law do not

have a right to a union.

Putting this issue on the table, getting the administration to agree that there is a problem, is a step forward. And we already have one tangible result: a promise by the administration that they will apply the contract-mandated 20-student cap in composition courses taught by the nonunionized adjunct faculty, this despite the fact that more than one administrator had proposed higher class sizes for nonunion faculty.

This is only a single step down a long road, but it at least repre-

sents a step in the right direction, the direction of ending exploitation of non-unionized faculty.

Shawnee State is an institution with a long history of bad blood between faculty and administration. Still, I feel the New Unionism has at least a fifty-fifty chance of working at Shawnee State.

Those might not sound like great odds, but they are encouraging given our troubled history. Yes, the New Unionism might actually work at Shawnee State, and if it can work here, it can work anywhere. ■