4-2019

Guest Editorial

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol38/iss1/3

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
GUEST EDITORIAL:
Our Union, Our History, Our Struggle
Orson Kingsley and Lee Torda

The Comment, March 10, 1977 [BSC student newspaper], Archives & Special Collections, Bridgewater State University.

Orson: In the spring of 1976 the summer on campus finally turned to a boil. Faculty here at Bridgewater State were not yet unionized and were in year three of working without a pay raise or cost of living adjustments. Then, right before everyone left campus for spring break, the then president announced he was putting new limitations on the faculty sabbatical leave policy and changing the math for calculating future course load equivalency accruals (sound familiar?). The standard governance process of the time was ignored, and no faculty input was sought out and collected. One person on a whim made the decisions all faculty would have to live with.

Lee: My earliest memory of what it meant to be in a union was watching my father paint signs for the United Autoworkers Local 1250 in Brookpark, Ohio. Brookpark is a sprawling suburb abutting the city of Cleveland on its western edge and the home to not one but two Ford engine plants. I grew up in Parma, the other sprawling suburb of Cleveland, with the other west-side Italians, where the Parma Metal Plant has made metal dyes for General Motors since 1948. In Cleveland, even the wealthy are blue collar.

My father wasn’t in the UAW; he wasn’t in a union at all. An illustrator for American Greetings (also headquartered in Brookpark), he was painting signs for his brother-in-law, my Uncle Sonny. My Uncle worked the overnight shift at Ford in maintenance, a job he’d held pretty much since coming home from the Korean War and not that long after the plant itself opened in the early 1950s. He was a union steward for the UAW and in 1983 more than 120,000 workers went on strike for 205 days against the heavy machinery manufacturer, Caterpillar. It was the longest strike in UAW history. I don’t really understand who thought it was such a good idea for my father to paint some signs. I just don’t imagine that artistic flair was what was going to turn the tide with management, though I’m sure they were the nicest signs you could want to see on a picket line. I think it was, on my father’s part, just more a desire to stand together in support of my uncle.

I don’t remember much more than that really, except those signs and worried adults wondering how it would all work out. It felt like a fragile, frantic time.

My cousin Susan, Uncle Sonny’s oldest girl, is a shop steward for the Communications Workers of America. And my cousin Jude, Uncle Sonny’s youngest, is the secretary to the Valley View Teachers Association, like us, a local arm of the NEA. There’s my cousin Ronny, master welder, member of the Iron Workers, local 17 and my Uncle Eddie, Sheet Metals Workers, local 33. I could go on. So when I took the job at Bridgewater State, it would have never occurred to me not to join our union. Unions are imperfect organizations, of course, but the financial security and quality of life that the unions defended for the better part
of the last century made possible, I am quite certain, my life as I know it today, even if indirectly.

Orson: Morale had become so low on campus in 1976 that students had been taking it upon themselves to protest repeatedly on campus and in Boston over the state’s threats of budget cuts to the state college system. It was faculty contract. The formidable Jean Stonehouse headed the fight. I was new and shiny then. I was happy to help. It felt like a family tradition.

I had forgotten that memory, until I sat down to say something about the state of things right now. Then I thought: man, I’ve been at this a while. And then: I think I’m tired.

I have faith in our union leadership. I believe in the work that I’m doing. I know the good work of my colleagues and the lives and livelihood of our students is worth a fight.

the students who realized that those responsible for preparing them for their futures could not do so at the capacity they expected and demanded if burdened by the stress of worrying whether they would receive their next paycheck and having to take on part-time jobs just to get by.

Lee: Of course my next union memory is seeing my first paycheck from Bridgewater. Union dues can be hard on the soul. But my other union memory, that first year, was learning that we had no contract. We wouldn’t get one for a good stretch, though I don’t remember feeling the rancor and disillusionment that I feel now. I am not sure I entirely understood what not having a contract meant, nor what getting a new contract would mean.

I imagine some of my fellow faculty feel that way now. Despite that fact, I remember standing on the steps of Boyden passing out informational flyers to students about the state of the I’ve been thinking about how I can help my students understand the cost of my labor when they don’t really even understand the cost of their own: they get what working for five hours at Dunkin’ Donuts gets them, but no idea what working for five hours on a paper I’ve assigned them will earn them. So I’ve been experimenting with contract and “spec” grading. It’s different than rubrics, which I find just as subjective as any other kind of grading. Contract grading, in particular, makes clear and then values the labor involved in a particular assignment. Students commit to a certain level of labor to earn a certain grade: the power to earn an “A” over a “B” resides with them—as it always has (or should have) and yet they haven’t always seen it as so. Students’ overwhelming reaction to this system is positive. “That’s super fair,” more than one student said. I’m asking for administration to make my work life fair and equitable; I’m committed to modeling what I’m asking for myself with students.

Orson: With no union or collective bargaining, the talk of a faculty strike increased. When skimming the Campus Comments from this era it becomes rather ironic, and sad, seeing the stark contrast in how students and administration viewed faculty. The students were at the center and no one needed to remind them of it. In today’s fancy lingo of “transformative learning” and “student centered” focus, it is still ultimately the students themselves who will suffer from the back-handed tactics used to destroy any trust that may remain among faculty, the administration, and the state.

I've been thinking about how I can help my students understand the cost of their labor. They get what working for five hours at Dunkin’ Donuts gets them, but no idea what working for five hours on a paper I’ve assigned them will earn them. So I’ve been experimenting with contract grading, which makes clear and values the labor involved in a particular assignment. Students commit to a certain level of labor to earn a certain grade: the power to earn an “A” over a “B” resides with them—as it always has (or should have) and yet they haven’t always seen it as so. Students’ overwhelming reaction to this system is positive. “That’s super fair,” more than one student said. I’m asking for administration to make my work life fair and equitable; I’m committed to modeling what I’m asking for myself with students.

Orson: With no union or collective bargaining, the talk of a faculty strike increased. When skimming the Campus Comments from this era it becomes rather ironic, and sad, seeing the stark contrast in how students and administration viewed faculty. The students were at the center and no one needed to remind them of it. In today’s fancy lingo of “transformative learning” and “student centered” focus, it is still ultimately the students themselves who will suffer from the back-handed tactics used to destroy any trust that may remain among faculty, the administration, and the state.
Lee: Now I write to my Uncle about our union, about the experience of sitting at the bargaining table, of trying to rally my fellow faculty to keep on with what has come to feel an interminable fight. I think I half expected him to laugh off my simpering about my cushy indoor work. Growing up in Cleveland, you have an idea of what “union” looks like. I don’t think I thought I was it. But my Uncle doesn’t laugh, of course, because labor is labor and unions are unions. Shame on me for not realizing that.

Orson: With the creation of the MSCA in late 1977, faculty and librarians finally had a collective voice backed by the MTA... With this we became part of something larger, capable of getting support outside the confines of our individual campus.

Lee: Their voiced discontent is what will fuel change as it is ultimately their decision to remain enrolled and pay tuition that brings and keeps us here. If they stop paying their bills both faculty and administration may find themselves out of a job.

Lee: Union membership is down in the UAW—roughly a third the membership from the 1970s. The Ford Engine Plant No 1 closed in 2012 and the Ford Engine Plant No 2, it was announced in October of 2018, will close too. Janus brought us no good news. And we still have no contract. I want to end this piece in some hopeful place. I’ve written and erased just those words over and over: I want to end in a hopeful place. I have faith in our union leadership. I believe in the work that I’m doing. I know the good work of my colleagues and the lives and livelihood of our students is worth a fight. It comes to this, really: I am bound, by personal and professional obligation to keep on, and I urge my fellow faculty to do the same.

Orson: Now we are presented with similar dilemmas that led to the formation of our union in the first place. Morale is low and escalating to the breaking point just as it did in the 1970s. Miserableness begets only more miserableness, with the trickle down inevitably spilling onto the students.

Lee: The briefest history of our union shows that our current fight is not the first time such a one has been fought. That offers no comfort, I know. The labor unrest of the 70s and 80s in understand. How can the state that gave birth to Horace Mann care so little about public higher education? How is it that the governor and the Board of Higher Education can look at what we are doing at Bridgewater and not fall over grateful, giving us money hand over fist as we graduate class after class of educated citizens, a mighty, highly-skilled workforce? Our students stay — to work, to raise families, to vote — in this state; how is it that their worth can be so easily set aside? And why isn’t our campus leadership fighting harder to make our governor and our legislature see this? Why are they not our ally in this fight?

Orson: Lee Torda is Associate Professor in the Department of English.

Orson Kingsley is Librarian and Head of Archives & Special Collections.