

1650 REPORT

Henry Ford Community College Federation of Teachers

LOCAL 1650, A.F.T.

5101 Evergreen, Dearborn, Michigan 48128

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ANNUAL REPORT ON STATE OF THE UNION

Thirty years ago next month, the HFCC-FT received its charter from the American Federation of Teachers. The passage of the Michigan Public Employee Relations Act in 1965 made this possible. That Act, the product of a more enlightened political era, afforded HFCC teachers the opportunity to separate from the Dearborn Federation of Teachers and form a local focused primarily on collegiate concerns. The constitution and by-laws codified by the Federation's charter members at that time require of Local 1650 Presidents annual reports on the state of our union. These reports have typically been retrospective and prospective in nature, reviewing the achievements of the concluding year and assessing the challenges of the upcoming. This, then, is the 30th such report delivered by the four Federation Presidents to hold office since 1966, the year Local 1650 was chartered.

For Local 1650 members, 1995 was the second year of a five year collective bargaining agreement. By the end of 1996, we will have reached the midpoint of that five year contract - the longest in the history of the Local. Ordinarily, we would now be preparing for contract negotiations. We are most fortunate not to be doing so. A contract of five years' duration was sought by the Local 1650 bargaining team because of Public Act 112 which gutted collective bargaining for the State's P-12 teachers and those at HFCC, the State's only remaining K-14 community college. That act, the product of the State's Republican Governor and Republican legislators, went into effect in April 1995. Despite curtailment of some of its provisions by the Court of Appeals, PA 112 still imposes fines on striking teachers, even if missed teaching days are made up, and it still empowers a Board of Trustees to impose its contract demands unilaterally if agreement is not reached with a union.

With our five year contract, HFCC teachers' contractual rights and benefits were secured long-term, in the hope of reversing the Republican Party's hold on the State Legislature or, at least, learning from the experiences of other teacher unions, as they labor to preserve their wages and rights while bargaining under the provisions of PA 112. What the 1650 negotiating team did not foresee, when drafting a five year contract, was the precipitous decline in College enrollment that we are now experiencing. In light of this decline, the security afforded by Local's five year contract, while not absolute, has become even more important. A five year contract is vastly preferable to the prospect of bargaining a successor contract in the context of declining enrollment and the regressive terms of PA 112.

While contract negotiations did not preoccupy the Local's attention in 1995, to a large extent political activity did so. Local 1650 was very active in the passage of the District's Miller School bond issue and the P-12's ten year operating millage. As had been the case in joint P-12/HFCC millages of the past, Local 1650 was instrumental in turning out campaign volunteers and developing campaign literature for these exclusively P-12 ballot questions. In the recent Board of Trustees' election, this Union again played a leadership role in electing Alex Shami, Jerry Stockwell, and Pam Wandless to the Board. With negotiations under PA 112 looming ahead of us and enrollment decline upon us, the election of fair-minded citizens to the Board of Trustees has become all the more important.

The response of HFCC teachers to the campaigns of 1995 and the response by 90% of Federation members who contributed \$3,800 to the Local's Political Action Fund were in keeping with this Union's 30 year tradition of political activism. So too was the Local's lobbying efforts against HB 4993. That Republican sponsored bill sought to extend PA 112's agenda by prohibiting College teachers from negotiating tenure, work load, and calendar. The lobbying efforts of Local 1650 members against this legislation constituted an important element of the MFT and AFL-CIO measures which kept HB 4993 in committee.

PA 112, HB 4993, and the Republican Party agenda to diminish teacher pensions, all of these confirm what this Local's leadership has observed time and again. Decisions in Lansing and

Washington impact directly on the professional lives and livelihoods of HFCC teachers. We must, therefore, be active in the political process. The wages, fringe benefits, and professional standing we enjoy at HFCC are the products of collective bargaining. Their negotiation and preservation did not and will not occur in a political vacuum. When we fail to support candidates and policies supportive of education and labor, far right ideologues pass and use PA 112, HB 4993, and like measures. They also appoint bureaucrats, commissioners, and judges of like mind. These people have a clear agenda. They are intent on dismantling the legislation and the union movement which have sanctioned and enhanced the economic and professional standing of teachers over the last 30 years.

HFCC teachers are not immune to what has befallen many workers in the private sector. The decline in the percentage of union workers in this country impacts on us. The plight of the Detroit newspaper and the Caterpillar strikers impacts on us. When 30-35% of the workers in this country were unionized, employee covered health care was negotiated and became the norm in union and then non-union workplaces. When 30-35% of the nation's workforce was unionized, cost-of-living provisions were common in union contracts, and real wages, even in the absence of COLA formulas, grew. When 30-35% of the nation's workforce was unionized, employees in non-union workplaces saw their wages and benefits rise because of the standards set by the union movement.

The rise of unions brought millions of Americans and most teachers in the middle class, and a few fortunate teachers into the upper middle class. The decline of private sector unions and election of far right politicians, however, are reversing that process. Granted public sector unions continue to grow in membership. Granted public sector wages and benefits have not suffered as in the private sector. But how long can that continue in the absence of a strong union movement in the private sector? How long will legislators support a standard of living for public sector employees, including HFCC teachers, that is rapidly disappearing in the private sector? PA 112, HB 4993, assaults on teachers pensions, and attacks on tenure provide the answer -- not long! Attacks such as these would have been politically untenable when one-third of America's private sector was unionized. They are now commonplace.

Far right demagogues have demonized the labor movement and labeled it a "special interest." The union movement, which champions economic equity for the vast majority of Americans, is a "special interest," while far right politicians catering to the interests of a wealthy elite purport to represent the American people. The Union movement has not declined because of the global economy and global competition. The legislation and judicial appointments of anti-union politicians have impeded union growth far more than the global competition. To a large extent, the union movement has allowed the far right to dictate terms of the debate. Even more disturbing is the fact that the union movement, itself, has drifted from its proper focus and message, and that is economic equity.

What can be done to reverse this decline in union influence? As consumers, we can patronize businesses with unionized workforces and purchase union made products. As voters, we can work for and vote for candidates whose platforms support rather than undermine organized labor. As union members, we can recall and promote what the union movement has afforded us -- professional incomes and professional standing undreamt of by teachers 30 years ago.

While on the subject of union solidarity and mutual support, I must report on the efforts of the HFCC Administrator's "union" to raid a Local 1650 Bargaining Unit position. For reasons still unclear, Local 71 has seen fit to force a hearing before the Michigan Employment Relations Commission in the hope of pulling the position of retiree Ken Walters out of Local 1650. This ill advised raid reveals not only the disdain with which the Local 71 views Local 1650, but something more as well. Time and again, Local 71's leadership has sought and received this Union's counsel regarding Local 1650 contract settlements, costings, and bargaining tactics. Time and again Local 1650 has supplied the campaign workers, campaign funding, and campaign literature which has secured HFCC's funding and, in turn, administrative jobs. Evidently with a five year contract, a ten year millage, and bonding secured for new construction at the College, Local 71 feels momentarily secure enough to reveal the shallowness of its commitment to union solidarity and its true regard for 1650's assistance in the past. Yet again "no good turn goes unpunished."

Regarding issues which will confront this Union in the new year, the Federation's Executive Board met last summer to consider union initiatives and programs. Among other products of that session were the activation and reactivation of several 1650 committees. In fact, Local 1650's revitalized committee structure mirrors the challenges of 1996 and thereafter.

The burden of the Local's Legislative Committee is to keep abreast of the onslaught of regressive legislation pouring out of Lansing and Washington and coordinate the responses of HFCC teachers. In 1996, this committee will address, at the very least, a Republican legislative agenda targeting teacher tenure, collective bargaining in higher education, defined benefit pensions, and the constitutional guarantees underpinning our pensions. The Republican push to privatize our pension system and governing board is of immediate and critical concern.

In 1996 the Federation's Performance Review Committee should make its recommendations responding to the North Central Association's call for periodic evaluation of tenured faculty. The committee has been pouring over evaluation models from other institutions of higher education, institutions with and without collective bargaining. It will endeavor to generate a model that provides meaningful evaluation of teacher performance and the means of enhancing teacher effectiveness, while at the same time protecting the rights and due process of faculty.

The Federation's Distance Learning Committee will soon begin its review of emerging educational delivery models. The very concept of distance learning raises serious contractual questions. What will be its impact upon enrollment, class size, teaching load, calendar, wages, extra-contractual opportunities, and full-time staffing levels? What contractual language will the Union devise to address these issues? More importantly, will departments/divisions have the opportunity to assess critically the merit and cost of distance learning, or will they be pressured to embark upon distance learning projects with little or no opportunity for proper reflection?

The Federation's Insurance Committee is well into its work of assessing developments in health care insurance options and determining if cost savings can be realized at HFCC without undermining the quality of our health care coverage. Most HFCC teachers select and enjoy a very

comprehensive and traditional health insurance program, while workers elsewhere are enduring diminished and discontinued insurance programs. Large numbers of employer group plans are moving to some form of managed care. The Insurance Committee is examining health care options for two very important reasons. First, we must be knowledgeable and prepared in the event that circumstances, internal or external to the College, force us away from traditional coverage toward managed care. As fewer and fewer private sector employees enjoy traditional insurance coverage, public sector employees will be under vastly increased pressure from legislators to move to managed care. Witness the move of the State Pension Board to a PPO program for retirees. Secondly, factors internal to the College may necessitate such change. Should enrollment continue to decline at HFCC and with it revenues, the Federation will have to consider budget reduction measures, and aside from wages and staffing, health care coverage provides the most significant area of potential savings.

The Solidarity Committee's activities, focusing on the Federation's social and charitable functions, may seem, at first blush, less significant than those of the other committees cited. The Executive Board, nevertheless, sees this committee's work as critical to the future of this Union. There is much to be learned and much strength to be derived when our faculty interact across departmental and divisional lines. Whatever the burdens of contract crises, informational picketing, near strikes, and strikes; of the old, week-long registration system in the gymnasium; and of millages and bond campaigns, these drew HFCC faculty together in common enterprises, and we were made a stronger faculty, stronger Union, and stronger College because of such shared experiences and opportunities for interaction. The Solidarity Committee's programs will afford Local 1650 members opportunities to come together and share our Union heritage, our talents, and our vision for the future.

Each of Local 1650's individual committees is hard at work, but this Union has a major obligation to act as a "committee of the whole" in 1996 as well. Inextricably tied to our efforts to influence the legislative process must be efforts to influence the political process. 1996 is an election year. It goes without saying, particularly in light of recent anti-teacher and anti-union legislation, which political party organized labor will support in 1996. Perhaps an observation by William Simon, a "moderate" Republican and officer in the Reagan and Bush administrations, will help

explain why. In a recent interview on the PBS program Wall Street Week, Mr. Simon was asked about polling data revealing the inaccurate public perception of a weak national economy and asked whether the stagnation of real wages over the last twenty years might account for that misperception. Mr. Simon responded that he did not think so, and he then went on to observe that in any event the poor in our country are better off than the poor elsewhere. Such is the empathy and vision, not of rabid House Republican freshmen, but of what was once the moderate wing of the Republican Party. Such is the political and social mindset at work in Lansing and Washington today, and the targets of this mindset are the environment, Medicare, Medicaid, education funding, public education, teachers, and of course unions.

I have been President of this Local for nearly 20 years. Until PA 112 and the lurch of the Republican Party to the far right, I was very careful to encourage support for candidates supportive of education and collective bargaining regardless of party affiliation, and there once were Republicans supportive of collective bargaining. I was and am aware that a significant number of HFCC teachers are Republicans and that an even larger number could best be described as conservative. Nevertheless, PA 112, HB 4993, threats to teacher pensions, and the broader legislative assaults on programs important to the middle class as well as those important to the underprivileged, all of this compels any responsible union leader to speak out. The leadership of this union is charged with enhancing and preserving the economic and professional standing of HFCC teachers, and that standing is now under severe assault in both Lansing and Washington.

Teachers, in general, do not have a long history of true middle class standing, and only a fortunate few teachers have any history of upper middle class standing. It will not take long and it will not take much to push teachers back into the lower middle class -- just a few years of diminished State and federal education funding, a few years of meaningless collective bargaining and management imposed contract settlements under PA 112, a few more years of stagnant wages and diminished health care coverage in a private sector devoid of strong unions, a few more far right legislators demanding and mandating the same in the public sector, and a few more elections such Governor Engler's in which 46% of the State's teachers voted for the Governor who ramrodded PA 112 into law. It took the teacher union movement over three decades to elevate most teachers to

meaningful economic and professional standing. Collective bargaining, in a supportive political climate, moved us slowly to where we now stand - amid the middle and upper middle classes. Should political candidates supportive of public education and collective bargaining continue to meet defeat at the polls, the return of teachers to the lower middle class will prove far more rapid than their ascent.

The explicit purpose of the Local 1650 Solidarity Committee, the implicit purpose of each Local 1650 committee, indeed the very purpose of the Union, is to draw the HFCC teachers together to achieve and secure with collective effort what we could never do in isolation. For thirty years the HFCC Federation of Teachers has been committed to such collective action, most clearly in contract negotiations and in its support of the College's shared governance structure. Teachers have come far in thirty years, HFCC teachers very far, so far that we tend to forget where we came from and how we got here. Our profession rose from lower middle class wages and paternalistic administrative surveillance over the last 30 years. The Union, collective bargaining, and political activism empowered and elevated us. Should we forget this, we will not stay where we are very long.

John McDonald

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