

1650 REPORT

Henry Ford Community College Federation of Teachers

LOCAL 1650, A.F.T.

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ANNUAL REPORT ON STATE OF THE UNION

If there was ever a period that more dramatically illustrates the impact of politics on our careers at Henry Ford Community College, I can not recall such, and that is saying a great deal, as 2003 marks my 25th annual report to the Federation as its President. Virtually every report to the Local 1650 membership over those years emphasized how inextricably tied our professional lives and livelihoods are to the priorities and ideologies of elected officials. 2002 was no exception; 2003 will prove no different.

2002-07 Contract

In the course of 2002, Local 1650 negotiated a five year contract and confronted disturbing, albeit short-lived, take-away demands from the College administration. Should that contract remain unaltered by re-opening and the renegotiation of its terms – a looming prospect – it will provide, even with its first year wage freeze, compounded wage increases approaching 16% for teachers at maximum salary and increases as high as 60% for teachers moving up the salary schedule.

The 2002-03 contract also provides for lasik and improved long term care insurance coverages, while safeguarding hospital-medical-surgical benefits. All of this was achieved in the context of administrative attacks on health benefits, laboratory assignments, and full-time staffing.

The 2002-07 contract also contained an early buy-out/retirement provision and language, most difficult to secure, which guarantees the replacement of the 21 HFCC teachers who opted for the buy-out.

The new contract contains, as well, re-opener language pertaining to years 2005-07 of the contract. Two questions now loom before us – what are the prospects of filling those 21 faculty positions and will our contract be reopened in its very first year.

While these are the questions that dominate our attention, they must be viewed in their political context – because it is politics that causes them to loom before us.

HFCC's State Revenues

It was clear in early 2002, as Local 1650 entered contract negotiations, that we should sign and seal a contract as quickly as possible. The State and national economies were spiraling downward, despite contentions, then a now, that the recession was receding. Each State and federal pronouncement proclaimed the worst was over, that the economy was turning around, when in reality serious budget cuts were being tabled until the general election was over.

Despite a clear crisis in State revenue, Governor Engler would not and did not postpone reductions in the Single Business and State Income taxes. It was clear to all but ideologues – and perhaps to them as well – that Mr. Engler's long string of tax breaks to special business interests and his overall tax policy would put the State in jeopardy should the economy falter. The State's "rainy day" fund did not grow as it should have – and is now depleted. The teacher pension system was not funded as it should have been, and the State employees' pension fund was raided. The State's revenue stream was reduced to marginal levels during a robust economy, and those marginal levels of revenue evaporated in a deteriorating economy.

Mr. Engler's game plan was driven by his and his party's ideology. Reduce the role government can play in addressing educational and social needs by driving down revenues (or in the case of the federal government – driving up deficits). Denigrate the merits of public education and social programs, do not address cuts in such programs squarely, and do not spell out for voters the consequences of their diminishment or loss. Enact, rather, a fiscal policy that eviscerates State revenues and achieve, thereby,

diminishment and loss of programs without assuming direct responsibility for doing so. A faltering economy, rather than fiscal policy and ideology, are at fault.

What have been the results of this narrow, self absorbed ideology and strategy? First, what was once touted as the “party of fiscal responsibility” has become the party of budget shortfalls at the State level and ballooning deficits at the federal level.

Second, the very wealthiest of citizens reap inordinate tax breaks, while the middle and working classes see public education diminish and State and federal social safety nets dismantled, all fostered by those in power whose incomes – augmented by their own tax policies – mean they will never need a social safety net and whose incomes permit them to purchase the very best of private education.

Some of us at HFCC, especially two income families, might convince ourselves that we will never need a social safety net. We all would do well to remember that only recently have some unionized teachers risen into the upper middle class, and only recently have some teachers risen to the middle class. In non-union “right to work” states, teachers with annual incomes of \$20-30,000 – and this includes community college teachers – still aspire to middle class standing. Which of us is so secure that a family tragedy or long term debilitating illness might not drive us or drive our children to a government sponsored social program?

Governor Engler’s fiscal legacy – a \$1.8 billion 2003-04 deficit – impacts the professional lives and livelihoods of HFCC teachers. It impacts our salaries, our health benefits, our staffing lines, and our pensions. All of these are jeopardized by State deficits of such magnitude. Like it or not, HFCC teachers are public employees. We deliver a “human service,” we deliver a “social service” called education, and consequently we are at the mercy of a governing party’s ideology. This plays out as well on the federal level, where Pell grants and Perkins grants are targeted.

Contract Re-opener

These political and budgetary realities are responsible for the two questions immediately before HFCC teachers. First, will Dr. Mazzara seek to re-open the contract this year? Almost certainly! The projected \$1.8 billion State deficit will translate into a 5% cut in HFCC's State revenue – at the very least. Can such a shortfall be covered without re-opening the contract? To answer this, the College's cash reserves, millage renewal, and tuition revenue must be considered, and each of these will play some role in balancing the College's budget. But the College administration's traditional response to budget shortfalls – unfortunately, a response common throughout the State and nation – is to reduce full-time faculty positions and use part-time faculty to subsidize College operations.

If asked to re-open the contract, the Federation will study carefully every alternative to doing so. If the Local judges it necessary to do so, we will make re-opening contingent on “pre-negotiated” revisions which we find acceptable. We have a contract in place and are under no obligation to re-open. It will be re-opened only if necessary and only if satisfactory revisions are agreed to beforehand.

Faculty Replacements

The second question immediately before us concerns the contract's guarantee of 21 faculty replacements stemming from the early buy-out. Will Dr. Mazzara unilaterally impose a hiring freeze, ignoring clear contract language to the contrary? He may well try to do so, and the Union's response would be a grievance which we would win – eventually. Such a grievance going to arbitration might well take a year to resolve.

Why then, some ask, should faculty devote time and effort to the hiring process if a hiring freeze will be imposed and a victory in arbitration might well be far down the road? First, if faculty voluntarily close down the hiring process, the administration will not have violated the contract, there can be no grievance

against administration, and we will have played into the administration's hands. For the Union to grieve, the administration must renege on its contractual obligation to hire replacements.

Second, should Local 1650 enter discussions regarding re-opening the contract, the 21 faculty positions, how and when they would be filled, and what the membership might derive by postponing or phasing in such hires will all be open for discussion. This assumes, however, that the replacements have not already been conceded to the administration by faculty halting the hiring process.

What will Dr. Mazzara want if he asks to re-open the contract – relief from 21 faculty hires! Those positions provide the Union with bargaining leverage. The Federation's goal in any renegotiation of the contract will be to preserve all that we achieved in the 2002-07 contract. The method of doing so may entail some creative re-sequencing of those gains, including faculty hiring.

The hiring process for replacement faculty is admittedly laborious and time-consuming. Frustration will be high if Dr. Mazzara halts the process, particularly if he does so late in the process. Nevertheless, continuation of the process is the only strategy for assuring faculty replacements immediately or eventually – through grievance and arbitration or renewed bargaining.

HFCC and Political Action

The final question to be considered – at least for this report – is how do 180 HFCC teachers deal with the political forces impacting on this College, its programs, its students, and its staff. The answer is twofold: collective action and political action. The answer is union, and answer is politics.

Standing alone, Local 1650 does have impact on the local level. Annually, some 90% of HFCC teachers contribute to our political action fund, nearly 50% of Federation members respond to calls to prepare political mailings; some 20% work at the polls. We have elected five of our seven College Trustees – and this has helped immensely when administrators fantasize about their bargaining wish lists. Two HFCC

Trustees' seats are on the ballot next November. We also underwrite College bond and millage campaigns, and we will have to do so again next November, when HFCC's entire operating millage will be on the ballot.

Along with the MFT&SRP, Local 1650 has impact at the State level. We contributed to the successful campaigns of Governor Granholm (D), State Senator Irma Clark (D), State Representative Daniel Paletko (D), as well as John Stewart (R), and Gary Woronchak (R), two Republican State Representatives driven by sound public policy, not ideology.

Our national affiliate, the American Federation of Teachers gives Local 1650 a voice in national politics. The AFT assists candidates across the country who support public education, fair labor laws, and progressive social policies. Presently, much AFT energy and many AFT resources are focused on the re-authorization of the Higher Education Act and the securing of Pell and Perkins funding.

An HFCC faculty member alone can seldom influence Board of Trustees' policy or College administrative policy, but the HFCC Federation of Teachers does. Alone, Local 1650 could never hope to influence State policy makers, but with the MFT&SRP and State AFL-CIO, we have the ability to do so. Alone, the MFT&SRP and Michigan AFL-CIO could not impact Washington officials and bureaucrats, but through the AFT and national AFL-CIO, they and, in turn, we can do so.

Local 1650 members belong to a union that gives us the bargaining leverage and political resources that derive from numbers. We are also members of a profession that seeks to enlighten and liberate. Whether we find ourselves in the best of times or the worst of times, HFCC teachers will be precisely where decisions in the political arena have placed us. As members of the labor movement and as members of the education profession, we must enter the political arena, demonstrate our resolve, and advance the interests of our college, our students, and our profession. That is what 180 HFCC teachers should and must do. That is what all HFCC teachers – not 50% or 20% of us – should and must do.

John McDonald
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