

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- PAF Drops
- College Millage
- Deficit, Taxes
- State Constitutional Convention
- Enrollment Surge
- Governance
- Campus Security

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

PAF Drops	2
HFCC Millage	3
State Deficit	3
MPSERS	4
FT Staffing	4
Governance	5
Security	6
Healthcare	6

ANNUAL REPORT ON STATE OF UNION

A Very Bad Week

Over the course of last week, I was forced to revise this report again and again because events last week in Lansing and Washington were many and disturbing. Those events will heavily impact HFCC faculty – and they provide yet again powerful lessons about the need for political action.

In the last week, State Senate Republicans called for amendments to the State constitution to cut our wages by 5%, freeze our pay for three years, and require that we take a 20% hit on health insurance premiums.

“Republicans [propose to] cut our wages by 5%, freeze our pay for three years, require we take a 20% hit on health insurance premiums.”

During the last week, the prospect of national health care legislation virtually disappeared. What should have from a legislative fait accompli six months ago fell victim to the strategy of the Congressional Republican leadership and one Independent Senator to prolong agonizingly the legislative process, gaining time to stir up irrational fears through well funded opposition rallies, replete with armed protesters, depictions of the President as Hitler, death panel lunacy, and Republican Congressional leaders condoning such from the stages of these rallies.

Last week, five Republican Presidential appointees to the Supreme Court struck down legal precedents dating back to the 1900's, and afforded corporations unlimited use of corporate funds in the American political process. In the Court’s opinion, American corporations, even those controlled by foreign stockholders and run by foreign executives, are simply associations of U.S. citizens and entitled to flood the American political process with virtually inexhaustible funds – all in the name of free speech. This ruling has been hailed by the Republican Congressional leadership.

“The Supreme Court... afforded corporations unlimited use of corporate funds in the American political process.”

For many years as Local 1650 President, I restrained from criticizing the Republican Party in messages to the membership, recognizing that there were 1650 members committed to the Republican Party. That ended with the Engler Administration's repeated attacks on educators' collective bargaining rights and our State pension system. Given the intensified Republican attacks of recent years and now this agenda, Governor Engler's measures seem tame by comparison.

Political Action Fund Drops

“HFCC... wages, benefits, and pensions are the product of political decisions in Dearborn, Lansing, and Washington”

In but one week, we have had three more very strong lessons as to why political action and funding political action matters! However, for the first time in my tenure as Local 1650 President, I must report that member support for the Federation's political action fund has declined. Over the years, HFCC faculty have recognized that their wages, benefits, and pensions are the product of political decisions in Dearborn, Lansing, and Washington. They have recognized that funding is required to support candidates and legislation that address these concerns.

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For many years, over 90% of 1650 members have supported the Executive Board's annual request for political action funds. This year that percentage has fallen to 85%. While such support remains unparalleled among AFT unions, greater support of Local 1650's political action fund is important in electing candidates who will fund higher education and resist efforts to undermine our State retirement system.

This decline in support of the Federation's political efforts has been even more disturbing in a year when two Trustee seats and HFCC's millage renewal were on the ballot. Local 1650 spent over \$20,000 on the recent millage campaign and over \$10,000 in HFCC Trustee races and on non-partisan municipal candidates supportive of HFCC's millage. While 15% of Local 1650 members could not bring themselves to contribute to the Local's PAF and our recent millage campaign, I have not seen a single faculty member decline the wage increases and insurance benefits the Local negotiates directly and indirectly with elected officials. To be blunt, 15% of Local 1650 members are simply taking advantage and are “riding the backs” of their colleagues.

College Millage and Local Races

Nevertheless, even with reduced resources for political action, the Federation again financed HFCC's successful millage renewal and again developed all of the campaign's advocacy literature. Moreover, a record number of 1650 members – 50 out of 195 – worked the polls on Election Day. The result was a near 80% YES vote for the College, the election of two Federation endorsed HFCC Trustees, as well as successful campaigns by Mayor O'Reilly and five City Council candidates supported by the Local, all of whom publicly supported the College millage.

All College Trustees and the College Administration are very much aware of the vital role the Federation plays in HFCC's millage and bond campaigns. The Mayor and City Council are appreciative as well Local 1650's support of our community, its organizations, and its leadership. If HFCC's to prosper, its faculty, not just its administration, must be seen as engaged in the community and leading campaigns vital to the College. Over the years, this has become as an important a function of the Federation as addressing wages, hours, and conditions of employment – in large part because this work sets the stage for addressing such matters successfully.

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2010 State and Local Races

Next fall, the Federation's Area Reps will again seek political action contributions and volunteers to lobby their legislators and work the polls. Next fall, the entire State House, entire State Senate, the Governor's chair, the Attorney General seat, and two State Supreme Court seats will be on the ballot, as will an HFCC Trustee seat. Whatever one's views of State government and its shortcomings over the last several years, higher education, and particularly community colleges, have fared relatively well.

Deficit, Taxes, and HFCC

The State remains in a severe and prolonged economic downturn. The State Republican Party seeks to address reduced State revenues through budget cuts and tax cuts, in the hope that these will spur business investment and that benefits will one day trickle down through the economy. The State Democratic Party has attempted to address Michigan's plight through budget reductions, in addition to the \$4 billion in budget cuts since Governor Granholm took office, combined with a revamped tax structure that will generate additional revenue. Three observations in this regard:

“To my colleagues who embrace the Republican agenda, you might wish to get ahead of the “cut government curve by voluntarily and immediately returning 12% of your wages to the State.”

1. Most responsible economists acknowledge that budget and tax cuts alone will not resolve Michigan’s economic problems.
2. These economists recognize that Michigan’s tax structure must focus more on the growing service sector and less on the declining manufacturing sector.
3. Republicans calling for budget and tax cuts want to cut your wages, your benefits, and your pensions in pursuing their agenda. To my colleagues who embrace the Republican agenda, you might wish to get ahead of the “cut government” curve by voluntarily and immediately returning 12% of your wages to the State (5% wage cut and three year wage freeze) and reimbursing the State for 20% of your insurance premiums. The Federation will not stand in your way!

A society has certain public obligations to the common good. Often these obligations – education, health, social services – are labor intensive and do not readily lend themselves to the efficiencies of the factory floor. Next fall, this Local must support candidates who will fund the vital functions of State government – which include this College, and your careers in education, and your pension system.

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State Constitutional Convention and MPSERS

The November 2010 ballot will also include a proposal calling for a State Constitutional Convention. Proponents of such will be very well funded and will call for “reforming” the State Constitution. Their agenda will be to gut the State’s social services, including higher education, and eliminate the current Constitutional protections safeguarding your State retirement system. Much of the Local’s political effort, AFT Michigan’s effort, and the State AFL-CIO effort will be directed to defeating the call for a Constitutional Convention and the opportunity it would afford far right ideologues to undermine Michigan’s commitment to public schools, higher education, and the pensions of those who retire from careers in education.

Surging Enrollment and Staffing

Over the course of 2009 and throughout 2010, Local 1650 members have and must continue to concern themselves with four major issues internal to the College as well: enrollment, staffing, governance, and campus security.

As HFCC’s hallways, classrooms, and parking lots testify, enrollment is at record levels. It has surged 30% in less than three years. With nearly 19,000 students enrolled for the Winter 2010 semester, the College, for the first time its history, has seen Winter semester enrollment exceed that of a Fall semester. The implications of this for next Fall’s enrollment are clear – even more growth. The previous period for record HFCC enrollment was the mid 1980’s with an enrollment of 17,000 students. At that time, the College had 225 full-time faculty. Today with nearly 19,000 students, full-time faculty number 198 and adjunct faculty in excess of 800. Adjunct faculty are teaching some 60% of HFCC classes, also a record. Absent significant full-time hiring, that percentage will continue to grow.

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While HFCC’s adjunct faculty are dedicated teachers and the Adjunct Union is pressing the Administration hard to assure that adjunct performance is properly evaluated, the College needs a sufficient cohort of full-time faculty to develop curricula and programs, evaluate new pedagogies, advise and counsel a 30% increase in the student body, address the many institutional initiatives promoted by the Administration, mentor several hundred adjunct faculty, and support the governance structure of the College.

Divisions and departments must let the Administration know of their staffing needs. Requests for staff should not reflect a minimal number of faculty a Division might hope to get – but rather the number it truly needs. It is no service to HFCC’s students, the Administration, or the Trustees to diminish the need for full-time staff and “make do.” This year, the Federation will intensely pursue the College’s full-time staffing needs with the Administration and Trustees – but those needs must be demonstrated by Divisions and Departments in writing and forwarded to the appropriate Vice-president, Dr. Mee, and Local 1650.

Shared Governance Concerns

In 2009, many faculty expressed concern regarding the status of HFCC’s long tradition of shared governance. The Federation observed at the time and emphasizes once again that shared governance entails far more than a participatory management style and that the opportunity for faculty to provide input is only a part of shared governance.

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Under the Constitution for the College Organization, the faculty and administration share responsibility for matters of education policy, meaning that all proposed educational policies, following opportunities for faculty

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input, are subject to debate and a vote of approval or dissent by the College Organization or Senate. Only then should educational policies proceed to the Trustees for action, carrying with them College Organization approval or dissent. All of this applies as well to the many matters impacting educational policy listed in the Constitution.

It is imperative that Divisions/Departments, as well as the College Senate, document their concerns about shared governance and forward such to the Administration and the Union. Violations of the College Constitution are grievable under the Local 1650 contract, but there must be a written record of such. Divisions should also consider the example of the Fine Arts & Fitness Division which has established an ongoing Facilities Committee within the Division and is holding Divisional union meetings to address shared governance and other concerns.

Campus Security

2010 will also bring the full response of the Administration and Trustees to the recommendations of the Campus Security Task Force and the recommendations of the security consulting firm retained by the College, addressing emergency policies, procedures, and training as well as infrastructure needs.

The Task Force recommendations include all faculty concerns brought to Local 1650's attention. The Administration has begun to address several of the recommendations concerning HFCC's security infrastructure. A key recommendation yet to be addressed is a two-way emergency communication system to each room across HFCC's three campuses.

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Federal Healthcare and HFCC Healthcare

Lastly, I must return to politics and legislation. On several occasions I have communicated to the membership the AFT's position regarding federal healthcare legislation. Many HFCC faculty support federal health insurance legislation that will address the need for universal health insurance coverage and cost containment. I have heard from a couple of members who do not.

Clearly there are serious moral – in fact life and death – dimensions to this issue. Such moral dimensions are all the more weighty for those who already enjoy comprehensive healthcare coverage but have reservations about affording it to others.

In considering this issue, one must also examine the motives of opponents well financed by those who profit from the status quo, the motives of opponents no longer in the legislative majority who expressly oppose healthcare legislation for political gain, and the thought processes of opponents who have a sense of entitlement about their own employer paid health insurance coverage and labor under the delusion that their healthcare coverage will remain secure.

“In considering [federal healthcare legislation], one must also examine... the thought process of opponents...who labor under the delusion that their healthcare coverage will remain secure.”

A career spent securing comprehensive healthcare for HFCC faculty leads me to these observations:

1. While Local 1650 has been able to shield HFCC faculty from the cuts in and loss of healthcare coverage common across the nation, there is no guarantee that it can do so indefinitely. Moreover, the Michigan Supreme Court has ruled that health coverage for retirees in the State Retirement System (MPSERS) is not guaranteed by the State Constitution and therefore exists at the discretion of the State Legislature.

Question. How long will elected local and State politicians and how long will taxpayers provide public sector employees, such as us, insurance coverage that is disappearing in the private sector? While there has been considerable heat and misrepresentation generated by opponents to healthcare reform, many of whom profit handsomely under the status quo, whatever shortcomings a federal healthcare program may have, it will prove vastly superior to having no affordable insurance program – an increasingly likely prospect for us all.

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2. Other HFCC and District unions have already made significant healthcare concessions. HFCC Administrators cover out of pocket 10% of their traditional BC-BS premium. That percentage will no doubt rise in future negotiations. District unions no longer have even “grandfathered” access to employer paid traditional BC-BS coverage, and they must now pay for the premium differential between an HMO and PPO insurance program.

3. Michigan Senate Republicans, led by Senator Michael Bishop who aspires to the Office of Attorney General, are calling for amendments to the State Constitution which would:
 - a. Impose a 5% pay cut on all public employees in the State,
 - b. Impose a three year wage freeze, including step increments, following the 5% wage cut,
 - c. Require that all public employees pay 20% of their health insurance premiums,
 - d. Require subcontracting bids by all schools for custodial, food service, and transportation.

Think of the impact of this Republican agenda upon you and your family. Think even more of its impact on HFCC's underpaid adjunct faculty.

The Republicans propose to put these amendments on the August 3 primary ballot. Republican legislators calling for these "reforms" to curtail public employee healthcare coverage will use a State Constitutional Convention to pursue their goals if they can not be implemented without opening the entire Constitution.

"No HFCC faculty should labor under the impression that we and our families are entitled to comprehensive employer paid healthcare or that our healthcare coverage is secure."

All of this is in keeping with the Republican agenda to balance the State budget solely with budget cuts, rather a combination of budget cuts and the application of the State sales tax to services, as proposed by Governor Granholm.

No HFCC faculty should labor under the impression that we and our families are entitled to comprehensive employer paid healthcare or that our healthcare coverage is secure. Given very ominous trends and absent federal healthcare legislation, I am certain that few of our children and grandchildren will enjoy the secure, comprehensive healthcare that we have enjoyed. I am almost as certain that given such trends and absent federal legislation, few of us will enjoy comprehensive and affordable throughout the remainder of our careers and retirement.

Threats to Middle Class Standing

Affordable healthcare, secure pensions, and virtually every other challenge facing HFCC and its faculty will all be determined by politicians elected to local, State and federal office. The labor movement and supportive legislators brought educators into the middle class, but middle class wages, benefits, and pensions are rapidly disappearing in America, with disastrous results for individual families and the nation's economy. The Supreme Court decision permitting corporations to use their vast economic resources to control the outcome of elections and the decisions of elected officials will only further decimate the middle class.

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The future of the nation's middle class – and our own middle class status – are at stake in every election and every legislative session. In conceding the political arena to the opposition, we compromise both the public interest and our own professional interests. In conceding the political arena to our opponents, we compromise both the mission of our College and our careers in education – and we ill serve the thousands of students coming to our doors.

John McDonald
January 25, 2010