

*“UNIONS HAVE THE POWER AND CLOUT TO PROTECT
AND PROMOTE THE PROFESSIONS WE PRACTICE.”*

Unionism on the rise



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Unionism is spreading across America's institutions of higher learning as never before. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) now has more than 120,000 higher ed members, an increase of about 20 percent in the last decade. With about 100,000 higher ed members, the National Education Association (NEA), AFT's competitor union, has also experienced significant growth.

Just recently, colleagues at Florida State University, a major research institution, responded to political attacks on shared governance and academic freedom by overwhelmingly supporting affiliation with Florida's merged AFT/NEA union. When given the opportunity to organize, more than 90 percent of voting faculty said "yes" to the union. Higher ed academic and professional faculty at many other institutions are doing the same thing. Across the country, they are turning to unions as the institution most able to protect and enhance the professions they practice. This is good news.

Why is the spirit of unionism moving so swiftly through the hallowed halls of academe? The answer is becoming more and more evident. Unions have the power and clout to protect and promote the professions we practice and, need I remind anyone, our professions are under the gun as never before.

Take the recent vote at Florida State. Florida Gov. Jeb Bush wanted to smash the existing unions in Florida's higher ed system. So he abolished the state Board of Regents and established local boards in its place, the effect of which was to take away bargaining rights at the Florida State system. Although only a small percentage of the faculty (about 15 percent) were union members when this attack occurred, they and their nonunion colleagues were angered by the unfair attack. To make matters worse for union busters, the move to break the union was also accompanied by budget cuts and attempts by politically motivated meddlers to interfere with key issues of shared governance. Needless to say, this poisonous and increasingly familiar combination of underfunding and political meddling galvanized the faculty to action. The realities of the day made it clear they needed a union and, within

weeks, nearly 70 percent said so by signing organizing cards. Now they have a union ... again!

As an AFT vice president and chair of AFT's Higher Education Program and Policy Council, I had the opportunity to speak to colleagues at Florida State prior to the vote on unionization. I used this opportunity to describe UUP's work with SUNY's Faculty Senate in reaction to the trustees' unilateral efforts to violate the principle of shared governance by trying to foist a top-down core curriculum down our throats. I also talked about our annual budget battles; I spoke about how we fought off attacks on tenure; and, most importantly, I explained what resources a union has to protect and enhance our professional lives. Unlike university senates, unions have legal standing and an independent source of funding. In fact, the union is the only organization created by and funded by the faculty. Its potential is almost unlimited; a union will become whatever the faculty want it to be. I also told them how important it is to be part of larger state and national unions, and how collective action on this scale increases our power and presence with elected politicians, university managers and at the bargaining table. I also reminded our Florida colleagues that good things don't happen on their own. The union is made up of its members and the almost unlimited potential of collective action is realized only when the union is democratically structured and responsive to its members' needs.

The Florida State story has a happy ending. Unfortunately, the political climates of Florida and New York are not unique. The life of the mind is under attack as never before. Whether it's underfunding, political meddling or managerial intransigence, colleges and universities across the U.S. are at a crossroad. But the good news is the extent to which faculty and professional workers at America's institutions of higher learning are taking the path of unionism. It's crystal clear that higher ed unions are the key institution to protect and promote the intellectual crafts we practice.

The Voice encourages letters to the editor about union and SUNY issues, politics and other membership concerns.

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