

In Defense of Unions

by Mark James Miller

The hangdog looks on their faces said it all.

A dean stood delivering a tongue lashing to a group of part-time instructors, three or four people who had evidently committed some offense that caused her to come storming out of her office, her face red with rage, her demeanor boding ill for whoever happened to be the target of her wrath. She had a reputation as a bully and tyrant, and her fits of temper were well-known and feared; secretaries and student workers ran for cover when she approached. Bursting into the workroom where these teachers were preparing their classes (naturally, as part-timers, they had no offices to do this in) she proceeded to give them a fearful dressing-down.

She shouted and gesticulated in a disrespectful, threatening manner that would have been thought abusive had it been meted out to a class of third graders. As this tirade went on I wondered why none of these people spoke up in their own defense. Why didn't one of them tell this woman that her behavior was unacceptable?

But no one said anything. The instructors on the receiving end of this harangue simply hung their heads and took it, the way chastened children will. I never learned what their crime was, but for me this day in 1999 was a revelatory moment, eureka! A light came on, an epiphany was reached! The need for a union of the part-time instructors at Allan Hancock College was driven home to me. These people didn't say anything because their jobs were forfeit if they did. They were contingent workers without rights. Their employment was at the mercy of this dean, who held their jobs in her hand and knew she could mistreat them with impunity. They had the choice of taking this or quitting. And it goes without saying that the culture then existing at the college enabled her to perpetrate her abuse; she did it, in other words, because she could. No one in a position to challenge her authority had ever said, or would ever say, that what she did was unacceptable.

A few months after this incident took place an election was held, under the supervision of the Public Employee Relations Board. Part-time instructors at Allan Hancock College voted on whether or not they wanted to unionize. The vote was a staggering 87% "yes." Why such an overwhelming repudiation of the status quo? The part-time faculty at Hancock College was one of the lowest paid in California, eighth from the bottom. They could be hired and fired at the whim

of whoever was doing the scheduling, be it a department chair or a dean, and had no recourse if treated unfairly, arbitrarily, or abusively. If a dean decided his/her nephew should have your job, the nephew had your job, and that was the end of the story. There were no office hours; instructors were expected to meet with students on their own time, and, in some departments, coerced into attending meetings and taking part in activities such as holistic grading of tests without pay. Yet they were expected, (as they still are today), to provide the same quality education as that provided by their much-better paid and recognized full-time brethren. They had no input in how the college is operated, despite teaching at least half of the units offered. Only a union representing their interests could start to make effective changes and challenge the culture that regarded part-time instructors as second-class citizens.

The rest, as they say, is history, when you consider all the improvements the union has made and continues to make, but not everyone was happy. "I want you to know that I am not a union person," were the words of a part-time instructor who called our office to object after we negotiated the agency fee in 2003.

She was opposed to unions philosophically, she said, and she resented having to be associated with one. She saw no need for a union of the part-time instructors at Allan Hancock College, and said that as far as she was concerned it would have been better if the union had never been formed at all. I told her that if you truly detest unions there is a way you can prove it. Start by giving back the raises we have negotiated for you. (In our first contract alone we were able to wring a 14% pay increase for the part-time faculty out of the administration). Refuse to accept any increases in pay we get for you in the future. Return the state parity money (the distribution of which the union negotiated on your behalf). Refuse to avail yourself of any of the rights we have won for part-time instructors, such as office hours, rehire

rights, and the right to file a grievance. Do all this, and you will prove that your anti-unionism is genuine. If you don't, I'll know you are just looking for a free ride.

The conversation came to an abrupt denouement, although before she hung up she did say something to the effect that the administration would have given all this to the part-time faculty without a union being involved. Exactly how that feat would have been accomplished she did not try to elucidate, and when I repeated that idea to a room full of administrators during a negotiating session their laughter literally shook the building. We have not heard from her since. Nor has she returned any of her pay or refused to accept any of the increases we have negotiated over the years. But her comments were typical of what is said

by those who are opposed to organized labor. Some believe unions are unnecessary, others take exception at being "forced" to belong to one, still others just don't like unions and want no part of them. Do we honestly need a union of the part-time instructors at Allan Hancock College? Are unions still relevant in the 21st Century? Why not let your employer determine your rate of pay and what rights you as an employee should have? They know what they can afford to pay and are much better acquainted with the intricacies of their budget than anyone else. They understand their institutional and corporate needs to a greater degree than any employee can. Wouldn't we, as community college teachers, counselors and librarians, be wiser to let the administration decide if we need rehire rights or office hours? Can't we rely on administrators and department chairs to always treat people fairly? If you do your job the way you should, the administration will appreciate your efforts and keep you employed here, so job security and rehire rights are irrelevancies. Who needs a union?

In a perfect world, nobody would. In a perfect world unions would not be necessary. Neither would police, the military, the Securities and Exchange Commission, elected government in general or the Presi-

dent of the United States in particular. (That this would put the current occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue out of work is a subject best left to another discussion). In a perfect world, employers, both public and private, would pay their workers exactly what they deserved, and would always treat them fairly, justly, and with appreciation for their hard work and loyalty. Workers would never be exploited or abused, corporate profits and CEO pay would never be excessive, wages and salaries would always keep up with inflation, and life would be the proverbial bowl of cherries.

Most people reading this know the millennium hasn't arrived yet, and we don't live in Utopia. We live in a world of global warming, \$100-a barrel oil, wars, famine, poverty, corporate scandals, downsizing and outsourcing. In short, we live in a world of imperfect human beings who do not always follow the better angels of their nature. Until that day arrives, workers are going to need unions to represent their interests to those that employ them. But the past 30 years have not been the best of times for the American labor movement. Unions, and unionism, have been in decline. A changing economy, a relentless onslaught of anti-union propaganda from the right, a great deal of anti-union legislation, and a complacency in the mindset of traditional union leaders have all combined to bring about a drastic devolution to what was once an important factor in the American social, economic and political landscape. Organized labor can, and by rights ought to be, a powerful and positive force in American life.

At their best, unions function as a counterweight to otherwise unchecked corporate and managerial power, and are a standard bearer for social and economic justice. That unions have often fallen short of these ideals is undeniable, and that they are at least partially to blame for their own demise is equally true. Nor can it be gainsaid that the labor movement can—in fact, it must, and soon—rise up out of the ashes, reinvent and reassert itself, and be an effective advocate for working families in the United States. Unions are necessary. Unions are relevant. Without unions acting as a counterbalance, managerial and corporate power runs amok, as is shown in skyrocketing executive pay and scandals such as Enron and Tyco. The decline of the unions has run parallel to a decline in middle-class living standards, with more and more Americans falling into poverty, more

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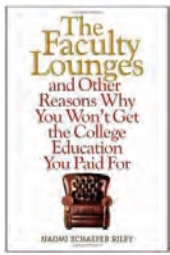
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By Naomi Schaefer Riley

Ivan R. Dee Publisher

Chicago, 2011

Available at Amazon: Kindle \$9.99, Hardcover \$15.14

Reviewed by Deborah Dahl Shanks

This is another in a long list of books about higher education, tenure, and the politics of faculty and academic freedom. The author, Naomi Schaefer Riley, is the daughter of two PhDs who were academics at a prestigious university. Her father was a "have", a full-time tenured professor, her mother was a "have not", an adjunct NTTE who taught at a half a dozen different colleges over numerous years. Her perspective of academia is one of both an insider

Higher Education?

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this book should be required reading. Before you write that check, read this book. What you don't know can cost you – and your children. ●

Martin Goldstein teaches gender and race issues at Santa Monica College. He is a graduate of Columbia and Harvard Universities, and worked in the film industry for many years as a writer and producer, winning the Writers Guild Award for his docudrama "Unnatural Causes" about Agent Orange and the Vietnam vets. He was FACCC Part-Time Faculty of the Year in 2010 and is currently Part-Time Governor (South) for FACCC and Chair of the FACCC PAC.

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A PRIMER ON IMPROVING . . .

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The collaborative process we used at UD does not offer one-size-fits-all solutions for every institution (or even our own!). However, our work has yielded encouraging results, and we believe that it is transferable to other institutions.

Those considering embarking on this type of discussion will need to be mindful of the unique mission and culture of their own institutions as they collect pertinent data, embrace dialogue between divergent views, and focus on progress rather than perfection. All sides must prepare for change and debate. Finally, enhanced student learning should be maintained as the central goal, recognizing that appropriate support for all faculty members is directly linked to learning results. ●

IN DEFENSE OF UNIONS

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and more Americans going without medical care, and the wealthiest becoming even wealthier. If these trends are to be reversed, unions are going to have to step up and play a major role. ●

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and an outsider. She is very critical of the higher education system as it stands, but tries to balance the facts of where we are, how we got here and what is wrong with this picture looking toward the future. The center of her book is on the positive and negative aspects of tenure, and on the disintegration of excellence in higher education due to lack of quality teaching from both the over-use of adjuncts and their lack of academic freedom and from too much research by lofty professors and lack of academic leadership from the full-time, tenured faculty members.

She also clearly is attacking the current state of tenure and how it does not promote excellence in education. That excellence happens by chance of who may be teaching at any given time or place. She gives an interesting history of tenure, its purpose along with the rise of unions in the 20th century. Through it we gain a better understanding of how tenure has evolved into the iron clad fist hold it currently holds on the system and why it either

must change or cease to exist.

Ultimately, her book points out the disparaging way adjuncts are treated and why this is problematic for public employees in the higher education system and how it ultimately hurts students and the integrity of education. She uses analogies such as 'we would never think of using a fire or police force of "adjuncts" who work half time or free-way fly and at half the salary.' So why should we accept it in higher education?

As a reporter for the Wall Street Journal, Naomi Riley uses extensive research, statistics and interviews throughout the book, includes a comprehensive list of further suggested readings on the subject, and has endeavored to give a logical and reasoned argument about the state of higher education and its evolution. You may or may not agree with her conclusions, but she has interviewed both sides of the fence including, administrators, tenured and non-tenured faculty, the president of AAUP and leadership from the New Faculty Majority. Although the majority of her information centers on

research universities, she does make comparisons and commentary about community colleges as well.

It is worth a read as well as sharing with colleagues, both full and part-time. ●

Deborah Dahl Shanks has been a Part-time Instructor for 25 years at Diablo Valley College in Music and Humanities, including 3-5 years at Contra Costa, Las Positas and Foothill Colleges. She served 8 years on the DVC Faculty Senate and 10 years on the United Faculty Association Executive Board including service as a member of the negotiating team. Her previous service to FACCC includes Part-time Officer, PT Governor North, member of Part-time Faculty and Retirement Committees. Awards include 2002 Part-time Faculty of the Year Award, 2009 Margaret Quan PT Advocate Award, CPFA 2009 Lifetime Achievement Award.

She currently serves on the United Faculty Executive Board as PT Advocate, the STRS Task Force for Part-time Faculty Retirement Equity and the CPFA Executive Committee. She can be reached at ddahlshanks@cdfa.org.



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