

The State of the Union: A History of the Labor Movement at Vanderbilt University

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This article will document the historical context of the labor movement at Vanderbilt University in order to explain the nature and interaction of the labor union with central administration over the past forty years. Recognizing the lack of scholarly attention to the labor movement in Paul Conkin's *Gone with the Ivy* (1985) and *Peabody College* (2002) and Dale Johnson's *Vanderbilt Divinity School* (2001), the author contributes to the academic literature by providing a broad overview of the historical background and current state of the labor movement. As the largest employer in Davidson County and a major contributor to the state of Tennessee's economic development, the relationship of University administrators and labor representatives has a large impact on the condition of surrounding labor movements, particularly in the city of Nashville's low-wage service workers sector. In providing a brief chronological synopsis of the labor movement and the role of female involvement in the union, the author concludes by providing a context for contemporary labor negotiations.

I. Introduction

This article will address the history of Vanderbilt University's relationship with their union, providing a historical context for the nature of that relationship and focusing on the organization of the Vanderbilt union and the interaction between the university and the union. This subject is a vital one that deserves more attention than it has received. The major histories of Vanderbilt University, such as *Gone with the Ivy* (1985) and *Peabody College* (2002) by Paul Conkin and *Vanderbilt Divinity School* (2001) by Dale Johnson, contain no mention of a labor union at Vanderbilt. An understanding of the historical background and current state of Vanderbilt's union is a much-needed resource. As the largest employer in Davidson County and a major contributor to the state of Tennessee's economic development, the relationship of University administrators and labor representatives has a large impact on the condition of surrounding labor movements, particularly in the city of Nashville's low-wage service workers sector. This article will be a vital effort to compile the available information on the historical connection between Vanderbilt and the labor movement.

This article will trace a brief chronological synopsis of the labor movement in the state of Tennessee and the specific context of Nashville. It will also provide an overview of female involvement in unions. These synopses will provide a context for the labor movement at Vanderbilt University. In providing a historical background for the labor movement and the role of female involvement in the union, it will also address the union's effectiveness in creating a better working environment for Vanderbilt employees.

II. Labor in Tennessee

Tennessee has not historically been a stronghold for labor unions. The South proved to be an inauspicious place for union movements; the region had a surplus of available workers, the available jobs were largely unskilled, and the workers tended to be prejudiced against the perceived northern influence of the unions. Furthermore, the industrial bosses capitalized on this cultural distrust of unions, using terms such as “socialist,” “anarchy,” and “communism” in their anti-union propaganda (Hodges 1959, 11).

According to labor economist and historian George S. Mitchell, “unionism failed to appear in the South, not because it answered no purpose, but because it was hard to introduce” (Hodges 1959, 12). Between 1919 and 1921, “there were widespread union movements in...new southern industrial centers” which tended to focus on textile mills, coal mines and factory-related work (Hodges 1959, 10). Indeed, “the great bulk of the workers, the men of the factories and industries, the workers who were simply called ‘industrial workers,’ were laboring outside the ranks of organized labor” (Hodges 1959, 11). As the Great Depression produced industrial turmoil and skyrocketing unemployment, however, the labor organizing activities came to a virtual halt (Hodges 1959, 202). Although the New Deal benefited labor movements in other parts of the country, organized labor continued to lag in the South.

The next great blow to the union membership of Tennessee was the passage of “Right to Work” laws in 1947, which have long depressed union membership in Tennessee.¹ At present, the state government hails these laws as a boon to businesses, proclaiming as one of its “Ten Reasons Tennessee Makes Sense” the fact that Tennessee “offers a steady, dependable labor pool with union membership well below the national average.”² Although the passage of the federal Taft-Hartley Act motivated state union leadership into political action, the labor unions have not been able to secure the repeal of the right to work laws in Tennessee despite an exhaustive repeal campaign throughout the 1950s (Cotham 1995, 231-245). Labor in Tennessee has been more concerned with maintaining existing jobs in the area since the 1980s, rather than organizing for more labor union rights. The United States trade imbalance with foreign imports has caused many typically union-oriented jobs to be eliminated from Tennessee, including shoe and clothing manufacturing; this phenomenon has harmed labor organization in the state (Cotham 1995, 313).

As Vanderbilt’s union represents many more unskilled laborers than skilled workers, the union has had to deal with the difficulties in organizing this historically non-union sector, an issue addressed more specifically later in the article.

III. The Landscape of Labor in Nashville

The organized labor movement in Nashville has never been particularly strong. In the 1920s, Nashville’s Chamber of Commerce aggressively publicized the city’s wealth of “cheap, nonunion workers, who—the chamber’s publicity constantly reminded everyone – were made up of ‘good quality native American labor’” (Doyle 1985, 192). Nevertheless, Nashville can be viewed as a labor town in three ways. First, the city of Nashville has its own local labor movement through a variety of locally driven labor unions in, for example, the service economy – many city-employed service workers are unionized, and many members of Nashville’s large entertainment industry are also locally unionized. Second, as the Tennessee state capital, Nashville is home to state-level labor

¹ Bureau of the Census, *State and Metropolitan Area Data Book 1997-98*, table A-22.

² Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, “Ten Reasons Why Tennessee Makes Sense,” State of Tennessee, http://www.state.tn.us/ecd/biz_dev_research_stats.htm (accessed March 27, 2004).

organizations and also plays a larger political role as the location of the state legislature, as labor advocates often gather in Nashville to lobby the legislature. Finally, Nashville is home to several national labor organizations such as the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers International Union (PACE).

All unions in Nashville, as in most of the South, have two basic models for organization: locally-organized trades, which are often comprised of construction or similar trades, and national economic institutions. The latter group includes railroads, the General Motors plant in Spring Hill, Tennessee that has a United Auto Workers (UAW) local union, and the Bridgestone tire plant in outlying Laverne, Tennessee, which has a Steelworkers local union. A division exists between locally-initiated labor organizations and national labor movements imported to Nashville that has occasionally impeded the growth of the overall labor movement.³

Several major occupations in Nashville tend to be non-unionized, including the large tourism industry, which, in other areas of the country, is often unionized. The tourism industry includes hotel employees, many of whom are pulled from the same labor pool as Vanderbilt's unskilled workers.⁴ A major difficulty of unionizing in a generally non-unionized area is evidenced in the competition between union and non-union jobs that drives down annual wages.

Finally, minority involvement in unions—or the lack thereof—has also been a major factor in Nashville. Recent empirical research suggests that unions provide a significant pay difference for minorities, such that African-Americans in unions receive approximately \$507 per week, compared with \$356 per week in non-unionized jobs (Baldwin 1998, 139). While a significant pay difference would suggest that African-Americans should join unions for higher wages, this has historically not been the case in the South (Brattain 2001, 228).

In other areas of the South, including Memphis, Tennessee, the labor movement was connected with civil rights in the 1960s, bringing an African-American presence to the unions.⁵ However, unlike Memphis, Nashville's labor movement was never consciously joined with the civil rights movement. While Memphis "owed its very existence to the cotton trade and slavery," the city of Nashville and eastern Tennessee never had a plantation-oriented economy, which caused Nashville's African-American population to be smaller than those populations in comparable cities in western Tennessee (Honey 1993, 14). This phenomenon has caused Nashville and other east Tennessee areas to be more Caucasian, more Republican and less union-friendly than many western Tennessee cities; additionally, the African-American communities in Nashville have not historically been associated with the labor movement.⁶ This demographic difference has led Nashville unions to have greater difficulties in organizing minority workers than west Tennessee cities such as Memphis.

Furthermore, Memphis' black union movement focused on the Congress of Industrial Organization's (CIO) unskilled labor unions, rather than the American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions, which organized skilled craftsmen and were "based on craft exclusionism and segregation" (Honey 1993, 285). Because the Vanderbilt union was originally an affiliate of the AFL, its early position on race has created notable tensions.⁷ This new research will show that racial divisions appear to have influenced the Vanderbilt union's problems between skilled labor, which is primarily white, and the unskilled labor, which is primarily African-American.

³ Daniel B. Cornfield (Professor of Sociology, Vanderbilt University), in discussion with the author, April 2004.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Laborers' International Union of North America, "The Birth of a Union," *The Laborer*, Fall 2003, http://www.liuna.org/pubsnews/pdfs/AnniversaryMag/Pgs4_11.pdf (accessed April 25, 2004).

IV. Labor Unions and Women in the Service Industry

Women became heavily involved in contemporary union issues during the 1960s and 1970s, the blossoming years for second-wave feminism, which focused on gender equality in the workplace. Women unionists fought for the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and received the anti-sex discrimination clause in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Deslippe 2000, 114). Many Title VII-based suits were brought against unions and employers by female union members, which led to the “ascendancy of support for gender equality” in 1964-1975 (Deslippe 2000, 115). Title VII helped create parity between the sexes and races; however, the “closing wage gap...was due as much to the stagnation of white women’s job status and income as to new equal employment opportunity measures” (Deslippe 2000, 131). In 1970, median wages for Northern African-American women were 95% those of white women—up from 75-80% in 1960. However, white men had the highest yearly median earnings (\$8737) followed by black men, replacing white women, at \$5880. White women (\$5078) and black women (\$4009) followed (Deslippe 2000, 131). Although the problems of wage disparities still existed, in the 1970s, women unionists believed that the labor movement was the proper battleground for their cause, and women actually voted more often for unionization than men did (Deslippe 2000, 192).

Indeed, “[t]here has been the growth of a working women’s feminism which is a unifying agenda for all women and deeply connects women to working people” (Balsler 1987, 212). Through this shared consciousness of the feminist and labor movements, female involvement has strengthened. According to one expert, “Although fewer than one in seven women is covered by a union contract, unions are becoming increasingly feminised with the shift in unionisation to the public and service sectors” (Hallock 1997, 47). In fact, women union density remained stable at 15% through the past 20 years, while male union density dropped from 31% to less than 20% (Levine and Dale 2003, 45).

Female labor involvement has led to significant changes within the labor movement. The 1996 median weekly earnings of full-time female workers were \$549 for unionized workers, compared with \$398 for nonunion workers – a 38% advantage (Mort 1998, 62). Additionally, labor unions “have adopted pay equity as the major strategy to eliminate the wage gap...they have also adopted policies to combat sex segregation of occupations, a closely related issue” (Hallock 1993, 27). Despite these gains, the gap between male and female wages has not closed (Levine and Dale 2003, 45). Decreases of the wage gap during the 1980s were related to men’s wage stagnation, women’s acquisition of higher paying jobs, and improvements in female education (Hallock 1993, 30). The unions have nonetheless provided a more equitable pay situation, as female union members experience a smaller wage gap than non-unionized women (Hallock 1993, 30).

This newly energized female involvement in unions has changed the face of the labor movement. A quarter of women unionists are in sales or service occupations, which are not traditionally unionized jobs (Hallock 1997, 47). Additionally, women in unions bring their own insight to organizing and experience a higher success rate than men in organizing fellow laborers, particularly other women (Hallock 1997, 63).

Thus, while females have been instrumental in gaining a form of equality within the workplace, the wages of a female remain lower than the wages of a male, in general, which tends to lower the average wages of Vanderbilt unskilled workers, many of whom are female. Additionally, this phenomenon exacerbates the wage disparity between the skilled craftsmen and the unskilled labor, since nearly all of the skilled craftsmen are, in fact, men. Female workers at Vanderbilt have historically been unlikely to be dues-paying union members, since skilled laborers are the main dues-

paying members, and only two women work in Vanderbilt's skilled crafts.⁸ Vanderbilt's union would be more representative of its constituents, and thus more effective, if more women were unionized; however, unionizing women in low-paying jobs is a standard problem. Many women in Vanderbilt's low-wage sector have multiple jobs and many are heads of single-parent households, which leaves very little extra time and money for union meetings and dues. Despite this problem, the fundamental disconnect between Vanderbilt's male-dominated skilled craftsmen and the unskilled laborers presents the most pressing issue, as I will later demonstrate in this paper.

V. History of Labor Organization at Vanderbilt

Vanderbilt's union, the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA), began in 1903 as the International Hod Carriers and Building Laborers Union.⁹ In 1903, the union became an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and, in 1965, the Hod Carriers Union became the Laborers' International Union of North America. With over 800,000 members, the LIUNA now represents primarily construction-sector workers and postal service employees, as well as some service workers and other public sector jobs.¹⁰ Headquartered in the District of Columbia, LIUNA is divided into nine regions in North America; these regions are divided into approximately 50 district councils and 500 local unions.¹¹ The Ohio Valley and Southern States Regional Office is located in Nashville, Tennessee, which represents the states and territories of Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.¹²

Vanderbilt's union-eligible employees are represented by LIUNA Local #386. The LIUNA agreement covers the grounds workers, custodians, dining employees and plant operations and plant services workers. At present, there are roughly 600 people covered by the union agreement. According to a central administrator, however, only eighty to one-hundred people were dues-paying members in the spring of 2004, which has been a "fairly consistent number for the last 15 years."¹³ The communication gap between Vanderbilt's administration and its union members is evident in official LIUNA records that put the actual number of Vanderbilt dues-paying members at 180.¹⁴ In fact, general confusion over the unionization of Vanderbilt's employees is widespread, as demonstrated in a 1980 article from the University's official newspaper, which stated, "All permanent employees [of the grounds crew] are members of the Laborers [sic] International Union of North America, an AFL-CIO affiliate."¹⁵ This is not correct, as all permanent employees are not members of LIUNA; they are covered by the union due to the state right to work laws, but they are not full, dues-paying union members.

The initial organizing movement began in 1968 at Vanderbilt as a request for an employees' association by the skilled craftsmen in protest of favoritism among managers, inadequate pay raises, and a flawed break policy. The organizing employees went to court with Vanderbilt University twice

⁸ Marshall Stack (skilled craftsman, Vanderbilt University), in discussion with the author, April 2004.

⁹ Laborers' International Union of North America, "The Laborers' International Union at 100: Looking Back, Moving Forward," <http://www.liuna.org/about/media/timeline.pdf> (accessed April 25, 2004).

¹⁰ Laborers' International Union of North America, "About the Laborer's Union," <http://www.liuna.org/about/index.html> (accessed April 25, 2004).

¹¹ Laborers' International Union of North America, "About the Laborer's Union: Regions and Structures," <http://www.liuna.org/about/regions.html> (accessed April 25, 2004).

¹² Laborers' International Union of North America, "About the Laborer's Union: Departments and Contacts," <http://www.liuna.org/about/departments.html> (accessed April 25, 2004).

¹³ Mark Petty (Buildings and Utilities Director, Vanderbilt University), email message to author, March 19, 2004.

¹⁴ Steve Farner (manager, LIUNA), in discussion with the author, April 2004.

¹⁵ Sharon Hogge, *The Real Dirt: A History of the Vanderbilt Garden Club for Campus Beautification* (Nashville: Vanderbilt Garden Club for Campus Beautification, 1998).

to put the association in place; each court visit cost the employees' association \$1500. Marshall Stack, a longtime Vanderbilt employee involved with organizing the employees' association, said that the LIUNA intervened in the second court visit; one employee had signed an LIUNA union card, which allowed the union to intervene on behalf of the employees, just as the fledgling association had run out of money. Several of the organizers, including Stack, were unhappy with the LIUNA's intervention; the LIUNA, as a multi-trade union, would represent not only the skilled craftsmen, but also the unskilled, lower-paid labor, many of whom were African-American. Although Stack says that race played no part in the division between the skilled and unskilled laborers, the occupational racial segregation suggests otherwise, particularly when located in a southern city in the early 1970s. Surprisingly, most of the organizers did not experience a severe backlash from the university, but the employees' association president, a medical center employee, was fired two weeks after the organizing began—an illegal action by the university. However, this was a relatively typical outcome for an organizing drive. Additionally, according to Stack, some employees' association-supporting skilled craftsmen did not join the union; however, most shop members did join the LIUNA local union, and the managers did not demonstrate much hostility towards the union members.¹⁶ This relative lack of hostility may have been due to the generally union-friendly climate of Nashville at the time. According to Steve Farner, a former business manager for the state LIUNA office, the city of Nashville was a “pretty strong union town” specializing in traditional craft unions.¹⁷

James Hale, currently the LIUNA's Vice President and Regional Manager for the Ohio Valley and southern states, was involved with the original organization of Vanderbilt's union. Hale denies Stack's implications that LIUNA was an unwanted intruder on the employees' association. He described the original process of LIUNA's involvement: a Vanderbilt employee made the initial contact with LIUNA; the employees spoke with the union; a committee of union officials and employees was organized; and the committee made a plan to organize the general employees.¹⁸ This lengthy process also helps to explain the gap between the beginning of the employees' association in 1968 and the initial union contract signing in 1972.

VI. Makeup of the Union – Skilled Craftsmen and Unskilled Labor

LIUNA is a multi-trade union, so they represent workers from greatly varying occupations. As Vanderbilt's union contract covers both skilled craftsmen and unskilled labor, the union has the difficult task of organizing these two contrasting—and at times, opposing groups under the same union. This situation creates problems for both the union and the university, as the interests of the skilled craftsmen are often pitted against the interests of the unskilled labor.

Most of the dues-paying union members at Vanderbilt are skilled craftsmen, and are often ex-construction workers, coming from traditional union backgrounds or having received their training through union training programs. The union at Vanderbilt is under-utilized by the service workers, such as dining employees and housekeepers, whose occupations are not traditional union sectors.¹⁹ The unskilled service workers tend to be non-union, partly because a majority of the low-wage service workers are African-American. African-American workers tend to come from non-union working backgrounds, such as custodial jobs or self-employed status.²⁰ Although most of the union stewards in the lower-wage sectors of dining services and housekeeping stewards are African-

¹⁶ Stack, discussion.

¹⁷ Farner, personal communication.

¹⁸ James Hale (manager, LIUNA), in discussion with the author, April 2004.

¹⁹ Mark Petty (Buildings and Utilities Director, Vanderbilt University), in discussion with the author, April 2004.

²⁰ Ibid.

American, for example, this is the expected outcome from those predominantly African-American-held jobs.²¹ The racial divide between the skilled and unskilled labor has not gone unnoticed by the union. Hale admits that he did not sufficiently consider racial biases during the organization and maintenance of the union, and he is “sure [that] in some people’s minds race had something to do with [the conflict within the union].”²²

Vanderbilt’s administration is able to control labor negotiations effectively by pitting the resentment of the higher-paid skilled crafts workers against the lower-paid unskilled laborers. This conflict has arisen from the LIUNA’s position as a multi-trade union—it represents workers of widely varying trades, backgrounds, and incomes—which has proven to be an issue for its effectiveness at Vanderbilt where, Farner says, the “climate is poisonous” towards labor.²³ Skilled craftsmen are more likely to pay union dues and to be involved with the union contract negotiations than lower-wage workers; this state of affairs allows the administration to work with the skilled craftsmen to create contracts that favor the higher-paid skilled craftsmen—who have a much lower turnover rate than the unskilled labor and are therefore more profitable to the university—at the expense of the lower-paid workers. Farner calls this process a “vicious cycle”—the lower-paid workers do not pay union dues and are uninvolved with the union contract; they do not gain wage benefits equal to the higher-paid skilled craftsmen; their lower wages cause higher turnover; the higher turnover discourages the workers from joining and becoming involved with the union.²⁴ Although the lower-paid workers could be involved with the union negotiations, the skilled craftsmen ultimately get a greater voice in the process, since they have a tradition of bargaining more effectively with the university in the contract process. This form of pay scale contract is common at major research universities such as Brown University in Rhode Island.²⁵

John Callison, a Vanderbilt General Counsel member, recognizes that the skilled workers do have more influence on the bargaining committee, as a significantly higher percentage of skilled craftsmen are dues-paying union members than the unskilled labor, even though the union technically represents many more unskilled laborers. This lopsided representation at the bargaining table leads to problems for the lower-paid workers. In fact, he says the University has presented bargaining proposals to benefit the lower-paid workers, and the union has not been interested, instead focusing on the benefits for the majority of the people at the bargaining table—the skilled craftsmen. Additionally, Callison says that the University understands that it is “important to look at the needs of the people,” but they cannot help the lowest-paid employees if the union rejects their proposals; the university would “like more money spent on the low-paid [workers],” but that intention is undermined by the “self-interest of the skilled crafts[men].”²⁶

However, the union argues that the University does not uphold this philanthropic outlook during the negotiations. When the union appeals to the University’s altruistic aims during the negotiations, attempting to convince the university to address the “needs of the people,” the administrators often say that they “can’t pay over the competitive rate.”²⁷ Whether the University has the workers’ best interests or the university’s financial interests in mind during negotiations, this issue becomes central in the discussions over the union’s two main points of contention: the employee retirement plan and the union bargaining unit.

²¹ Hale, discussion.

²² Ibid.

²³ Farner, discussion.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ James Callison (General Counsel member, Vanderbilt University), in discussion with the author, April 2004.

²⁷ Hale, discussion.

VII. Retirement – A Perennial Problem

The main contention between the union and Vanderbilt has long been the retirement plan. More specifically, the union pension plan remains the largest issue during the union contract negotiations.²⁸ The university pays into the pension plan, which has a vesting period, and the employee must wait several years before he or she is eligible to receive benefits. The vesting period becomes problematic as the lower-wage workers have a very high turnover rate, so some workers never become eligible for the benefits that the university funds. At each contract negotiation, the union argues for a higher university contribution into the pension plan, which effectively limits the funds that the university directly spends on worker salaries.²⁹

The union pension plan was initiated in 1951 when the Chicago Laborers created a “multi-employer pension plan, one of the first in the nation, ensuring retirement security for workers who regularly move from one employer to another.”³⁰ Therefore, the purpose of the plan is to protect employees such as Vanderbilt’s low-wage workers who switch jobs frequently; these workers, if they remained in an LIUNA union, they could maintain their retirement plan.

Workers must choose between the union pension plan, which has a vesting period but requires no up-front expense from the worker, and the Vanderbilt retirement plan, which vests immediately but requires a worker contribution of at least three percent of their salary, which the University matches. According to a Vanderbilt employee, the University retirement policy has since prevented some employees from becoming dues-paying union members, and the policy was initiated in the mid-1990s, when many housekeepers joined the union in hope of negotiating a raise in pay.³¹ The University also has an incidental financial incentive to discourage workers from joining the union pension plan: if an employee does not join the union plan, he or she is automatically joined to the university’s plan.³² Thus, if a worker leaves Vanderbilt and does not claim his or her matching share of the retirement contributions, the University keeps those funds. The retirement issue is an intricate problem that has historically caused much debate in the union-administration negotiations.

VIII. The Bargaining Unit – A Second Issue

Another source for the union’s difficulty in working with the university is the bargaining unit – a small portion of employees representing all the employees covered by the union contract, which encompasses all people involved with the maintenance of the University. Throughout the history of the union, as the Peabody College and Vanderbilt Medical Center workers were added as accretions to the bargaining unit, the power of the bargaining unit has been diluted by the differing interests of the increasingly diverse people represented by the bargaining unit. For example, the Medical Center employees often receive higher wages than general University workers; this discrepancy causes conflicts of interest within the bargaining unit. The conflict between the higher-paid skilled labor and the unskilled labor dilutes the power of the bargaining unit, as the disdain of skilled craftsmen toward the lower-paid workers creates an atmosphere detrimental to powerful union bargaining tactics for all employees. Furthermore, as each contract bargain covers hundreds of workers, the university often argues that it cannot financially provide more concessions for the union-covered

²⁸ Callison, discussion.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ LIUNA, “The Laborers’ International Union at 100: Looking Back, Moving Forward.”

³¹ Petty, discussion.

³² Vanderbilt University and Medical Center, “Retirement Benefit Policy,” <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/HRS/policies/retirement.htm> (accessed April 25, 2004).

employees, since there are many employees covered by the single union, and any concessions would be made to all the union-covered workers.³³

This extensive bargaining unit did not occur uncontested by the union. In the late 1970s, the hospital began an organizing campaign when LIUNA employee James Hale filed a petition to represent the hospital employees as an individual unit because he felt they comprised their own “community of interest.” The university administration wanted the Medical Center employees to become an accretion to the original bargaining unit, however, thus diluting the power of the Medical Center employees.³⁴

Demonstrating the conflicting memories caused by a historical distance, Callison recalled a different version of the disagreement involving the medical center. The main federal legislation for labor unions, the National Labor Relations Act, had traditionally excluded hospitals from being organized. This circumstance changed in 1974 when the NLRA was amended to cover hospital workers. As hospital workers were allowed to be unionized, the LIUNA attempted to expand their control over the Medical Center; however, Vanderbilt disputed the hospital workers’ “commonality of interest” with the university-side workers necessary for unionization under the same bargaining unit. The university had four main areas of unionized workers: food service, plant operations (skilled craftsmen), custodians, and warehouse workers, a sector that no longer exists at Vanderbilt. The union argued that the Medical Center’s nutrition services workers, skilled craftsmen, and custodians had a “commonality of interest” with their university-side counterparts, while the university disputed that commonality between the dining services and the nutrition services workers; the two reporting structures were separate, and their directors were different and within different areas of the university’s management structure. According to Callison, the university did allow the Medical Center’s skilled craftsmen and warehouse workers to become an “accretion” to the union—to join without a vote within the collective bargaining unit—since the medical center’s skilled crafts and warehouse workers reported to the same bosses as did the workers on the university side of campus. The custodians who worked in the medical school were allowed to accrete to the bargaining unit, as they had a “commonality of interest” with custodians from the rest of the University. The custodians involved with patient care, however, were not added to the union.³⁵ While Callison’s and Hale’s memories of the medical center incident differ widely, this incident does demonstrate negotiation problems caused by the bargaining unit issue.

Thus, the retirement plans and the bargaining unit have been fairly contentious issues through the years. Yet these conflicts have not prevented Vanderbilt from maintaining a relationship with its union.

IX. General Relations

In recent years, the local LIUNA chapter has pursued less ambitious goals in its dealings with Vanderbilt. In the mid 1980s, the union pay-raise strategy became less aggressive. The union had held a policy of a progressive pay scale in which custodians would reach the top of their pay scale within five years, for example, thus encouraging a low turnover rate and providing the workers with higher pay. However, in the mid 1980s, the union allowed a pay plan that included a bonus but omitted the progressive pay scale, thus leaving new employees at the bottom of their pay scale. As the original union members retired or left Vanderbilt, the push from the workers to negotiate a

³³ Hale, discussion.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Callison, discussion.

tougher contract deteriorated, and the union became less demanding.³⁶ Fewer issues have also required the response of union leadership. As the union contract changed throughout the years, the contract has become a “refined document” that has not required extensive reworking at each negotiation.³⁷

These trends are currently being reversed. In 2004, LIUNA held a membership drive that resulted in fifty new members joining the union, bringing the total number of dues-paying members to 229.³⁸ Most of these workers are unskilled laborers who have traditionally been non-unionized. This union drive contributed to the success of the lower-wage workers during the wage negotiations held from November 2004 to March 2005. The lowest-paid worker had previously been paid \$6.50 per hour; this minimum wage was raised to \$7.55. Additionally, workers in the lowest five pay grades, including housekeepers, food service workers, and groundskeepers, all received raises of at least 4%, which is higher than those pay grades’ average raise. One lower-wage worker commented that her raise was the highest that she has received during her 15 years at Vanderbilt.³⁹

X. Results from the Union

The union has supplied crucial assistance in regulating the management of the union-covered employees. According to Hale, specific labor disputes at Vanderbilt often “centered around a supervisor who was pretty...zealous about his job, picking an individual out for termination purposes. Usually a person who was written up unjustly or terminated unjustly [makes the initial complaint to the union].”⁴⁰ The union instituted a management dispute plan that provides the employees with safeguards against arbitrary managers. In fact, according to a university custodian, the union has successfully changed the daily management of the workers. The arbitrariness of the managers’ power is now significantly limited, and workers now cannot be terminated without reason. Only stealing, drinking and fighting result in automatic termination; otherwise, an employee must be written up for the same offense three times in a twelve month period to be terminated.⁴¹

At present, there remains a common impression among union workers that administrative officials are greatly removed from the lower-wage workers’ daily lives. One employee noted that workers do not feel comfortable in Kirkland Hall, an administrative building that contains the high-powered administrators on campus.⁴² Recognizing this perceived tension, the union serves as an intermediary between the staff and the administration, providing an effective method for voicing concerns about managerial practices. The union has been a regulatory agent for the university’s worker policies, making the jobs of the unskilled laborers, in particular, more agreeable and secure. While the union at Vanderbilt has not made great strides in wage-related issues, the regularization of low-wage employees’ management has been a great boon to the workers. Still, the Vanderbilt chapter of LIUNA has been plagued by the disparity between the skilled craftsmen and unskilled laborers, and they have not successfully bridged this gap through the implementation of effective measures. The union must reconcile these two groups in order to continue to bargain successfully for the union members. Furthermore, the union must address the retirement issue and determine the most efficient method to maximize the union members’ retirement benefits. Although the union should be fighting harder and more effectively for all its members, the union has managed to

³⁶ Petty, discussion.

³⁷ Callison, discussion.

³⁸ Steve Farner (manager, LIUNA), email message to author, April 26, 2005.

³⁹ Vanessa Hoo, “Union, Vanderbilt Sign New Contract,” *Vanderbilt Hustler*, March 18, 2005.

⁴⁰ Hale, discussion.

⁴¹ Interview with custodian, April 20, 2004.

⁴² *Ibid.*

prevent the more egregious violations of the workers' rights in the often hostile climate for organized labor of Nashville, Tennessee.

Appendix A. Campus Support for Vanderbilt's Union

The current dearth of dues-paying union members can be attributed both to the historical background of Tennessee's labor movement and to the lack of support on the university's campus. Labor organization has never been an issue of much concern for Vanderbilt activist communities. The histories that address social movements at Vanderbilt University tend to focus on race-related issues rather than any labor movement topics. The single labor-related controversy occurred in the late 1960s, when "the practice of food service [in the Divinity School] had been to place whites in positions of authority, such as at the cash register, while blacks were relegated to the food line and the kitchen area...The faculty demanded that a black woman be trained to run the cash register, which they believed would begin to constitute a new pattern of relations in this critical area. This effort succeeded, and a black woman assumed a position that had been held only by whites" (Johnson 2001, 189-190).

This initiative, however, demonstrates the Vanderbilt student and faculty's tendency to focus on symptoms, rather than causes, of a problem: rather than advocate for the training of a single black female, the faculty would have made a larger impact by coordinating with the workers to help them gain agency within the work environment. Because no labor unions existed at Vanderbilt during this minor crisis, the faculty had no organization to work with, through which the workers could have coordinated their own response to the issue. With a union, the faculty might have created a lasting change in the power structure without pitting white-against-black, as they seem to have in this scenario. Rather than focusing on injustice within the low-wage workers, they might have focused on injustice between the differently paid levels of workers. However, the Divinity School faculty was more concerned with race issues than with labor issues, and their actions are indicative of that concern.

Throughout the past two years, a student group known as Living Income for Vanderbilt Employees (LIVE) has taken up the issue of Vanderbilt workers' rights, campaigning for a living wage and a better working environment. The group has so far experienced two victories—the implementation of a short-term disability plan and pay increases for the five lowest pay grades. According to student organizers, the organization continues to gain support from students and faculty, and their strengthening relationships with the low-wage workers constantly informs their advocacy work. In the future, the LIVE organization hopes to create a better environment for labor negotiations that could lead to more productive negotiations and benefit all employees.

Appendix B. Nature of the Research

This research project relies primarily on personal interviews for relevant information on the union. Overall, I interviewed two individuals within the Vanderbilt administration – Director of Buildings and Utilities Mark Petty and General Counsel John Callison – and two individuals in LIUNA management – James Hale and Steve Farner. In addition, I interviewed one Vanderbilt skilled craftsman, Marshall Stack, who is not a dues-paying union member, and one Vanderbilt unskilled laborer who is a dues-paying union member. I contacted two dues-paying skilled craftsmen for interviews, but both refused to speak with me.

Before the interviews, I prepared a set of questions for my interview subject. At the start of each interview, I invited the individual to describe any significant union-related memories or opinions. After the individual finished this open-ended portion of the interview, I proceeded to ask the specific questions that were prepared in advance, as well as any new questions that arose during the interview. Each interview provoked more questions for the next interviewee, as each person had different recollections of varying events. I found that my experience in each interviews would leave many questions unanswered. Moreover, the lack of paper documentation for many of the incidents described in this paper may secondarily limit the credibility of my sources. Nevertheless, I believe that this article does provide an accurate overview of the fundamental relationship between Vanderbilt and its union, as the general character of that relationship was supported in all interviews.

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