

Faculty Bargaining: An Idea Whose Time Has Come?

The administration at Southern Oregon College in Ashland recently notified 13 faculty members that they would not be rehired next year.

Within five days 60 per cent of the school's faculty employes had signed a petition requesting the Public Employe Relations Board to hold a collective bargaining election at the school.

That action forced OSEA's Board of Directors meeting a week later to make a decision on an idea whose time—according to many—has come: collective bargaining for professors who teach at Oregon's three major universities and four regional colleges.

The board's decision, which supported a recommendation made by the Association's all-faculty member Academic and Unclassified Services Committee, was for OSEA to give top priority during the next two months to establish collective bargaining for faculty employes.

That decision put into action a flurry of activity that should within a relatively short period of time tell the Association if collective bargaining for Oregon's professors is indeed an idea whose time has come.

The activity includes a membership drive at the various institutions of higher education, distribution of printed material on collective bargaining and plans for "collective bargaining seminars" at the various schools.

One academician who is deeply involved in all of that activity is Dr. Robert E. Nye, professor of music at the University of Oregon in Eugene. Long active in OSEA, he is completing his second term as director of its Academic and Unclassified Committee.

Nye believes academic employes need collective bargaining, and they need it now: "Without collective bargaining—without a formal, legal means of forcing the legislature or the Board of Higher Education to listen to us—we will have to continue to ask for things hat in hand."

He says polls indicate the majority of his colleagues who teach at the state's three largest schools agree with him. Results of the polls, with 50 per cent of the questionnaires returned, show 62 per cent of the faculty at Oregon State University want collective bargaining now. The figure is a whopping 80 per cent at Portland State University, and 75 per cent at the University of Oregon where only OSEA members were surveyed.

Another view of the subject is expressed by Dr.

Lafayette ("Lafe") Harter, professor of economics at OSU and a member of Nye's Academic and Unclassified Services Committee.

"The university has gotten so large and impersonal," he says. "One of the consequences of that growth is the fact that faculty members are less important and have less influence over the things that affect them."

"In addition to that," Harter says, "the public is worried about taxes, and we're a long way down on their list of priorities. They think we're a bunch of fat cats making too much money."

According to Nye, working in higher education today is quite different from what it was in the late 50's and early 60's when there was ever-increasing student enrollments, physical expansion and a seemingly endless flow of federal dollars.

In the last few years both enrollments and federal dollars have dropped. Student unrest has lessened public support at a time when it is badly needed. All of that has brought problems to the schools and to the employes. "We've been living on austerity budgets for the past several years," Harter says. "We have cut, cut and cut budgets."

The crunch came in Oregon in the fall of 1971 when the System of Higher Education was faced with a financial crisis brought about in part because student enrollments were not as high as had been estimated. Because of the crisis, the Board of Higher Education declared a "financial exigency" to exist.

The declaration made it possible for individual schools to terminate faculty members without regard to tenure and without regard to the prior notice which was previously required.

"Many people lost their jobs," Nye says. "I think that fact plus the problem we've been having with faculty salaries during the past several years has done more to stir interest in collective bargaining than anything else."

Nye says it is "unfortunate" the faculty employes at Southern Oregon College filed their request for a collective bargaining election. In fact, he and Harter, along with OSEA staff member Gilbert C. Polanski, went to SOC and asked sponsors to delay filing the petition.

Why? "Because the Academic and Unclassified Services Committee felt that a single bargaining unit should be created composed of all faculty employes within the System of Higher Education, rather than seven or more individual bargaining units made up of faculty members at each institution," he explained.

"We also feel negotiations should be conducted with the Board of Higher Education, rather than with each individual school in the system," he noted.

OSEA's Board of Directors agreed with Nye and his committee. That means the Association will oppose creation of a bargaining unit at SOC on the grounds that a statewide unit is the appropriate unit.

Before OSEA seeks election as the representative of a statewide unit of faculty employes, however, it must have the support of the majority of the employes in that unit, according to Nye. That's why the Association is conducting a membership drive at the various schools.

"We estimate a single bargaining unit for faculty employes would number about 4,500. OSEA presently has 1,400 academic members throughout the state. That means we would have to nearly double our membership before we could become actively involved in collective bargaining for faculty employes," Nye says.

OSEA's Unfair List

The following official has committed unfair labor practices in state employe collective bargaining:

Attorney General Lee Johnson

There apparently are four groups interested in representing faculty employes: OSEA, the American Federation of Teachers (AFL-CIO), a combination of the National Education Association and the Oregon Education Association and the American Association of University Professors.

Although he admits to being biased, Nye says he thinks OSEA could do the best job. "The Association has had more than six years experience in negotiating contracts for classified employes in nearly every state agency," he remarked.

"OSEA is a politically sophisticated organization with experienced lobbyists and a large staff. More than any other organization, it has worked at the legislature and at the Board of Higher Education for academic employes. It is a splendid tool just waiting to be used."

Despite the increased interest among Oregon's faculty employes in collective bargaining, enrolling new members "won't be easy," Nye predicts. The reason? "They're just not joiners. The majority of the faculty think of themselves as members of professional groups, such as engineers or architects. They wouldn't dream of joining a labor organization."

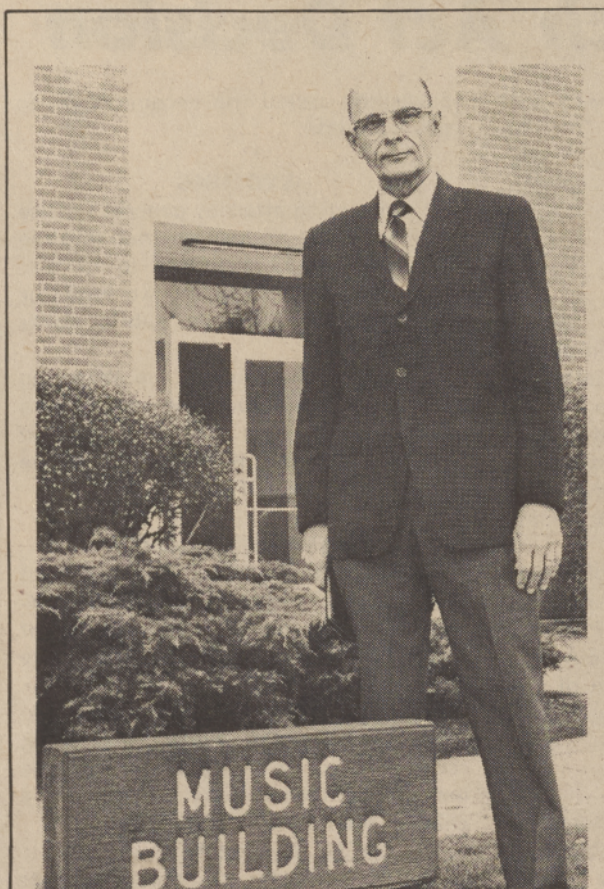
Harter agrees with Nye that increasing membership among the faculty will be tough. But he says the main reason is due to a lack of communications. "If more of the faculty knew what OSEA has done and could do for them it would make enrolling them much easier."

OSEA's stress of membership at this time will hurt to some extent, Harter claims. "It will make some of the faculty think the Association is just out to increase its membership. But we've got to have greater support among the faculty before we can become actively involved in bargaining for them. That presents us with a real dilemma."

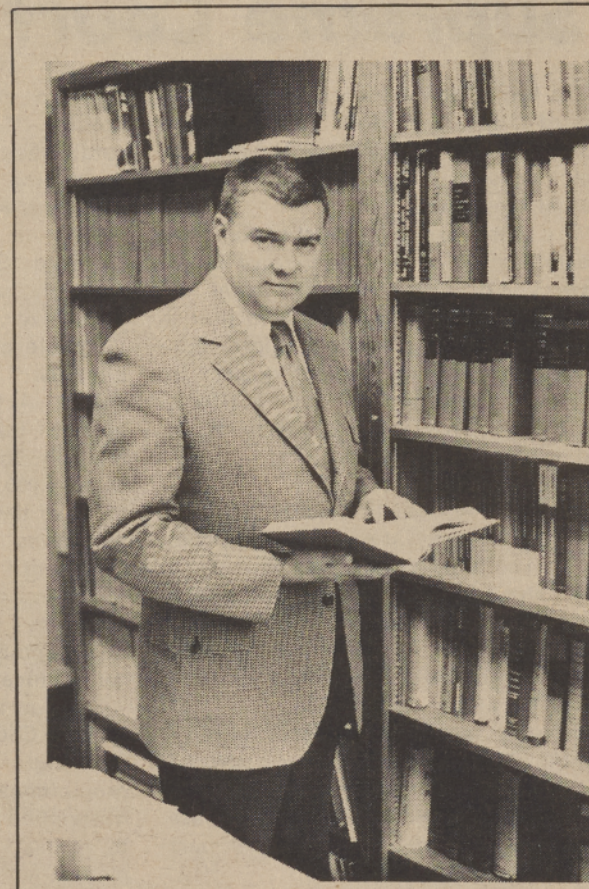
Nye thinks there is almost no limit to what could be negotiated for faculty employes. His list includes salaries, fringe benefits, tenure, promotions, work load, class size, grievance, disciplinary and severance procedures, and a host of other working conditions.

Harter is not sure he agrees with Nye's list. He thinks such matters as salaries, fringe benefits, and grievance procedures are negotiable. But he is not sure about such employment relations matters as tenure, class size and work load.

However, both men are in agreement about one thing: collective bargaining is needed for Oregon's faculty employes, and it is needed now.



NYE: "It seems to me that academic employes are very naive politically. We seem to be inept at taking care of our own interests. For some reason unknown to me faculty members seem to think someone is going to wave a magic wand and solve all their problems."



HARTER: "Faculty members may not realize it but they have a powerful ally in the state's classified employes. Each can be of tremendous help to the other, and together they can be a potent political force. They should unite in a single organization."