

A History Worth Thinking About,

In the beginning.....

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY 1969-1979: ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

Grand Valley State College was built in the '60's, out in the country, twenty miles from the nearest city. It was a beautiful campus and an exciting place to work. Everyone felt a deep sense of commitment and strong feeling of community. But after working as a secretary for a few years, I became a hard-core union activist. My colleagues and I turned to political action after being deceived by the administration too many times.

The clerical staff were women, making up the majority of the Clerical/Technical (CT) unit, who worked in the business offices, records and admissions offices, book store, and as secretaries, many serving large numbers of faculty. We were required to have excellent writing, communication and English skills, as well as skills in shorthand, Dictaphone, mathematics, accounting, typing, and in some cases, foreign language. (Proficiency in a diversity of computer programs came later.) We had to dress professionally--no slacks—and be the essence of diplomacy and tact. We were the problem solvers for both faculty and students. We were also the lowest paid group on campus (including the all male janitorial staff). So dependent was the college on the clericals, that if a secretary didn't show up for work, an entire academic unit was thrown into chaos. Our clerical group was extremely small in comparison to the large number of people we served, creating an additional burden. It was--and still is--the ever present clericals who kept the college humming from 8 to 5 each day, maintaining an efficient environment for faculty and students to study and work.

The predominantly male technical staff considered of laboratory and media assistants. (Later this group included computer and TV engineers.) Their wages exceeded those of the clerical staff; however, job skill requirements for technicians, as stated on the job descriptions, were only equal to or even less than those of many clericals and they still are. We were situated in separate buildings scattered across 800 acres, keeping us isolated from each other, which made it difficult to become acquainted and share common working experiences. Most of us were loyal to our bosses, ignoring our own needs and the needs of other clerical staff.

In the beginning, the pay was average, but as time went on our increases grew smaller, and we hardly ever knew if or when we would receive a raise. When an employee in one

department got a merit raise, all others in that department would be penalized with smaller raises in order to compensate. Administration's constant refrain was, "*There's not enough money to go around.*" A raise didn't depend so much on your worth as an employee as it did on your boss' position in the hierarchy and willingness to go to bat for you. Favoritism ran rampant, creating low morale across the campus. Clericals came from the immediate area, a conservative area. Most were not politically enlightened, so at first it was easy for the college to keep changing the rules. While there was plenty of grumbling, no one was willing to speak up where it counted.

I was transferred from Admissions to the executive suite, where I worked as secretary to the Vice President of Academic Affairs. It was there that I became acquainted with the president and vice presidents and learned about the political structure of the college. The other administrative secretaries and I often compared notes. We didn't have to look far to see personnel problems creeping into the system. Eventually my boss, with whom I had excellent rapport, resigned. The Personnel Director who had instituted the policies resulting in grave inequities was promoted to Vice President of Administration and Finance. The day he moved into the executive suite, there was an open memo left on my desk informing me that I was to report immediately to another building where a new college was emerging within the cluster of separate colleges. The secretaries remaining, as well as many other CT members across campus, paid a great deal of attention to my abrupt transfer. I brought with me a wealth of information about the politics and policies of the college. And, ironically, I was able to get this new position upgraded to administrative assistant, the highest ranked clerical position.

Many CT staff were under the false impression that if they were dependable, didn't ask questions, and kept their place, they would be taken care of. I had felt this way as well, at first. Because clericals looked upon academe with reverence and respect, and thought that decisions concerning their employment would always be made in their best interests, administration was able to take full advantage of their idealism. The clerical worker was powerless. Some supervisors took pleasure in using their power to control clericals who reported to them. For instance, one glanced at the clock each time his secretary left and entered the office and checked her desk when he no longer heard the clicking of her typewriter. Some clericals were required to make elaborate arrangements on two and

sometimes three levels of bureaucracy before time off was approved. Although the supervisor's signature on a time card was the only one required, in many cases time cards were sent across campus for a final check by the administrator of the division, then recorded by the lead secretary before they were sent on to payroll. This secretary was also required to take a daily roll of all secretaries in her division. The reports were sent on to a higher level. As the college continued to grow, we became more and more relegated to second class status.

Faculty were being hired from all over the United States, bringing with them new and liberal ideas. They were constantly meeting to discuss their teaching philosophies, creating policies including salary equalization between male and female faculty, and molding their working environments. With affirmative action breathing down the necks of administration, equalization of the female faculty salaries was a high priority for administration, but the low clerical salaries were being ignored. I soon realized that I was working for an institution that professed equality but excluded us. By the early seventies there was enough discontent that most clericals began to question their salaries and benefits. All other units, including the unionized janitors, continued to do much better. The secretaries remaining in administration and I arranged our first meeting, held one evening in our telephone operator's home close to campus. There were about twenty women present, all eager to share their problems. The meeting lasted well into the night, and was followed by several others, launching the beginning of a struggle that would continue for many years. Eventually we made a connection with a labor union and circulated union cards. When the president of the college heard about the threat of unionization, he arranged a meeting with five of us. After listening to our complaints he expressed concern and assured us that there was nothing a union could do for us that administration could not provide as well, if not better. We trusted him and gave up pursuing a union at that time.

In 1973, a Committee of Five, including me, was elected by the CT staff as liaison to the president. During the next few years our committee grew into a large elected Liaison Committee that discussed, researched, and wrote proposals for change. We passed recommendations on to an Executive Committee, which consisted of five elected clericals. If the Executive Committee accepted these proposals, they were sent to Personnel for final

approval. We were resentful that in the beginning not one man served on either of these committees. A male COT told me that they considered our dilemma a woman's problem. And while our male co-workers were critical of the college, he also criticized us for the way we were handling things. At first some of the women had trouble getting the hang of this new-found power and were afraid to speak up at meetings. But soon, many who had never made an administrative decision in their lives grew into their new roles like professionals. It's hard to imagine that anything like this would startle anybody now, but we decided to show up to work one day in slacks. Two days later, we received a memo from Personnel stating that we could not wear slacks, only matching pantsuits, which was read through howls of laughter. This was a liberating experience for us. Meanwhile, our committee had developed a grievance procedure and a professional growth and development policy and made recommendations concerning wages and fringe benefits. Our five day sick leave was improved to twenty, but coverage for recuperation from maternity was still inadequate. Although we had made some gains, morale remained low over wages and a host of other inequities, including unfair hiring and promotion practices, lack of job security, poor retirement benefits, and forced vacation when the college closed for winter holidays or inclement weather. For years there had been a lot of talk, promises and paper work thrown at us, but not much had substantially improved. When the 1977 Clerical/Technical Employee Manual was circulated, we found that administration had inserted a procedure stating that the Liaison Committee could no longer meet unless the meeting was called by the Executive Committee with the approval of the Personnel Officer. This procedure further stated that any meeting of the Liaison Committee had to be in consultation with the Personnel Officer and *"limited to what is reasonably needed to resolve the issues."* The final blow came at the end of the paragraph which stated that two at-large members would be appointed to our Executive Committee by the Vice President of Administration and Finance. Clearly, this was intended to destroy the power structure of these committees. It was another slap in the face and the beginning of the end of any decision making that we had previously enjoyed. It didn't take long for these administrative appointees to change the politics of both committees. But I could see the attitude of the entire CT staff changing as well. Soon groups from different buildings were meeting to discuss their wages, hours, sick time, classifications, hiring and promotion practices, and supervision. In the months that followed, the question of fairness,

which had never been discussed in the past, was becoming an important issue. Many clericals recognized the disparity between them and the rest of the Grand Valley community, and many realized that the college was lining their pockets by means of it.

The main objectives of the Liaison and Executive Committees had failed, and we had lost the attention of the president. We still held meetings, but our hands were tied by the new manual, and it was impossible to push positive changes through the Executive Committee. We handled a lot of grievances--mainly requests for job upgrades---but if a grievance wasn't withdrawn on a lower level, the final decision was rendered by the president. Not a single grievance was settled in our favor. Some of the committee members became discouraged and resigned from the Liaison Committee. They were replaced by clericals who lacked the courage to disagree with the administrative appointees. The committee soon became the official voice for administration.

In January, 1978, I sent a letter to the new CT Liaison Committee and to the president of the college demanding a 2% increase for all CT's, over and above any campus wide increase. I received a prompt reply from the president informing me that he didn't respond to the word "demand." At our next Liaison committee meeting, there was heated discussion about the conditions that had prompted my letter. Tempers flared, and the group was divided on whether or not the letter should have been sent. The administrative appointees strongly opposed it. In subsequent meetings, the committee's differences tore the group apart. But in February, to my surprise, a petition was circulated supporting my request for a 2% additional increase and stating the extreme financial difficulties most of us were having. This petition, containing 90 signatures, was considered by the committee but tabled until a new compensation package which claimed that it would "*alleviate many of the problems*" was furnished by Personnel. Another turning point came when the petition was finally approved by the Liaison Committee, but vetoed by the Executive Committee. When the 1978 compensation package was introduced, my worst fears were realized. Historically we had worked a 37.5 week, a fringe benefit to attract people to commute to the country from surrounding metropolitan areas. When we looked at the percentages, they seemed reasonable on the surface, but the new package increased our work week from 37.5 to 40 hours, and the amount earned by the extra working hours was considered our raise. The

extra time equaled 132 hours, over three weeks per year. The new compensation package also contained a step system, something we had wanted for a long time. But to my dismay, there were twelve steps, so that it would take twelve years for an employee to reach the top, with only a \$5.00 increase a year. And an old policy remained which we had tried unsuccessfully to change, stating that if a promotion occurred, the employee's step placement decreased one step for each compensation range promoted, i.e., B3 to C4 to D5. So if you were promoted, it would take a year or longer to realize a financial gain. Although the Personnel Director said that there was a 14% average pay hike granted for the additional hours, in reality the "14% average increase" was for the additional three weeks of working hours per year.

Another petition which targeted the wage scale and the forty hour work week was circulated, requesting a referendum to table the compensation package. This was rejected by the Liaison Committee, 6 yes, 8 no, in spite of the fact that 134 CT's had signed the petition. Meanwhile we had telephoned all CT employees to find out how their salaries would stack up if they didn't work the extra hours. Although some went up four cents and some 15 cents an hour, many went down ten cents. It was interesting to note that there were a few who got percentage gains in the teens even without including the extra hours. We learned later that two of these recipients were the administration's appointees to the Executive Committee. These women held what some considered an enviable position, because they had power and also the support of administration. I imagine that aligning with them felt safe for those who had no idea how to deal with the turmoil they found themselves in.

Our only hope to stop the package from being implemented was to attend the Board of Control meeting where it would be approved. After extensive questioning by the Vice President of Administration and Finance, I was granted permission to speak. On the day of the board meeting, we discovered one of administration's secretaries eavesdropping outside our door as we were doing last minute preparations on our presentation notebooks. When we asked her what she wanted, she looked flustered and left. That same day I received a call from administration grilling me again about my reasons for wanting to speak.

The most important items in our presentation notebooks were a list of individual compensation figures for most CT employees indicating their salary loses; a copy of the

referendum to table the package which we enclosed in spite of its rejection by the Liaison Committee; and the Grand Valley employee newspaper FORUM with the headline CLERICAL TECHNICAL GROUP APPROVES .CHANGE IN PAY, HIKES--but in truth the majority had not approved the change.

Several CT's, including some technicians, attended the Board of Control meeting with me. I gave what I felt was an articulate plea, explaining the inequities of the package. William F. Seidman, member of the board, asked several questions which gave me the opportunity to prove my point. When I sat down, I was convinced he understood exactly what the problem with the package was and had been drawing me out. But when our Executive Committee Chair was given the floor, she discounted everything I had said. She emphasized the fact that the Liaison and Executive Committees had overwhelmingly approved the package, and that the board would be hurting employees if the package was not approved for a May 1st implementation. When she was finished, the board members clapped. It was a humiliating experience for me and for those who came with me. One of our male supporters yelled, "*We need a union!*" Others thanked our Executive Committee Chair for "*selling us down the river.*" I managed to regain the floor, and to convince Mr. Seidman to establish a subcommittee to investigate the inequities, in spite of the package implementation on May 1st. When I finished, the only woman serving on the Board of Control shouted, "*Let's get this over with, I'm leaving for Florida and have a plane to catch!*" The package was adopted with one abstention. It was further resolved that the chairman appoint a Review Committee to examine the effect of the compensation package and submit its findings to the October board meeting.

Later, outrage among the CT staff regarding the committees' failure to support the referendum, prompted a document to be circulated among the CT staff listing the exact number, by building, of those who had requested the referendum.

...The Liaison Committee voted against supporting the petition, 6 yes, 8 no. The Lake Michigan Hall representative to the committee voted against it, although 14 out of 18 CT staff were in support. The Commons representative voted against it, although 8 out of 11 in that building were in support. In Seidman House 9 out of 11 supported the referendum, but their representative is the Liaison Chair and she did not vote, even though she has voted on all other issues...

This document made it clear that both of the committees had failed to represent the communicated concerns of the CT staff. Battle lines were drawn. Although I wasn't the author of that letter, I was now alienated from some women with whom I had worked closely for many years. The stakes grew higher when the GRAND RAPIDS PRESS entered the debate. One by-line read **"GVSC WORKERS UPSET OVER SCHOOL'S NEW PAY SYSTEM."** In addition, differences of opinion among the CT staff were voiced in the Letter to the Editor section of THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS:

...Grand Valley insists they have no legal obligation to compensate employees for required additional working hours. To attribute distress over this to the greediness of overpaid workers is absurd considering that raises in the past have in no way kept up with the cost of living...

Later GRAND RAPIDS PRESS published a rebuttal:

...When I was hired at Grand Valley, it was my impression that I would be earning a weekly salary not an hourly wage. The complaint comes from those who are still thinking hourly wage when they are earning weekly salaries. Apparently the author of the April 27 letter is of the mind that an hourly wage is more important than the salary she earns. It would seem that there are some who are still at the common wage level when they should have grown into the responsibility of a salary level job...

What the author of this last letter failed to realize was that unlike the professional salaried staff, CT staff lacked all privileges, e.g., to be paid while having the freedom to come and go as they saw fit, to be sick, to have a baby, attend a funeral, take care of personal business, without having to measure that time on a card right down to the last quarter of an hour; to get four weeks vacation after the first year instead of after the seventh, and to be vested into an adequate retirement plan in five years instead of fifteen. Where it would have been an advantage to be a salaried employee, the rules didn't apply to us.

The following letter published in the employee newspaper FORUM expressed the feelings of many:

... I am well aware that there are many ways to present an issue, but to talk about a weekly increase in pay and ignore the additional hours is an obfuscation, deliberate or not. When Personnel tells me that I received a 5.7% increase and I know that means I will be making .03 cents less per hour, I am not fooled!...."

Personnel fought back with excuses like *"the amount of dollars allocated are at a maximum."* *"If there are any inequities they will be reviewed next year."* *"I hope the Liaison Committee will help us in defining the word inequity."* The Executive Committee Chair, who had "sold us down the river," published a long account in the FORUM defending the package:

...At numerous meetings we listened to comments by Personnel that additional dollars were not possible until October if we did not approve the package right away. The probability of a 40 hour week led to the possibility of one. If we had followed the wishes of the "concerned CT group" and had it removed from the April Board meeting, we would have taken from more than 100 employees the chance for the highest increase in recent years...

She further stated that we ended with a win-plus situation because we got our increases and at the same time the package would be reevaluated by October to resolve any inequities.

Meanwhile, under intense pressure, the Liaison Committee passed a resolution that elected representatives must be committed to voting only the views of their constituency. The Liaison Committee then reconsidered the referendum, to table the decision on the package. There was so much heat put on the two committees that members with opposing views finally did work together to develop a cover letter indicating their support of the referendum which was finally sent to the Board of Control Review Committee. However, a few days later we learned from one of the administrative secretaries that the committee had ignored the October deadline, met briefly before the June Board of Control meeting, and rubber stamped the original package. The Review Committee made no attempt to notify us of this action. I learned of it officially a month later, by reading the June Board of Control Minutes. Many were furious by this betrayal: some thought of it as business-as-usual, while others felt that the drive for equity at Grand Valley was a hopeless cause.

The Liaison Committee didn't meet during the summer. Five of us, both men and women--two from the committee, a librarian assistant, and lab technicians did some investigating. We met with a state insurance analyst and learned that beside our other problems, the already inadequate retirement plan could legally be terminated by action of the Board of Control for any reason at any time. He also told us that the plan barely reached the minimum standards for state employees. In addition, he pointed out serious loopholes in our health insurance. Our situation was much worse than we had imagined.

We considered an independent association, but among the disadvantages was the limited ability, because of cost, to take grievances through the state arbitration process. Our local treasury would have to be enormous to consider arbitration for its members. And who would decide which issues were worthy of spending all that money? Yet without arbitration, the grievance process would remain a sham. Also, expecting one attorney or small law firm to stand up to the Grand Valley Board of Control, whose members included powerful men like William F. Seidman, was unrealistic. After discounting an independent association, we began searching for a solid labor union. We checked Michigan law to be certain our jobs wouldn't be jeopardized for attempting to organize. We discovered that the Hutchinson Act passed in 1965, would give us the protection we needed.

First we considered the same union we had contacted in 1972, but we later learned that there wasn't a single minority or female person on their staff. And in our meetings, their union representatives spoke directly to the men and ignored the women. So we decided against them. After several meetings with the Michigan Education Association (MEA), we concluded that they would be the most effective. All of their professional staff had masters degrees, and many were women and minorities. They had a large research and legal staff and could provide us with arbitration services; training in negotiation, grievance processing, political action and public relations; and assistance in the development of a bargaining program and governance structure. And finally, they had enough power in the state to take on Grand Valley.

We were anxious to share what we had learned with our co-workers, but when we took our ideas to the Liaison Committee, we were met with antagonism. The meeting erupted into argument. No longer were we a group working for a common cause. I left discouraged, believing that these women didn't want to take on the responsibility for their working lives, nor did they want to be associated with any kind of labor union at all, period. The bickering and paper war began.

We had a large turnout at our first MEA informational meeting. People's questions expressed their fears. Did we run the risk of losing our present benefits? Would we alienate administration? Would the MEA dictate our moves? Could we do as well with the Liaison Committee by regarding the manual as a contract?

Those opposed to affiliating with a union, began the effort for an independent association. They called themselves the CT Awareness Group. Members consisted of the Administration's appointees to the Executive Committee and their following, those who had been in opposition to the Union Interest Group from the beginning.

Even though I had been elected to the original Committee of Five that reported directly to the president, and felt a deep commitment to the women I worked with, I needed to focus my energy on more pragmatic goals. And, frankly, the anger some committee members felt toward me had taken its toll. So I resigned from the Liaison Committee. My resignation letter--circulated to the CT staff whom I had served, as well as to the Liaison Committee--included among other reasons, the fact that the wishes of 134 CT employees as reflected by their signatures on the referendum, was presented negatively by the Executive Committee, to the Personnel Office, and to the Board of Control. After I sent this memo, I received a typed note signed by "*Not Gutsy*" at the bottom of my letter. It said, "*Hallelujah! Someone gutsy enough to say it like it is!*" And a memo from the Director of Personnel stating:

My perception is that you had something else in mind other than just resigning. Why was it necessary to inform CT members of this action? This involves not only your time, but also the expense of printing that number of letters, plus using the campus mail. The Executive Committee Chair presented the wishes of the CT petition signers very fairly to the Board of Control. I feel that you owe her a formal apology. Please call my office to make an appointment.

I never did.

From then on, we geared up and circulated union -authorization cards, along with a historical document listing the inequities and loss of benefits we had had to accept due to our lack of legal clout. Also included was an insert: from the most recent CT Manual:

The college reserves the right to change, supplement, or rescind any or all of the provisions of this manual upon notice to its employees.

Although Union Interest Group memos were sent to CT staff only, Personnel responded to each, but never directly to what had been said. Instead of dealing with our statements head-on, Personnel was evasive when we stated the facts and did nothing more than attempt to instill in us a fear of labor unions. For instance in one memo they said:

Q. Today there is an open door policy. I can take questions to the personnel office myself. Will I be able to do that if there is a union?

A. No. If the union is elected, their representative will speak, act for, and bind everyone in the unit to a contract whether any individual likes it or not. With a union, it's what the union wants that counts, not what you might want individually.

Another memo from Personnel said that *"by signing a union authorization card, you are applying for MEA membership."* The student newspaper LANTHORN discredited this. They phoned the Michigan Employment Relations Commission (MERC) office and in an article stated that MERC had told them that under Michigan law the name of a labor union must be specified on authorization cards in order to bring the issue to a vote.

Meanwhile, the newly elected Liaison and Executive Committee suggested turning the CT Manual into a legal document:

...The Liaison Committee respectfully requests that the administration regard the CT Manual as a contract between the colleges and the employees...

...The Liaison Committee requests that the statement "The colleges reserves the right to change, supplement, or rescind any of all of the provisions of this manual upon notice to its employees," be revoked...

"That way," the committee stated, *"we will be guaranteed that our rights and benefits are secure, and what we hope to accomplish will remain intact."* They failed to realize that the manual did not provide for negotiating salary increases, guaranteeing an individual vote in the terms of employment, providing money for legal counsel for interpreting and enforcing the manual, or providing impartial resolution to grievances.

By October, 1978, there was a final split between those in favor of a union, those in favor of an independent association and the status quo. CT's circulated a lot of written dialogue about the union and the association, but nothing in favor of the status quo. Interestingly, Personnel did not respond to the independent association's memos at all. We perceived that this was because if that group did succeed, Personnel's control would remain the same as before. However, Personnel disputed this assessment:

Union interest group has stated that the administration prefers the association. Is this true? Absolutely not! I think the union is trying to mislead you into not trusting the administration or Association. Also, unions generally want preferential treatment for union officers without regard to seniority.

Not only were memos from each faction circulated, but those not yet committed to either side sent memos:

...My biggest concern is that IF we were to unionize independently, who would do all the work? If we would have had some truly dedicated and thorough workers this year, we would not have ended up in such a sorry state of affairs. Where are we going to find the strength that we lacked earlier? Partial blame for the recent package has to lie with us! At no time were we forced to accept the package until after the Liaison and Executive Committees voted it in. Was that our error? ...Too many of us were intimidated by the high pressure sales. ...Some of our benefits are good despite the fact that some of us really got screwed in the recent package. Do we risk our present program for the benefit of those who got shafted?

During this time, I was lucky enough to have a smart, feminist boss who understood our situation, and who was the highest ranking woman on campus. I also had a lot of support from the academic unit I worked in. One of the faculty members did the statistical data in our presentation notebooks, and many faculty members supported our cause by exposing our plight to their colleagues at faculty meetings. Others in the Union Interest Group received much of their support from faculty, and the students stood firmly behind us. But most of the low to middle income professionals and some conservative faculty members viewed us as nothing more than troublemakers.

Meanwhile the drive for an independent association gained enough momentum to place their official title "Grand Valley Clerical Technical Association" on the ballot, as this Grand Valley FORUM headline indicates: ASSOCIATION NOW A POSSIBILITY FOR CLERICAL, TECHNICAL STAFF.

...Members of the Awareness Group, which have brought in lawyers to speak at several information meetings on campus "designed to help CT employees examine issues in an objective way" have found that many CT employees were leaning toward an independent association. They stated that "the advantages of an association over a union are that we will get a better return for every dollar spent. The Grand Valley CT Association would select a lawyer who would provide legal advice during bargaining and grievance procedures, and who would be paid on a services rendered basis."

Other choices on the ballot were Michigan Education Association, or Neither.

By then the core Union Interest Group which had started with five active members had grown to over twenty from across the campus community--secretaries, TV engineers, administrative assistants, library staff, and lab technicians. The men's perspective changed the chemistry of our meetings, but we learned to work together and were obsessed with our cause, meeting constantly, often in the evenings. Our planning meetings were energizing and collegial, but not without conflict over issues. Written dialogue was grafted to reflect the thoughts of the group. Our open meetings focused on sharing our needs and discussing solutions. However, the Awareness Group for the independent association focused mainly on what they perceived as the problems connected with forming a union. There was nothing else you could sink your teeth into. For instance one memo stated:

There have been many information sessions designed to promote the union's cause and they hold out some glowing 'guarantees'. They talked about a step system, which we already have. They discussed a grievance procedure. We have a grievance committee now where confidentiality is assured. Under a union, grievances and their settlements are a matter of public record. The only thing a union can guarantee is \$90 a year dues.

Are you willing to risk losing vacation days, or a reduction in sick days or holidays for an increase in wages? The union does not consider fringes a part of salary.

We made a point of having a few union interest people attend their open meetings, keeping a low profile. They brought in attorneys to speak on the success of independent associations. At one meeting someone--not involved in the union interest group--aired a list of grievances a mile long. After listening to this harangue and asking questions, the guest attorney raised his hands in the air and said, "I think you guys need a union!"

With enough authorization cards turned into MERC, things fell into place. But Personnel continued to do nothing more than cast doubt. They said they were deluged with phone calls from CT staff worried about the possibility of unionizing. Had they made an honest attempt to problem solve and take responsibility, they might have defused our drive to unionize. But they only communicated with us through derogatory memos and snide remarks. Their unsolicited responses to the Union Interest Group were neither timely nor convincing. They denied the early problems which had brought about union activism in the first place. At the end of one of many memos blasting the union they said, "Ask yourself whether the union can

really assure a solution to what you perceive as a problem." After reading this, one of my co-workers said that because we were women, they assumed we couldn't think for ourselves. When we returned from the holiday college closing--where we were forced to use our vacation days--the first issue of the FORUM contained two editorials "*Why a CT Association?*" and "*Why MEA?*" The voice for the independent association still hammered on nothing more substantial than the evils of a union:

FACT: Because we are public institution, it is illegal for us to strike. If we affiliate with MEA, reach a snag in bargaining, our jobs are not guaranteed. [N.B. Picketing before and after working hours is a constitutional right. Withholding services is legal when it involves an unfair labor practice confirmed by MERC.]

FACT: What is job security? If an employee retires, quits or is released, will MEA be able to prevent the unit's position from being eliminated? Remember if someone leaves, quits, or is released, the administration has every legal right not to fill that position... [N.B. If the Awareness group had done their homework, they would have learned that when an employee quits or retires and the position isn't filled, this is reduction by attrition, i.e., the loss of personnel by the normal course of events. Indeed, job security means that when an employee's position is eliminated, they have the right to move to the position of the least senior person in the same or lower classification for which they are qualified. As it stood, if Grand Valley eliminated your position they could lay you off regardless of seniority.]

FACT: Under President Carter's voluntary wage guidelines, the increase in salaries will be approximately 7% for 1978-79. Because we are a public institution, we receive a substantial amount of federal grant money. In all wisdom, we cannot afford to bypass those guidelines. [N.B. Can anyone really be convinced that a secretary whose raise brought her up to \$135 a week is the cause or should be the cure for this country's economic problems?]

In the same issue the Union Interest Group stated:

MEA will provide us with professional consultation and legal assistance through our bargaining; it will train members so that we can live up to our best potential in bargaining; it will provide assistance in developing our governance structure; it will assist us in processing grievances up to and at the level of arbitration; it will provide legal service when we need it.

Just before the election, a letter from the president sent to our homes said:

Personally, I am not as concerned with the economic and ideological arguments on this issue as I am about how it affects our relationship at Grand Valley. I hope you can meet with me on Thursday, January 11,....I am looking forward to learning of your concerns as members of the staff of Grand Valley.

The president had turned a deaf ear on us since 1972. Most of my colleagues and I saw no reason to believe, since he was *"not as concerned with the economic and ideological arguments"* as we, that meeting with him now would make any difference. As the election drew near, memos from each group intensified. It wasn't until just before the election that the Awareness Group for an independent association informed us of a plan based on using model contracts from other colleges. They further stated they could have a contract ready in less than a month:

...Union Interest Group says our Association will be weak, that we are tied to the CT Manual and to the Liaison Committee. We already have several good contracts that we are researching and it should be a small matter to transfer our present benefits into legal language. ...They say they are amused by the Associations interest in furnishing retirees with a token of appreciation, flowers for the sick and help when tragedy occurs. Since when has it become fashionable to be insensitive to the personal needs of fellow employees?. ...We have it on good authority that the MEA would do nothing for us until enough money was accrued to cover their expenses.

Under such tense conditions, it was more difficult dealing with our adversarial co-workers than battling Administration, because while they were courting Administration, we were going for broke.

When the January 30th election drew near, Personnel sent out a list of voting instructions, followed by *"regardless of whether you signed a union card, you have not committed yourself until you have deposited your marked ballot into the ballot box,"* which was an absolute contradiction to what they had stated earlier.

When election time arrived, most of the CT staff viewed the administration with serious mistrust as the following LANTHORN headline indicates:

CT'S VOTE IN MEA UNION A LANDSLIDE. 128 of 138 eligible voters turnout to vote. When votes were counted, the results showed 70 votes for MEA. 30 votes for the Association and 28 votes for Neither. No run-off election will be necessary.

However, the FORUM's announcement voiced a different point of view. CT Awareness Chair was quoted as saying, *"I think we're more divided than ever. People are angry, and some are threatening to quit."* But the gem of the day came from the Personnel Director whom the FORUM quoted as saying, *"I don't think the election will mean any serious changes."*

I had waited for the news while sitting in the one free class we were allowed each year. When the Dean's secretary peered through the window, I rushed into the hall where my Union Interest colleagues were standing. We spent a moment congratulating each other for our victory before setting up our next business meeting.

After all those years, we had finally gained the college's recognition and the legal right to mold our working lives. Now the real work was about to begin, and with this would come the burden of responsibility. The thought of this commitment was frightening and exhilarating. That was January 30, 1979...the day that marked the beginning of a whole new list of struggles that brought about the wages, benefits, and contract language that we enjoy today. But we still do battle with administration during bargaining, and over the interpretation of the contract. But through the years we've moved mountains, because now the women want pay equity and the administration has agreed to work with us, instead of against us, to obtain this goal.

Written by Virginia L. Gordon Revised, 1994