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BREAKING THE SILENCE: THE MAKING OF THE CLERICAL, OFFICE, AND TECHNICAL ASSOCIATION AT GRAND VALLEY, 1970-79

Virginia L. Gordon

When I was invited to contribute my memories of the early days of Grand Valley, I felt compelled to write about the organization of our clerical/technical union, because, although it was a significant chapter in the history of this university, it has never been described in any spoken or written history. With this essay, I hope to end the silence.

When some of us in the clerical staff came to realize in the early 1970s that our working conditions weren't fair and then acted on that realization, chaos followed. Not unlike labor problems throughout American history, our own process created turmoil and stress, and because of the pro- and anti-union factions that divided us, sometimes we felt threatened and betrayed, not only by the college administration, but by our co-workers as well. During the sixteen years that have passed since then, we have all learned to respect each other and to work together. Differences are now settled within the framework of a legal contract that cannot be changed without agreement on both sides. Today, we settle issues through a democratic process, a process of which I am very proud.

In the early days of the university, the clerical and technical salaries were similar to those of other colleges in the state, but as time went by our increases grew smaller, and we hardly ever knew if or when we would receive raises. Often, when someone received a merit raise, others in that same department were penalized with smaller raises in order to compensate. A raise didn't depend so much on your worth as an employee as it did on the willingness of your boss to go to bat for you. Such favoritism exacerbated our already low morale. Most of us came from politically conservative areas and were not politically savvy, so at first it was easy for the administration to keep changing the rules. And while there was plenty of grumbling, no one was willing to speak up where it counted.

We had to be proficient in such academic areas as writing and math and in the technical skills of typing, shorthand, dictaphone, and accounting. We were expected to be the problem solvers for both faculty and students and the essence of diplomacy and tact. We were even required to dress professionally—no slacks, even in winter. Yet we were the lowest paid staff group on campus. Even so, many of us believed that if we were dependable and did not make a fuss, we would be "taken care of." We were in awe of academia and assumed that an enlightened institution would, in good faith, make decisions concerning our employment in our best interests.

However, some of us came to believe that those in power were taking advantage of our naïveté.

Meanwhile, faculty were being hired from all over the United States, bringing with them the new ideas of the seventies. They were constantly meeting to discuss their teaching philosophies, create policies, and mold their working lives. An important issue for them was the equalization of male/female faculty salaries. Our janitorial staff was unionized, and, through their contract, better paid and with some control over their working lives. But the clerical and technical staff felt helpless.

Taking a harder look at our situation, some of us held our first organizational meeting in a home close to campus. Twenty women were present, all eager to voice their concerns. The meeting lasted late into the evening, launching several other meetings and a struggle that would continue for many years. We took our concerns to the president and agreed to try settling our differences by working closely with the administration.

In 1973, a Committee of Five was elected by the clerical/technical staff as a liaison to the administration. During the following few years, our committee became the Liaison Committee, a larger elected group that discussed, researched, and wrote proposals for change. At first, some of the women were afraid to speak up at meetings, but it was not long before many who had never made an administrative decision before grew into their new roles like professionals. This was a liberating experience for us. We passed recommendations that were sent to the Personnel Office for approval. We developed a grievance procedure and a professional growth and development policy and made recommendations concerning wages and fringe benefits. However, although we made some gains, we were unable to change wages, unfair hiring and promotion practices, poor retirement benefits, and the policy of having to take forced vacation or unpaid leave when the college closed for winter holidays and inclement weather. Accordingly, a small group of us began meeting outside the limits of the Liaison Committee to question its effectiveness. When, subsequently, a new personnel manual and compensation package was thrust upon us, one which we had had little part in developing, our worst fears were justified.

Since 1963, clericals had worked a 37.5 rather than a 40 hour week on a weekly salary, a benefit meant to attract employees from jobs closer to their homes in the cities. We were expected to work the additional two-and-a-half hours only when the need arose, which was infrequently. With the new package, our work week would be increased to forty hours; the extra working hours totaled two-and-a-half hours a week, or three weeks a year, and the only increase in salary would be based on that extra time: in essence, no increase at all. Through a phone survey, we discovered that, under this new policy, some of our co-workers would be receiving four cents more an hour and some fifteen cents, but most salaries would decrease as much as ten cents an hour, without the additional hours figured into the calculations.

Another grave disappointment to us in the new compensation package was a step system, which we had wanted—to replace the ambiguous minimum-maximum salary schedule in effect—but this one would work to our disadvantage. In the twelve-step system it outlined, a salary would increase \$5.00 a week each year, but

it would take twelve years to reach the top. After a promotion, it would take a year before a salary's increase would be at all significant.

We could no longer tolerate such unfair policies and circulated a petition targeting the wage scale and forty hour work week, requesting the board of control to table the entire package. We collected 130 signatures. Our only hope to stop the package from being implemented was to attend the April 1978, Board of Control meeting and distribute presentation notebooks which contained articles, memos, and statistical data to illustrate our point, and the petition.

It was a lovely day, and we felt optimistic as we walked across campus. As the spokesperson for the group, I explained the inequities in the package to the board. One member of the board asked several questions, which gave me the opportunity to elaborate. But then a member from the Liaison Committee gained the floor to say that the committee had voted in favor of the package and wished to have it immediately approved by the board, fearing that a postponement would only hurt the workers. I managed to regain the floor and to urge the board at least to investigate our concerns. The petition to table the package was ignored, and the package was adopted, with one abstention; but it was further resolved that the chair appoint a Review Committee to examine the effect the package would have on our wages and to submit its findings to the October 1978 Board meeting. We left feeling that at least not everything was lost.

After the meeting, battle lines were drawn and became more fierce when the *Grand Rapids Press* entered the debate. One headline read, "GVSU Workers Upset Over School's New Pay System." In addition, letters from the clerical/technical staff were published in the "Letters to the Editor" section of the *Press*. An excerpt from one letter summed up 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!

I learned only by accident that the Board of Control Review Committee had met briefly before the June board meeting and rubber stamped the original package. When I informed our group, many were furious, but others simply considered it to be business as usual. During the summer, five of us set out to do some investigating. We met with a state insurance analyst, who told us, after reviewing the new manual, that among other things, the document, including the retirement plan, could be rescinded by action of the Board of Control for any reason at any time. Our situation was worse than we had imagined.

At first we considered an independent association, but among the disadvantages was the inability, because of cost, to take grievances through the state arbitration process. Our local treasury would have had to be enormous to consider even one arbitration. If an independent association cannot afford to arbitrate, a contract is useless. Therefore, we began a search for a well-established union. After meeting

with three labor unions, we agreed that the Michigan Education Association would be the most effective in our particular situation. In the fall, when we met with co-workers to share our ideas and enthusiasm, we were faced with some antagonism. The meeting soon erupted into argument. No longer were we a group working together for a common cause. The bickering and paper war began. Those opposed to affiliating with an organized union began the drive for an independent association. However, there were enough signed union interest cards to bring the issue to a vote.

During this time, I was the Administrative Assistant to the Dean of William James College and got a lot of support from the dean as well as from faculty members: one had helped compile statistical data for our Board of Control presentation, and others promoted our cause through discussions with colleagues. Others of the clerical staff across campus also received support from the faculty members in their areas. Our core Union Interest Group grew in number and included television engineers, library staff, and lab technicians. Committed to our cause, we often met late into the evening. Our planning meetings were energizing and collegial, if not without some disagreement over issues, and the memos we circulated were crafted carefully to reflect the philosophy of the group as a whole. Our open meetings focused on defining our problems and discussing solutions.

With our union interest cards turned in to the Michigan Employment Regulation Commission, things began to fall into place. When we returned from the college winter holiday closing (having had to use some forced vacation days or unpaid lost time), the first 1979 issue of the Public Relations office's campus newspaper, the *Forum*, contained two articles: an anti-union view, "Why a CT Association?" and a pro-union view, "Why MEA?" It's interesting to note that, at that time, there was no movement among the staff to maintain the status quo. As the January 30th referendum approached, the Personnel Office sent out a list of voting instructions, explaining the three options. This memo provoked another paper war among the clerical/technical staff, making it painful to deal with co-workers who had become adversaries.

When the votes were tallied, it was clear that very few had wished to preserve the status quo and that an overwhelming number of eligible voters had supported the union. The student newspaper, the *Lantern*, described it this way:

CT'S VOTE IN MEA UNION A LANDSLIDE. 128 of 138 eligible voters turned out 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."

But the *Forum* voiced a different point of view. Someone was quoted as saying, "I think we're more divided than ever. People are angry and some are threatening to quit." Yet another, "I don't think the election will mean any serious changes."

However, as soon as we learned of and congratulated ourselves on the victory, we set up another meeting, and we were joined by some who had been active in the push for an independent association, so some of us, at least, felt more united than

ever. After all those years, we had finally gained the college's attention and the legal right to participate in the decisions affecting our working lives. That was January 30, 1979, the day that marked the beginning of a whole new list of struggles that brought about the wages, benefits, contract language, and the camaraderie that we've worked so hard to achieve, and that we enjoy today.