

SIDNEY INGERMAN\*

## Employed Graduate Students Organize at Berkeley.

AT THE HEIGHT of the Free Speech Movement,<sup>1</sup> with a significant part of the University of California's Berkeley campus paralyzed by a student strike, strike leaders estimated that 600 of the school's 1,200 teaching assistants had joined the strike, while some 300 more were respecting picket lines.<sup>2</sup> Two months later, on February 1, 1965, the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, chartered Local 1570, University Employed Graduate Students, consisting of teaching assistants, research assistants, and readers on the Berkeley campus.<sup>3</sup> By June, membership in the new local had more than doubled, following an organizing campaign in academic departments and research institutes, and among nonprofessional library personnel. With close to 500 members, this unique addition to the ranks of white-collar unions is at present the third largest local affiliate of the AFT in the state of California; its potential membership includes about 2,500 academically employed students.

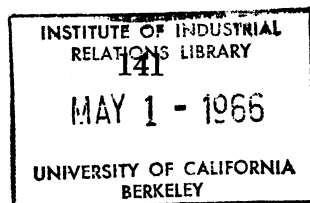
These unprecedented actions by a group of advanced graduate students at an American university—students on the verge of professional careers—provide the background for this paper. The questions to be dealt with are the following: What were the circumstances that led to union organization? How special were they? Can such an organization endure? If it does, is it an isolated phenomenon on a unique campus? Finally, are these events a

\* Graduate student, Department of Economics, and Research Assistant, Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Gerald Fox and Brian O'Brien in the preparation of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Starobin, "Graduate Students and the Free Speech Movement," *Graduate Student Journal*, IV (Spring, 1965), 22, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Teaching assistants typically teach small sections of students enrolled in courses where a professor delivers mass lectures. Research assistants usually work under the personal supervision of an individual professor and aid in projects of interest to the professor. Readers are used to grade examinations and term papers in certain large courses.



harbinger of the development in the United States of the politically oriented graduate unions found in many other countries?

### Teaching Assistants

Teaching assistants constitute the core of Local 1570's membership. The University of California, along with other large universities, has attempted to meet the problem of a rapidly growing student body and a limited supply of qualified faculty by turning over to graduate students a significant part of the responsibility for teaching freshmen and sophomore students. These teaching assistants, on the road to their Ph.D.'s, have been described as "generally the most enthusiastic, underpaid and overworked members of a university teaching staff."<sup>4</sup> Most of them are at least in their mid-twenties, and many support families. They are often treated with little consideration and forethought when departmental policy is made, and are unsure how long their jobs will last. In a number of cases handled by the union, clerical error and bureaucratic inertia were found to have been the combined cause of teaching assistants not being reappointed.<sup>5</sup>

### Organization of the Union

There is no doubt that the extensive involvement of graduate students in the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and the student "revolt" that took place during the academic year 1964-1965 was an important factor leading to the organization of employed graduate students. However, quasi-union activity in the University's Economics Department had begun almost a year earlier and provided the experience and elements of leadership that made possible the survival and growth of the local.<sup>6</sup> Other student organizations which were born at the time of the Free Speech Movement now represent, at best, a small corps of activists. A semester prior to the emergence of the FSM, the Economics Teaching Assistants Association was responsible for the reappointment of three of its members whose jobs had been threatened. The association maintained an independent though sympathetic position with regard to the FSM, and during the first day of

<sup>4</sup> "The Ubiquitous TA," *Time*, LXXXV (June 4, 1965), 49-50.

<sup>5</sup> *The Preliminary Report of the Select Committee on Education of the Berkeley Division of the University of California Academic Senate* (May 24, 1965), a faculty commissioned study, summed up the problem in the following way: "The present system of teaching assistants and readers . . . is extremely poor. In some departments it permits a degrading bargain-basement exploitation of graduate students."

<sup>6</sup> Three Economics Department teaching assistants had had considerable trade union experience. One student had recently returned from two years with the AFL-CIO's Industrial Union Division research staff, another was a former local union officer in both the Steel and Auto-workers Union, and a third had had extensive rank-and-file union experience.

the spontaneous student strike issued a position paper which urged all teaching assistants in the department to respect picket lines.

*Union or political pressure group?* The present purposes, organizational form, and affiliation of the graduate union were determined in a hard-fought competition between two groups: one sought to create an organization rooted in workplace collective bargaining (an extension of the Economics Association model); the other was concerned mainly with broad reform and political unionism. Illustrative of the latter group's view is the position taken in an early organizing leaflet:

Within the GCC [the Graduate Coordinating Committee represented a large body of graduate students whose activities were closely coordinated with the Free Speech Movement] is being formed a Union of University-employed Graduate Students. Its concerns include those of the GCC, but through the union we will be able to enjoin a strength which we would not have if we were only a fraternity of graduate students. . . . Through possible affiliation with organized labor, the UGS can bring to bear the pressure, enjoin the cooperation, and command the sympathies of a large body of support from the outside community. . . .

It is necessary to organize ourselves to maximum strength in order to reform our conditions radically within the University and the purposes of education: in other words, to redefine the uses of the University.<sup>7</sup>

An election leaflet of the slate of officers representing the opposing group indicates the more traditional collective bargaining approach:

The last few months have shown us that the educational process of this University needs radical changes and major improvements. . . . We have learned how bigness and impersonality damage what should be an important vocational and intellectual experience. How can we, as employed graduate students, improve our lot and improve the University as an educational institution?

In the first place, we must start where the problems arise, in each department and work place. We must improve the conditions under which we work. To be good teachers, we must have classes of manageable size and be free to teach what we believe true. To be fair and conscientious readers, we must receive a wage that makes it possible to devote sufficient time to each paper that comes before us. To be creative researchers, we must be free to follow the facts where they lead us. . . . All of us, whatever our job, should be protected from arbitrary hiring practices and capricious dismissals.

These problems that stand between us and meaningful work can be solved by a union that is organized in each work place. The union committees that work to improve conditions at the department level are the solid base on which a strong and lasting union can be built.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> From the organizing leaflet, "ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, JACK?" issued December 1965 on the Berkeley campus.

<sup>8</sup> From an election leaflet, issued February 21, 1965.

The collective bargaining group went on to win every post in the union's first election.

*Affiliation.* The question of affiliation with organized labor posed interesting problems for the student organizers, as well as for the international unions presented with the chance to charter such a local.

The well-organized collective bargaining group, which was aligned with the teaching assistants in the Economics Department, moved single-mindedly for affiliation with the American Federation of Teachers. They argued that the AFT was the only labor union that could provide the professional appeal necessary to expand the union's membership on campus, and that for many graduate students who would be entering the teaching profession such affiliation logically united their present and future. It was also pointed out that the small but growing AFT local of faculty members on the campus could be counted on for both moral and material support. Another argument was that only a teachers' union would understand and support militant action in defense of academic freedom and educational reform.

Members of the group advocating a more political union proposed affiliation with the Teamsters Union (independent), the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (independent), or the State, County, and Municipal Workers Union (AFL-CIO). They believed that the "muscle" of these unions would become available in the immediate crises on the campus. Neither the Teamsters nor the Longshoremen showed interest. Representatives of the State, County, and Municipal Workers Union and the AFT presented their unions' respective merits before a crowded membership meeting; the graduate students then went on to choose the AFT by an almost unanimous vote.<sup>9</sup>

The students wanted the AFT. But did the AFT want the students? The AFT leadership had three problems to consider before issuing a charter. First, was the student leadership sufficiently stable to function within the trade union milieu? Second, could the jurisdiction of the local be defined so that the professional character of the AFT would not be diluted? Third, could the local support itself financially? The student leadership idea was apparently found to be acceptable. The jurisdictional problem was solved by restricting membership to academically employed students, mainly teaching assistants, research assistants, and readers whose achievement level in terms of degrees and competence compares favorably with that of most

---

<sup>9</sup> One factor that influenced the size of the vote for the AFT was the fact that the SCMWW dues structure was inflexible and considered prohibitively high by many of the students.

teachers. (By a broad interpretation of this formulation nonprofessional library personnel were later accepted into membership.) Finally, the graduate student leadership set one dollar a month as the maximum dues possible for its constituents. The AFT pledged that limited organizing funds would be made available so that per capita dues could be paid to the national office and the Central Labor Council of Alameda County and there would still be funds available for building the local.

For the AFT the affiliation represents an important experiment. Success may mean that other large universities can be organized, but more immediately significant perhaps is the fact that one of the nation's leading universities will be turning out academicians and teachers with union cards. This is especially relevant to the AFT's effort to expand its base in California's State and Junior College systems.

### Activity in the Workplace

Because its membership is scattered over a large campus and employed in groups which have unique problems, the local has developed a federal structure whose basic units are workplaces—departments, institutes, centers, the library, etc. Thus far, the most significant activities have taken place where collective bargaining relations have been formally established.

The union represents over 50 per cent of teaching assistants in the Bacteriology, Economics, History, and Subject A (remedial English) Departments. Its membership is close to 50 per cent of assistants in the Mathematics, Music, Political Science, and Sociology Departments. It has 16 of the 20 research assistants in the Institute of Industrial Relations. To the surprise of some observers, 6 out of 35 teaching assistants in Electrical Engineering and 4 out of 24 teaching assistants in Business Administration have joined the union. The union has been unable to attract a single one of the 39 teaching assistants in Psychology, none out of 22 in Botany, and only 2 out of 96 in Physics.

Negotiations in the Economics Department (where the union represents over 90 per cent of all employed graduate students) and the Library have been extensive and productive. On the other hand, the union's dissatisfaction with policy negotiations on reappointment of teaching assistants in the Sociology Department resulted in an educational picket line outside the Department's offices during the closing days of the spring semester. In almost all cases where meetings with union committees took place new lines of communication were set up, and in many workplaces grievances were settled.

Local 1570 has dealt with three general types of problems in workplace negotiations.

*Appointments.* First, there are the problems that stem from the tendency in many departments to regard teaching assistants and readers as residual assets whose contribution to the department's teaching function is only peripherally considered in personnel policy. Typically, the problems arise in departments which have no firm or consistent criteria for hiring and reappointment. In other cases, appointments are announced so late that students who are not reappointed are unable to secure alternative financial support. For example, in a language department, a 40-year-old woman teaching assistant, who was supporting a child, was informed the weekend before she was to start teaching that her contract would not be renewed. Intercession by the union delegate was instrumental in determining that the decision not to reappoint had been the result of a clerical error, and she was rehired. However, the union found that in this department *no* appointments were confirmed until a few days before the beginning of each semester.

As mentioned earlier, even before Local 1570 was established, the Economics Teaching Assistants Association was able to win reappointments for three of its members. These three men were informed late in the spring semester of 1964 that under new criteria established by the Department they would be placed on an alternate list for reappointment the following year. The union committee objected to the procedure and maintained that the students had every right to expect reappointment under past practice. The union did not question the right of the Department to change hiring and reappointment criteria, but it maintained that such changes must be made early enough so that teaching assistants who could not expect to have their jobs the following year would be able to make other arrangements for financial support. Subsequently, a meeting of the Department's Graduate Committee agreed with the union and all three were reappointed.

During the fall semester of 1964, the Department's Graduate Committee drew up detailed regulations governing appointment of teaching assistants. Joint meetings of this committee and representatives of the union modified and improved the original proposals, and new criteria for appointment and reappointment were issued. In the first round of application, the new procedure has worked to the mutual satisfaction of the Department and the Economics teaching assistants. Joint consultation was sufficient to produce satisfactory solutions in the few cases where problems arose.

It is interesting to note that although teaching assistant and research assistant salaries are in the \$2500-\$2800 range there have been no signifi-

cant demands for increased pay. There can be no question but that the prospect of tripling his salary and raising his status through the achievement of the Ph.D. is the student's main goal. Therefore, it seems reasonable that the union has first sought the security of continued employment for its members. Given the temporary nature of their stay at the university, graduate students do not consider a pay increase of a few cents an hour to be an important issue. On the other hand, the union has expressed concern with the quality of teaching and the conditions under which research is done.

*Teaching and research.* The union is professionally interested in improving the quality of instruction in courses where teaching assistants and readers are involved. Teaching assistants in the Economics Department have been concerned with issues having to do with course content, choice of textbooks, and problems of improving teaching conditions. The union was instrumental in setting up a subcommittee of teaching assistants to review the merits of books that had been or could be used in their courses. Another subcommittee considered curriculum problems to be faced in the event of an anticipated changeover by the University to the quarter system. These subcommittees met with similar faculty bodies. In addition, at the union's suggestion, the Department agreed to hire a teaching assistant as a summer researcher to gather materials, exercises, and readings which would contribute to improving the following year's course. In order better to integrate current events into course presentations, the teaching assistants also negotiated subscriptions to the air mail edition of the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* for their office. But the union's most important accomplishment, as far as its teaching members are concerned, was to negotiate a decrease in classroom hours from six to four a week.

At the Institute of Industrial Relations the union has engaged in discussions with the Director regarding setting up a more acceptable system for assigning research assistants to faculty members.

*Amenities.* Finally, departmental negotiations have achieved improved allocation of desks and office space, telephone extensions for offices, and, although it seems trivial, in one institute research assistants are proud of having negotiated a clock for their office wall.

*The Library.* Important victories have been won by the union in the Library. Here, where collective bargaining takes more usual trade union forms, the first problem the union faced was an attempt to fire its key

organizer for alleged incompetence. The local's leadership, utilizing its affiliation with the Central Labor Council of Alameda County, involved that body's assistant executive secretary in meetings with the Library Personnel Officer and successfully defended the employee. Since then the union has negotiated a substantial cut in the number of hours of work necessary before promotion from probationary status takes place and has reached agreement that seniority affecting promotion will not be broken by less than a four-month hiatus in employment (to take account of student summer vacations). Also, a recently announced wage raise for Library employees may have been influenced by the growing AFT membership of both professional and nonprofessional librarians.<sup>10</sup>

### Campus-Wide Collective Bargaining

Fruitful discussion of issues that are relevant to the campus as a whole has proved difficult for the local's leadership. The hardest problem has been to determine who the employer is. The campus personnel officer deals with nonacademic issues; some personnel issues are referred to the Dean of the Graduate Division; some issues are declared to be in the province of the state Board of Regents; others belong to the state legislature. The formal as well as the actual decision-making chains must be found. When they could be found, the union pressed for the following: a wage increase for readers and pay for the time they spend attending mandatory undergraduate lectures; acknowledgment by the University that research assistants have personal rights to the research they do; and improved health insurance coverage, especially for graduate students with dependents.

In addition, the union has asked the campus administration to go on record against the loyalty oath requirement for employees and has announced that it is consulting with other unions which have members employed by the University of California about the possibility of a campaign to achieve a dues checkoff.<sup>11</sup> Thus far, the only tangible accomplishment has been to get a new group medical plan which will save money for employed graduate students with dependents.

As this article is being written, during midsummer, the union's leadership is grappling with a new and characteristically difficult problem. The state legislature, in a move that has been interpreted by the union as an attack on Berkeley teaching assistants and faculty, has reduced the annual budget allocation for teaching assistants, thus threatening 260 teaching

<sup>10</sup> Professional librarians are being recruited by Local 1474, which represents faculty members.

<sup>11</sup> *The Daily Californian*, May 19, 1965, p. 3.



assistants' jobs. The union recognizes that the problem lies in the political arena, but it also believes that a fight must be made on the campus and departmental level where the allocation of jobs takes place, and where possibilities exist for diverting funds from other uses to assistants' salaries.

### Can Local 1570 Endure?

Can the local survive tranquility, born as it was in the midst of student "revolt"? Given the propensity of activist graduate students for political and social involvement, will the union be able to remain broad enough, yet sufficiently united, to be effective? Can a union whose membership has graduate employment between two and five years and has the prospect of sharp upward economic and social mobility provide continuity and maintain competent leadership? These seem to be the basic problems confronting the union's existence. They are imposing problems to be sure, and objective prognosis must tend to be pessimistic. But who could have predicted the union's development to date? The imposing array of accomplishments and the large number of students involved and affected by the local's activities constitute favorable prerequisites for future growth.

The ticklish problem of political action among the highly politicized membership of Local 1570 has thus far proved less of a problem than experienced observers of the labor movement would have expected. For the most part, the local has played a rather small part in campus student politics. However, it has joined with other groups in sponsoring a campus rally and march protesting United States policy in the Dominican Republic, and it has cosponsored with the faculty local a mammoth 36-hour community meeting whose overriding tenor was criticism of United States policy in Viet Nam. A secret ballot referendum to contribute financial support to the Viet Nam Community Meeting was overwhelmingly approved by the membership.

By American trade union standards, Local 1570 must be classified as a left-wing union. The question is, can it survive as an organization highly concerned with political issues as well as professional and collective bargaining functions? Most foreign graduate student unions are of the political variety. Thus far, American experience indicates this path leads, at best, to narrow sectarianism.

### The Future of the AFT

Can the organizing experience at Berkeley be expected to occur among graduate students at other large universities? Probably not. Given the intrinsic problems of building and maintaining such a union, it

is unlikely that the factors that made Local 1570 possible will readily be repeated.

However, the organization of Local 1570 is pertinent to the increased tempo of union activity that is taking place in California junior colleges, state colleges, and at the University of California. A recent example of this activity is a rally held on the campus of San Jose State College, where AFT members in full academic regalia demanded:

Continued free tuition, unlimited enrollment for qualified students, collective bargaining, faculty control over educational policy, 20 per cent increase in salary, 20 to one student-teacher ratio, nine-hour teaching load, regular sabbatical leaves, support for faculty research and scholarship, travel to scholarly meetings and adequate office space and secretarial help.<sup>12</sup>

On the University of California Berkeley campus, the faculty local of the AFT has tripled in size in the last year and now has about 130 members. On the same campus, a quasi-union organization, the Academic Research and Professional Association, was founded in May 1965 to represent the interests of nonteaching full-time professional and research staff members. There are between six and eight hundred University of California personnel eligible for membership in the organization.

The organization of graduate students at the University of California may be an important bit of corroborative evidence that the large numbers of professionals employed in rapidly growing educational facilities want some degree of control over their work environment and are susceptible to union organization.

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, May 14, 1965, p. 6.