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A New Force in American Labor: Academe

One in five members of the United Automobile Workers is in higher education.

THE REVIEW

By Barry Eidlin

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Cyn Huang is an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley. For roughly 10 hours per week, Huang, who uses they/them pronouns, works as a philosophy tutor — helping students hone term papers and parse the finer points of Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*.

More recently though, Huang has been working on something a bit less academic: campaigning to win the right for the members of the United Automobile Workers

union to elect its top leadership. While small groups of UAW reformers have advanced this proposal for decades to no avail, activists now see a real chance that it will become reality.

In the next few days, we will learn the results of a referendum allowing UAW members to decide whether they want to elect their top leadership directly, rather than via a slate of delegates. Ballots were mailed in October to nearly 400,000 members and more than 600,000 retirees, who are also eligible to vote. Votes will be counted beginning on November 29.

If the referendum passes, it would end an arrangement that has held for more than 70 years. Currently, local union members elect convention delegates, who then vote for top leadership in a tightly stage-managed affair at a quadrennial constitutional convention. Reforming this system would go a long way toward dismantling the one-party state that has ruled the UAW since 1948.

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This one-party system has not served union members well. Over the past few years, a sweeping corruption scandal has landed several top UAW officials in prison. Eleven senior union leaders — including two former presidents — were found guilty of fraud, corruption, embezzlement, and other labor-law violations. The federal government also brought an anti-corruption civil suit against the union; during negotiations related to that case, the UAW agreed to the direct-election referendum. Establishing direct election of union officers (also called "one member, one vote") could breathe new life into what was historically one of the largest and most powerful unions in the United States.

But why would a philosophy major at UC Berkeley join a campaign to change how an auto-worker union chooses its leadership? As a tutor in the University of California system, Huang is a member of UAW Local 2865 — along with other academic workers like graduate-student instructors and "readers," students hired to grade assignments. With 19,000 members, Local 2865 is now the second-largest local in the entire union.

Organizing those members has been challenging. "It's hard enough to get them to recognize themselves as workers," explained Keith Brower Brown, a Ph.D. candidate in the UC Berkeley geography department. "It's a whole other step to get them to embrace that they're a part of this international union, and they have a stake in changing the leadership of the union." To help colleagues take that step, Cyn Huang tries to connect the referendum to familiar issues: "You explain how the ability to elect top leadership could lead to better contracts, greater accountability, new organizing. It makes sense to people. Once they hear that, it's pretty intuitive."

In recent decades, academic workers like Huang and Brown have become an increasingly large part of the UAW. This group — which includes undergraduate tutors, graduate-student teachers and researchers, postdoctoral fellows, and adjunct instructors — now constitutes roughly one-fifth of the UAW's active membership.

But despite their growing numbers, academic workers have had a limited political presence in the UAW. No academic worker has ever served on the union's 13-member International Executive Board, which manages the union's day-to-day affairs. Locals representing academic workers rarely send their full complement of delegates to UAW conventions, where strategic goals and priorities are set. Sometimes, they don't send delegates at all.

That could be changing with the current referendum. Across the country, academic workers are organizing their fellow union members to vote for direct elections; their sheer numbers make them a significant voting bloc.

Why are so many academic workers in the UAW to begin with? Tracing this history leads us back to the 1970s, the dawn of academic-worker organizing. Back then, the first successful attempts at forming academic-worker unions, at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and the University of Wisconsin at Madison, found homes in the American Federation of Teachers — a logical choice for workers in the education sector.

But University of California academic workers had other ideas. Imbued with the anti-authoritarian spirit of the 1960s New Left, they were drawn to District 65, a "renegade union" founded by Communists in the depths of the Great Depression. It had made a name for itself as a militant, grass-roots union committed to organizing groups of workers who didn't fit the mold of "traditional" union members, particularly low-wage workers of color.

District 65 had always been a shoestring operation, and had long sought a better-resourced parent organization. In 1981, it affiliated with the UAW; in 1987, it merged fully with the larger union. This was the first step in consummating the alliance of academic and auto workers. District 65 hoped that the UAW's ample treasury, particularly its strike fund, could bankroll more effective organizing. For its part, the UAW was already reeling from the contract concessions and plant closures that

decimated its membership in the 1980s. Unable to organize in their core industry, UAW leaders hoped that the District 65 merger would allow them to expand membership elsewhere.

Cultural and political factors were in play, too. While far larger and more bureaucratic than the hardscrabble District 65, the UAW still traded on its reputation as a bastion of postwar progressivism. It was a reputation largely built by Walter Reuther, who served as UAW president from 1946 until his death in 1970.

Reuther's UAW set the bar for wages and benefits for much of the U.S. labor market, transforming manufacturing jobs into decent, secure work. But it also provided funding and organizational infrastructure for the social movements of the 1960s, including Students for a Democratic Society, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The 1962 Port Huron Statement, considered the founding document of the New Left, carries that name because it was drafted at a UAW retreat outside Port Huron, Mich.

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While Reuther's successors lacked much of his progressive social vision, we can see faint echoes of it in the District 65 merger. By investing in the "nontraditional" workers whom District 65 organized — including academic workers — the UAW sought not only to expand labor's ranks, but to expand notions of who belonged in labor's ranks.

But there was a darker side to Reuther's vision, one that proved far more resilient after his death: his commitment to centralized control and organizational secrecy. As he rose to the presidency in the 1940s, Reuther consolidated power and eliminated internal opposition. In so doing, he transformed a union famous for its vibrant — critics might say fractious — internal life into a one-party state.

The party in this one-party state is known as the AdministrationCaucus. Since 1949, it has exerted de facto control over all aspects of the union. The caucus decides whom to run for union-leadership positions, stage-manages union conventions, and oversees much of the union's day-to-day operations. It is virtually impossible to advance in the union leadership without being a member, and being a member requires pledging loyalty to top leadership above all else.

The top-down UAW leadership model did not always mesh well with the more contentious, dynamic internal culture of District 65, including the academic workers. But over time the Administration Caucus quelled internal dissent and imposed the UAW's regimented discipline. Within a few years of academic workers at the University of California winning their union in 1999, what would become Local 2865 was essentially a shell organization.

A similar model prevailed as the UAW extended its academic-worker organizing to other campuses over the course of the 2000s. But after the 2008 financial crisis, union leadership ignored calls to mobilize against budget cuts in higher education — and many academic workers lost patience. Members began organizing reform caucuses, often under the name Academic Workers for a Democratic Union. An AWDU slate swept to power in Local 2865 in 2011, while affiliated groups gained influence in locals at the Universities of Washington and of Massachusetts at Amherst, and at New York University. Reform caucuses have since emerged at Columbia and Harvard Universities and at the New School.

The various reform caucuses have had their ups and downs in the years since they first formed, as well as friction with regional and International Union leadership. But collectively they signal a shift in academic workers' relationship to the UAW. Instead of disengaging, members are digging in and trying to change their union.

ntil recently, these reform efforts were concentrated within the academic-worker locals, cut off from workers in the automotive core of the union. The one-member,

Uone-vote referendum has changed that.

The referendum "has brought us in contact with other UAW members in a way that has genuinely increased solidarity," said Andrew Bergman, an applied-physics Ph.D. student at Harvard and member of Harvard Graduate Students Union–UAW Local 5118. "Now we see ourselves as part of this union that has traditionally been industrial, and by extension people buy into the idea that they are workers, which is a big step up even from a year ago."

"We're learning so much from auto workers who have decades of organizing knowledge" added Anila Gill, a Ph.D. candidate in cinema studies at NYU. This alliance "is the kind of organizational structure that creates lasting ability to build union power."

For their part, autoworker reformers have taken inspiration from their academic counterparts. "With the referendum, the connections have grown exponentially" said Scott Houldieson Sr., a Ford worker and member of Chicago Local 551. "We've learned a great deal about each other's situations with our employers and found that we have a great deal in common. Exploitation isn't limited to the factory."

The organization facilitating this alliance is Unite All Workers for Democracy, a movement of rank-and-file UAW members formed in late 2019. After coming close to triggering a constitutional convention in 2020, where delegates would have voted on the question of direct elections, UAWD has played a pivotal role in the current referendum. Houldieson, who chairs UAWD, estimates that the group has distributed more than 80,000 leaflets. That's on top of thousands more calls, texts, and one-on-one conversations.

Small groups of academic-worker and autoworker reformers had been connecting informally for years to discuss issues of shared concern. Running into academic-worker delegates at past UAW conventions, Houldieson noticed that they were the

ones “willing to stick their necks out” to challenge top leadership on issues of financial transparency and democratic accountability.

But the alliance gathered steam in early 2020, as autoworkers involved with UAWD started trying to get academic workers on board with their effort to trigger an early constitutional convention. Political affinities aside, there were practical considerations. To trigger the convention, organizers needed endorsements from UAW locals representing at least 80,000 members. As some of the largest UAW locals by membership, the academic-worker locals offered an efficient means of reaching that threshold.

That effort fell short, but it laid the groundwork for the current campaign. “This is what I’ve been looking for for years — to be an actual union,” said UAWD co-chair Justin Mayhugh, a GM worker out of Local 31, in Kansas City. He notes that academic workers have provided crucial support for the recent strike by John Deere workers, talking up the strike on social media and donating to a fund for striking workers. Mayhugh contrasts this enthusiasm with what he sees as more tepid support from the International Union.

The growing presence of academic workers in what has traditionally been a manufacturing union might seem likely to stoke internal divisions. So far, the common focus on the election referendum has forestalled this kind of conflict. Few auto workers are willing to explicitly attack academic workers as interlopers out to change the character of the union — at least for now.

What’s at stake in the one member, one vote campaign? The current referendum is the latest in a decades-long line of reform efforts in the UAW. While these previous efforts made some headway, they were ultimately ground up in the cogs of the Administration Caucus machine. This time though, the corruption scandal has created an opening for structural reform. “It’s sad that this is what it took,” said Houldieson, “but we need to seize the opportunity.”

As membership declined, the UAW shifted from setting high bars for wages, benefits, and working conditions to pioneering "innovations" like labor-management "partnership" programs.

The stakes are high. In recent decades the UAW has slipped from its postwar position at the vanguard of U.S. labor. Membership has declined from its peak of around 1.5 million in 1979 to barely 400,000 today. And as membership declined, the UAW shifted from setting high bars for wages, benefits, and working conditions to pioneering "innovations" like concession bargaining and labor-management "partnership" programs. These turned the union into a "partner" that assisted management in putting in place work-speedups and multitier wage scales, which pay different groups of workers different amounts for doing the same work. These concessions have sapped worker solidarity and eroded union power.

The UAW and automakers also set up "joint training centers," joint ventures between the UAW and each of the "Big 3" auto companies, established with the goal of improving the auto companies' quality and competitiveness. In reality, they created unaccountable patronage machines and poorly regulated sources of funding that are at the heart of the current corruption scandals.

Given its position at the heart of multibillion-dollar industries like auto manufacturing and, increasingly, higher education, a revitalized UAW could play a key role in solving many of the problems facing workers today, including wage stagnation, unpredictable scheduling, and eroding job quality.

We saw hints of this power in the recently concluded strike of 10,000 UAW members at Deere & Company. There, workers won significant gains after a month on the picket

line (and rejecting two previous contract offers). Meanwhile, 3,000 academic workers at Columbia University have been on strike since November 3, fighting for improved health and dental benefits, antiharassment protections, and wages to match the cost of living in New York City. And 4,500 academic workers at Harvard University came to the brink of a strike on November 16 — only to have the administration agree to a contract at the last minute.

These actions are part of a broader pattern of worker unrest that some in the media dubbed "Striketober" last month. But they have been organized independently and often against the wishes of top UAW leadership. UAWD organizers contend that direct elections will result in a leadership that is more invested in supporting worker organizing.

"The current unaccountable leadership structure has stunted our ability to have campaigns in our union that call for increasing our strike power, or organizing support, or social justice issues," said Andrew Bergman of the Harvard graduate students'-UAW group. "All these issues we care about run through direct elections."

What's next for one member, one vote? The lack of polling makes it hard to predict how the referendum results will turn out, but UAWD organizers are optimistic. Opposition to one member, one vote has been muted. After months of silence, the Administration Caucus recently set upa website opposing direct elections, arguing that the current delegate system is democratic and that changing the rules won't "stop bad actors from running or winning."

A win for direct elections would constitute the most far-reaching structural reform in the UAW's history, and could start a reform process that transforms the UAW from a one-party state into something like a multiparty democracy. It would also signal the arrival of academic workers as a political force within the union. A defeat, however, would show that the Administration Caucus retains considerable power despite the leadership scandals.

Regardless of the outcome, academics and auto workers alike understand that this is the first step in a long campaign. “The alliance is going to have to continue to develop and mature” said Houldieson, “because academic workers are such a large part of the UAW nowadays.”

More broadly, the direct-elections campaign in the UAW suggests a shift in the character of academic unionism. In a world where fewer and fewer graduate students can expect to find a secure job at the end of their training, their role as a source of cheap, flexible labor for universities is hard to miss. As a result, academic workers have become more willing to identify as workers — and to make common cause with workers outside of academe. That shift has consequences not only for academic workers and the universities that employ them, but for the shape of the U.S. labor movement as a whole.

The author thanks Trent McDonald for permission to cite from unpublished interviews with Justin Mayhugh and Anila Gill.

Correction (Dec. 2, 2021, 10:14 a.m.): This article has been updated to reflect the fact that the vibrancy of Local 2865 declined a few years after it attained recognition.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

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