We Are All Learners

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Editor's note: Kris Rondeau began her talk by showing a video with documentary clips of the union's 1988 election at Harvard. The video, HUCTW 20th Birthday, is accessible on YouTube.

As you can see from the video, we won that election … and doors began to open. And we walked inside those doors, into rooms we had never seen before.

We learned something crucial. At that time, I believed, as workers do everywhere, that Harvard and all other employers always have a plan. That management processes were clear, strong, and deliberate. That decisions they made were thought through.

So one day, at breakfast with Professor John Dunlop[1]—Harvard's chief negotiator and my counterpart—I said, "John, I learned strategic thinking by watching Harvard. I learned how to think through decisions—what their effects would be two years, ten years, twenty years, even fifty years from



Rondeau and Dunlop on February 22, 1989, the first day of contract negotiations. *Credit: Joe Wrinn/Harvard University*

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now." John was washing down a bite of muffin with a sip of coffee. He gasped, sort of a Jerry Lewis or Albert Brooks moment. His food went flying about. After we had cleaned ourselves off and settled down, John looked me in the eyes with incredulity and humor. He leaned forward and said, "Toots, you have a lot to learn about big institutions."

It had never occurred to me there was no plan. It had never occurred to us there was no plan. That inside Harvard we would find an amalgam of management people, some underpowered, some with personal power, some with the power to obstruct, and thankfully, some with creative minds. We learned that power exists on a spectrum and it is *not* one thing.

We knew why we had organized Harvard: to balance power, to beat poverty, to help build a middle class in service-sector America, to begin to figure out how to change work. We knew Harvard was just one place and that only through continuous new organizing of new workers in new workplaces could we achieve the strength these kinds of goals required. So we traveled around the country, applying the ideas we absorbed at Harvard to places like the University of Minnesota, the University of Illinois, and several hospitals, altogether organizing over twenty thousand new workers.

In 1997, we won the biggest union election in Central Massachusetts in sixty years: the UMass Memorial Healthcare and UMass Medical School, where we now have 3,200 members. Then we organized social workers at Cambridge Health Alliance and a small but robust group of women who work as family liaisons in the Cambridge Public Schools.

Thousands of people, you and I and countless others, did this work. We learned and learned. We learned crucial lessons.

We learned that humans have a *curiosity gene*, that all of us are learners, and that we are our happiest when we are learning. *What a gift to know that*.

We learned that change happens *to you* if you are not there to influence how change happens. Modern workers must be intellectually and emotionally skilled and flexible to influence how change happens, to humanize how change happens, and to adapt.

We learned that compromise is not a dirty word or a sign of weakness. That compromises accumulate to create something that is much better than we could have imagined.

We learned that sometimes skill trumps power. Modern union leaders need a different set of skills than those we needed twenty years ago. New union leaders must be intellectually and psychologically flexible in a way we couldn't have imagined back then.

We learned that every worker has a role to play in the history of work. That happens when workers are connected to each other, when we make bringing new people into our community a top priority. Together, we can move large objects, like boulders or mountains, when we all push together. Organizing allows us to influence work and its future history.

You may have heard we are organizing Tufts University. It's true. We are helping 1,200 Tufts employees on three campuses—Medford, Boston, and

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Grafton Veterinary School. Our staff and employee organizers have met or contacted just over 900 people. And although sixty-seven percent of Tufts workers work in locked buildings, it is still safe to say the organizing outlook is rosy. In the fall, we will write to all of our members at Harvard, UMMHC, UMass Medical School, and the Cambridge Health Alliance to ask them to refer us to anyone in any walk of life at Tufts. We are trying to meet everyone, not just the union-eligible ones. Even if you only know a cow in the large animal hospital, we would like to be able to use your name to talk to him or her.

Inside and outside of work, we must organize. The world needs us to do our part—cheerfully: to use our collective power and good will to make work modern, flexible, and meaningful; to take good care of the ones we care for, little people and big people; to make our homes and institutions green and environmentally friendly; to seek friends and allies in other countries; to build a middle class in service-sector America; and to eradicate poverty and hunger in our own backyard and everywhere else. To work on these things and more, we must create a community built on kindness and interdependency.

You are now guides, teachers, and models. We must listen and listen. Union leaders must have a deep sense of our own identity and high levels of diplomatic skills. We must teach our union members just as we have learned: that there is no end, no answer. The road keeps going. We exist in the space between settle and strike, and we never have the luxury of a simple answer.

Thank you.



NOTE

1. A Harvard University economics professor and administrator for forty-five years, Dunlop is best known for his classic study, *Industrial Relations Systems* (1958). He served as President Ford's secretary of labor from 1975 to 1976.

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