Coalition Building

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I. Building Internal Coalitions

University of Hawaii Professional Assembly, the union representing faculty in the most unified system of post-secondary public education in the US, is, just as at most other colleges, itself a perennially fragile coalition made up of instructional faculty, researchers, librarians, and counselors working not only at the large flagship research/land-grant campus in Manoa, but also at two much smaller four-year campuses and six two-year community colleges.

[Bargaining Unit currently consists of 3,765 people (of which 3002 are members of UHPA) in non-administration positions (but including Department Chairs)]

The primary problem within our union is therefore not so much how to build a coalition with forces outside the university system, or even with the university administration, but how to preserve unity and dignity among our members across the UH system, and especially across the huge diversity of special interests at the main campus of Manoa (where almost half of the bargaining unit are housed).

[Manoa: 1,708 UHPA members and 413 non-members]

[Of course, we are not without those who do not want to be part of any union anyway, and they often subscribe to various right-wing groups that encourage people to opt out of the union altogether or at least demand that any fees used for overtly political activities be returned to them (413 out of 3,002). We are something of a closed shop: no-one can refuse to pay union dues, or their equivalent, at UH.]

I believe that the key element to a successful internal coalition is the setting of realistic and realizable goals:

Realistic Goal #1: Within our often fragile and complicated coalition, one such goal is to aim not for a specific percentage of member satisfaction but rather at zero dissatisfaction.

Example A: Fixed-Dollar Amount Salary Increase
In past negotiations, the union agreed to help the lowest-paid in the bargaining unit by splitting a negotiated raise, with one half of the increase as a straight across-the-board percentage and the other half a fixed dollar amount based on the median salary. That did not go down well with the top earners, who found their “relative deprivation” too painful compared to the very well-received but modest gains seen by the lowest paid. We have since stuck to across-the-board percentage increases, but, in negotiations with the Administration, insist on the establishment of salary minima for all ranks.

Example B: Special Salary Adjustments
When special salary increases were first introduced, primarily to placate the already better paid, UHPA was not only written into the process but felt it our responsibility to consider each case carefully and sometimes even make (completely justified) negative recommendations.

[How does faculty member A possibly merit this salary when others in his/her department are producing more research, doing better teaching, and contributing more to the academic and wider communities yet make much less?]
However, this approach, while creating some satisfaction, also produced extreme dissatisfaction within the union. We have since automatically approved each and every special salary adjustment request, selling this move to the full membership in terms of the pressure thus created for future relative increases for all faculty. The key point is, if the special salary adjustment request is now denied, it’s the administration that rejects it, and therefore the administration that has to deal with whatever dissatisfaction that decision creates.

Realistic Goal #2: No Agreement is a Zero-Sum Game
No campus or faculty classification should ever appear to be giving up something for another. Community College workload, for example, is a huge issue; until recently, their full load was five courses/semester. We have seen that this can be improved (i.e. lowered) in general contract negotiations without upsetting the flagship research campus faculty. However, this is only possible because the outcome (i.e. final cost) did not directly divert funds from the research institution.

II. Building External Coalitions (four examples)

A) Coalition with our NEA state coaffiliate, the Hawaii State Teachers Association (HSTA)
Although HSTA appears the most obvious partner, such a coalition has actually proven nearly impossible, as the interests and politics of the two groups appear generally antithetical. The NEA obviously has more “interest” in the larger teachers’ union; however, the HSTA also practices an anti-collective, head-and-feet-in-the-trough, K-12-should-get-it-all approach, and is more than willing to toss other public sector unions—even its natural allies—in front of the bus. One clear example is safe-guarding their own separate health-care program, thereby reducing the pool of lower-risk members and thus degrading the overall health-care coverage of all other public sector workers in the state. The word that most non-HSTA people use to describe HSTA is “untrustworthy.”

[I attended one meeting to discuss common educational and political goals and strategies; there was basically zero interest and definitely zero follow-up on the part of HSTA (my e-mails and calls about further meetings were simply ignored).]

[For a post-conference update, see the letter below, as well as other media; these show the machinations behind the legal challenge to “undo” recent negotiations.]

B) Coalition with the HI State AFL-CIO
UHPA’s affiliation with the local HI State AFL-CIO and, through that, with the largest sister public sector union of state government workers (HGEA), has proved a massive success. For example, when “clever” university faculty recently negotiated a six-year contract which saw the initial two-year 5% pay cut not only fully restored but fully repaid by the end of the contract (transforming the move from a furlough to an interest-free loan to the administration), this was presented to the other public sector unions by the AFL-CIO leadership as an option available only to UHPA through university control of tuition income. The agreement would therefore not result in a zero-sum game in which other government workers would consequently see further cuts.

[The furlough system was applied to most government workers, including many HGEA members on campus, just as to the teachers in HI; the HSTA’s decision to embrace a
“solution” of regular long week-ends received much greater national and international media coverage.]

C) Coalition with the University of Hawaii Administration
The university administration possibly imagines there to be a more deeply-running coalition with UHPA than there actually is, although the two groups now coordinate more thoroughly—for example, in terms of testimony at the state legislature. In addition, the current contract re-opener negotiations have been distinctly more cordial than those which led to the six-year agreement, even though it’s the same administrative team bargaining. Of course, we have had a major change in the new governor; as strong supporters of and big-bucks campaigners for Abercrombie, the university administration certainly knows that the faculty union has a very direct line to the ultimate decision-making power in terms of the State University: in Hawaii, for better or worse, the Governor. We’ll have to see how this potential coalition with the Administration develops as the state budget projections become even more negative.

D) Coalition with the General Public

The 'man in the street' is probably the hardest nut to crack, especially in a relatively working-class banana republic like HI (tourism may have replaced the pineapples, but the principle is still the same). UHPA spent heavily on the governor’s race, funding and filming several very well received TV slots which were not limited to issues of Higher Education; that commitment definitely raised our status, and our political clout, among House and Senate Democrats and many Abercrombie supporters. Beyond this, we try to maintain a positive rapport with our primary supporters, which unfortunately means cutting our losses somewhat with the general multitude. For example, UHPA is a major local supporter of PBS (the News Hour and Frontline) and NPR, and our own faculty and traditional supporters highly appreciate that sponsorship. This has been disparaged as “inclusive elitism,” but I would call it “Realpolitik.”

Where we could and should do better, perhaps, is in exploiting the basic good will we tend to have among our current and former students; unfortunately, the Administration and the UH Foundation have control of the databases. In terms of students currently serviced by our membership, the organization of UH in largely commuter campuses (due to the size of the islands) works against us, as commuting students do not generally have the time or energy to attend campus rallies or teach-ins. But a substantial amount of the continuing tuition increases is being used to pay for UHPA members’ salaries, and UHPA and its members must explain better to past and present students (as well as ourselves) the State Higher Education budget process; address why many of professors are making less than K-12 teachers; consider why the flagship campus (which charges the highest tuition and fees) has both the highest and lowest salaries in the system; etc.

Coalition building is undoubtedly more problematic at the moment due to the current perception that “public” unions are somehow more responsible for budget deficits than, for example, tax breaks for corporations and the rich. In a time of serious economic downturn, students and other workers are obviously more willing to scapegoat public-sector targets, especially “wasteful” public universities and, at Manoa at least, their largely White and mainland-import faculty. With the failure of the private sector to create sufficient well-paying positions and thus improve conditions for the American middle class overall; with most people’s incomes having declined in real terms over the past few years; and with their pension funds raided to grant CEOs more millions in stock options--
public sector workers sometimes do appear to have it 'too good' compared to non-public-sector and non-unionized workers. The facts, as speakers at this conference have shown, clearly point to a different conclusion, but this is not evident unless faculty and faculty unions participate very vigorously in the public discussion.

Update: August 23, 2011:

Another perspective--email from HGEA to members:

**HSTA's actions jeopardize collective bargaining for all public employees**

Dear HGEA member,

You may be aware that the Hawaii State Teachers Association last month filed a complaint with the Hawaii Labor Relations Board (HLRB) after the employers unilaterally implemented a contract for public school teachers. HGEA has been monitoring this situation very closely, as it could have serious implications for the collective bargaining process for all public employees.

As a public-sector union, we have much to be concerned about. The path and the manner in which HSTA is attempting to resolve this contract dispute is troubling, to say the least. We and the other public sector unions remain concerned about the possibility that the HSTA's open fighting with the HLRB can lead to a decision that negatively impacts all of us, let alone the possibility that the Legislature will consider knee-jerk reaction legislation to change the bargaining process.

HSTA's desperate attempts to deflect blame include insinuating that HGEA conspired with the governor to limit their negotiations. Their attorney, Herbert Takahashi, actually claimed that the "favored nation" clause in HGEA's contracts interfered with HSTA's collective bargaining rights, suggesting we were part of a conspiracy to limit what the teachers could negotiate. This is an absurd and insulting suggestion -- that we would hurt our own members in a bizarre plot to negatively affect teachers. The fact is that in recognizing HGEA as the first union to reach a settlement, the governor offered "favored nation" status as a way to maintain parity among all public employees.

On Aug. 4, I was involuntarily served with a subpoena to testify at the HLRB hearing. This action came despite our own effort and request of HSTA to meet regarding their complaint where we could offer our help. I am one of more than 80 witnesses, who include the Governor, legislators and other union leaders. HGEA's attorney, James Koshiha, attempted to file a motion to suppress the subpoena out of concern that it would expose and jeopardize HGEA in any future negotiations. In response, HSTA's leadership successfully sought to have Mr. Koshiha barred from participating in the HLRB proceeding. As a result, on Aug. 17, the motion to suppress was filed by attorney Debra
Kagawa on our behalf.

In taking a position that can jeopardize the future of the collective bargaining law, and attacking their fellow unions, the HSTA has run amok and is in danger of negatively affecting everyone in government employment.

To their credit, the University of Hawaii Professional Assembly filed a petition to intervene to preserve the right to strike for themselves and other unions. They, too, are deeply troubled by the actions of the HSTA leadership and want to ensure good-faith bargaining efforts can continue.

HGEA will continue to monitor this situation and do all that we can to ensure that your collective bargaining rights are not compromised.

In solidarity,

Randy Perreira  
Executive Director