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VIEWPOINT: State's college administrators not required to recognize vote of faculty; new law would remedy that

by Michael Honey

In Olympia, House and Senate members are considering legislation to require university and college administrations to recognize and bargain with faculty members when they choose to join unions.

Whether one likes or dislikes unions (they are only as good as their members make them), the issue is the right to choose. Many faculty would choose not to join, but like other Americans we cherish our rights to freedom of association and speech. We would like to have the right to make our own choice, just like anyone else.

The 1935 Wagner Act forbids employers from interfering with the right of employees to join unions and compels them to recognize and bargain in good faith when they make that choice. In many countries, workers still do not have freedom of thought and association on the job. Unfortunately, we have been losing that freedom too. American labor laws have been undermined and ineffectively enforced, and many private employers still fire workers for joining unions or find other ways to intimidate them from exercising their rights.

Governments feel more clearly bound to support the public good than do some private employers, yet it is still important to have employee rights clearly spelled out in state law. It is well worth remembering that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. died supporting the right of public employees to join a union.

The mayor of Memphis said the city's workers could join a union if they wanted, but because state law did not require him to, he would not recognize it or bargain with it. For lack of an alternative, black sanitation workers struck for six long weeks, in a conflict that provided the occasion for King's tragic assassination. His sacrifice, among other things, established the idea of labor rights as civil and constitutional rights, protected by law.

These are our rights too. Faculty members work for a living just like everyone else. We are not a class apart from other salaried workers, nor are most of us managers. Washington law already protects other state employees, including K-12 and community college teachers, but inexplicably, university and college faculty are excluded. If a majority...
of faculty on any campus decide to join a union and ask for collective bargaining, regents and administrators can refuse to recognize that choice.

The legislation currently under consideration has been drafted in consultation with university administrators and faculty across the state. The University of Washington administration is supporting the rights of its teachers - including its graduate students - to engage in collective bargaining if they so desire.

In theory, we who teach, including full- and part-time instructors, already have the right to join a union as American citizens. The question for the Legislature is whether it will protect this right by compelling administrators to recognize a union and bargain with it when faculty make that choice.

Except for Washington, only Missouri excludes higher education personnel from labor rights they extend to other public employees. As James Gregory, president of the UW's American Association of University Professors, told legislators on the King holiday, "History speaks very loudly today. It calls upon us to fix this flaw in our state laws and establish that all employees have certain fundamental workplace rights."

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