

NORTH HARRIS COUNTY COLLEGE UNITED FACULTY

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What? Me Join a Union?

by Gary Clark

You bet! Why not? The American Federation of Teachers is an indisputably esteemed organization composed of dedicated professionals committed to the strengthening of education. I value its goals; I share its concerns. The question may be not why I joined but what took me so long to join.

It took me a while to join because I had to grapple with a few matters of conscience. The AFT is essentially a labor union; it is part of the AFL-CIO. Now I'm not anti-union, but I'm not exactly pro-union either. I think American labor unions have, in large measure, ill served American labor. The AFL-CIO is a gigantic bureaucracy whose leaders often demagogically appeal to workers and constantly encourage wage confrontations with business leaders. Labor leaders are generally insensitive to or unaware of or just plain stupid about the mechanisms of American business. (Having said that, though, I wouldn't want to live in a world without labor unions because labor, frankly, keeps management honest.)

Management is itself flawed. Too many modern managers are driven by a myopic "bottom line" mentality focusing on merely short-term strategies that ignore long-term success. Many managers are just caretakers, passing the time of day, with no vision about healthy organizations being linked to a health society. But I'm not bailing out of management science because of the misguided behavior of a few managers. I'm proud to be associated with the management field because I believe modern management represents mature leadership of organizations.

Now the AFT represents mature teaching in educational institutions. I'm proud to be a teacher. So why did I take

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"Education for Democracy — Democracy for Education"

a long pause before joining the AFT? As I said, I needed to come to terms with some matters of conscience, three matters to be exact. First, I believed the AFT, as a labor union, was inappropriate for a management teacher. Second, I didn't like the apparent bellicose manner in which the AFT presented its agenda (though the agenda itself was reasonable). Third -- I'll be blunt -- I thought the local chapter of the AFT, the NHCC United Faculty, was driven by a wrong-headed personal animus toward Dr. Airola and the "administration."

The resolution of the first problem is that I'm a teacher, first and foremost. I want to be the best management teacher I possibly can be. To do that requires my working with other teachers to enhance the teaching environment and to fortify the educational system. That's why I work hard with the NHCC Faculty Senate; that's why I decided to join the local AFT chapter. Yes, it bothers me a bit that AFT is a part of AFL-CIO. But times are changing. Professionals are joining unions, and unions are becoming professional. Unions aren't ideal, but you don't join an ideal; you join a group with ideals.

The answer to the second problem was easy. My concern with the AFT's strident presentation of goals was after all a matter of perception. One person's notion of stridency is another person's notion of diplomacy. The goals of the AFT are what count. Besides, Alan Hall and my other colleagues in the union are not exactly what you'd call Trotskyites. I admire Alan and his group. They have rare courage, call it stridency or diplomacy.

The third problem was a matter of my own wrong-headedness. No one that I've talked to in the local union guild has any personal rancor toward Dr. Airola and the "administration." Indeed, I find the AFT people to be genuinely loyal to this institution and as committed to working with, not against, Dr. Airola as I am (and my record of loyalty speaks for itself). Our local AFT has a few vigorous disagreements with the "administration," as do I (again, the record speaks). But disagreement does not equate with disloyalty.

Speaking of disagreements, I assure you that I do not, nor will I, subscribe to every idea that AFT presents. Never did it enter my head that joining the local AFT guild would erode my freedom of thought. Regardless of my differences with the AFT, I will support it because its cause, teaching excellence, is my cause.

Many factors are militating against teaching excellence; but let me tell you that in my area of education, vocational instruction, the battle against those militating factors is harsh. Somewhat paradoxically, it is the union that I believe will help me champion management education and other vocationally oriented studies. The union has always supported what I do. It was time for me to support what they do.