

### THERE IS POWER IN A UNION—2007<sup>1</sup>

by Kathleen de la Peña McCook  
AFT Local 7463

The Democratic victory in the 2006 Congressional elections meant that the name of the Committee overseeing Labor concerns was returned its original robust title: the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor.<sup>2</sup> Under the leadership of Rep. George Miller the U.S. saw the first minimum wage increase in ten years (Rubin). The Employee Free Choice Act passed the House, but stalled in the Senate. Librarians' support of the Act is strong with the ALA-APA Council having voted in favor of the Act by resolution in June 2006 and a statement issued in support of HR 800 in March, 2007.

Librarian unionists were highly active in 2007. The strike at the Vancouver Public Library lasted 89 days — the longest librarian strike I have been able to identify (Galanopoulos)<sup>3</sup>. A new AFSCME union was voted at the Indianapolis – Marion County Public Library. Library unionists, Tarnel Abbott and Susan Velfort, were honored with important awards for their commitments to social justice and intellectual freedom. The scholarship of library unionism saw completion of a landmark study of the Chicago Public Library union by Joyce Latham.

As ever the role of unions in librarianship is not highly visible in the literature of the field, but strong and determined unionists comprise nearly 30% of all library workers and the editorial collaborative *Progressive Librarian* has an historical solidarity with our union brothers and sisters.

December 2006

§ Tarnel Abbott, Richmond Public Library, SEIU Local 790 was honored with the California Library Association Intellectual Freedom Committee, Zoia Horn Intellectual Freedom Award for 2006 (Brenneman). “As one of our committee said, ‘If every library had someone on staff taking these actions, imagine what a strong voice the library community would have in the fight to defend freedom of speech!’” wrote committee chair Janis O’Driscoll in the letter announcing the award.

January 2007

§ “Ignored Too Long: The Benefits of Managing a Library with a Union,” by John Buschman, Steve LaBash, and Dorothy Warner was published in *Library Worklife*.

§ Many librarians are organized as AFSCME locals. On January 12 Gerald W. McEntee, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), AFL-CIO, issued a statement on the escalation of the war in Iraq:

“The President’s decision to escalate the war in Iraq is reckless and wrong. It’s bad foreign policy and takes away the resources we need to solve problems here at home....” We are spreading violence in Iraq, not democracy. This ill-conceived war of choice has cost the lives of more than 3,000 American soldiers and countless billions in U.S. treasure. We could have solved the American health care crisis for what this war has cost us....” The time has long past to bring our troops home. This decision by the President is the very definition of misguided leadership.”

§ At the Library of Congress Saul Schneiderman, president of the Library of Congress Professional Guild, AFSCME issued a press release stating the LOC is not doing enough to protect employees and should create a program designed to monitor asbestos levels at the facility.

§ The California Faculty Association (CFA), which includes academic librarians, protested at San Jose State University to raise awareness about the unfair wages of faculty, to recruit new members and to show strength in numbers to the Chancellor’s office in hopes of reaching a deal for a new contract.

February 2007

§ California Faculty Association (CFA) informational pickets continued at 23 campuses. The efforts of the CFA continued through the spring. I’d like to emphasize the work of all the librarian members and point out that the Librarians Committee has its own page on the CFA website.

§ The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency continued to shutter libraries and make collections unavailable both to its own staff and the public. An unfair labor practice complaint was filed on Monday, February 5, 2007 by the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) National Council of EPA Locals, Council 238 before the Federal Labor Relations Authority. The Bush administration is seeking to dismantle the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s network of technical libraries. The fight to save them is being lead by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

§ The ALA-APA, the Organization for the Advancement of Library Employees announced. The creation of a union wiki on February 27, 2007. This wiki is a resource both for current union members and for library professionals seeking information about joining or starting a union.

“Unions are one of many ways library workers may improve salaries,” said ALA-APA Director Jenifer Grady. “ALA-APA cannot do collective bargaining, so its goal is to empower others to raise their salaries and benefits. Union membership is one of many ways to do this. By being part of a union, library workers gain local allies who can help them achieve pay equity and better salaries.”

March 2007

§ Dozens of Upper Moreland (PA) School District secretaries, educational assistants and aides wore signs demanding a fair contract around their necks as they walked the picket line Monday, the first day of their strike. Librarian Sue Powidzki, who works at the intermediate school, said she fully supported the strike. Union representatives said they want the community to know why they decided to walk off the job. People at the picket lines outside Upper Moreland Middle School on Monday wore placards that said “Value Our Support Staff” and “Keep Quality Employees.”

§ The James B. Carey Library which serves the faculty, students, and staff of Rutgers University’s School of Management and Labor Relations (SMLR) was announced as winner of the ALA-RUSA John Sessions Memorial Award. The Sessions award is named in honor of John Sessions, former American Federation of Labor/Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) co-chair of the AFL-CIO/ALA Joint Committee on Library Service to Labor Groups. The plaque, supported by a donation from the AFL-CIO, is given to recognize a library or library system that has made a significant effort to work with the labor community and by doing so has brought recognition to the history and contribution of the labor movement to the development of the United States.

“Under the stewardship of Constance Finlay, the James B. Carey Library has been transformed in recent years into a dynamic agent for providing in-depth and specialized information resources and services to a wide range of the labor community that includes students, scholars, union leaders and public policy practitioners,” said Theodora T. Haynes, award committee chair. “The Library’s recent successful initiatives document past and present work of labor and range from collaborating with the Public Employee Relations Commission on building a comprehensive database of collective bargaining contracts to mounting a historical exhibit and Website honoring James B. Carey. The award will be

presented at RUSA Awards Ceremony on June 25, 2007, from 4 to 6 p.m., during the ALA Annual Conference in Washington, D.C.

§ Strikes were suspended at the Community College of Philadelphia and the California State University System as reported by Scott Jaschik in “Off the Picket Line.” Both strikes included librarians.  
April 2007

§ Immigration legislation stalled in spring 2007. David Bacon wrote of the connection between immigration issues and the raids of Immigration and Custom enforcement (ICE). “The AFL-CIO opposes guest worker programs, and says immigrants should be given permanent residence visas, so they have labor rights and can become normal members of the communities they live in. Since 1999, the AFL-CIO has called for legalization of the 12 million people living in the US without documents. Most unions oppose employer sanctions and the recent immigration raids, because they’re often used to threaten and punish workers when they speak out for better wages and conditions.”

§ National Library Workers Day was celebrated on April 17. Tuesday of National Library Week is designated National Library Workers Day; and, that on that day, interested library workers, library groups, and libraries should advocate for better compensation for all library workers and, if the day coincides with National Pay Equity Day, these individuals, groups, and libraries should recognize both days together.

May 2007

§ The REFORMA Legislative Committee visit on Capitol Hill during National Library Legislative Day focused on the following: 1) support for the repeal of the REAL ID Act, 2) support for immigration reform as stated in REFORMA’s and the American Library Association resolution on immigration adopted in January 2007. 3) Bilingual Education, 4) Net Neutrality, 5) LSTA funding, 6) School Libraries (Improving Literacy through School Libraries & No Child Left Behind), 7) Librarians Act of 2007, and 8) Copyright. REFORMA is the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking. (McCook).

§ California State University faculty union members overwhelmingly approved a new labor agreement, association officials announced May 7, 2007. Last week, 97 percent of voting members of the California Faculty Association agreed to accept the tentative agreement between the union and CSU administration. CSU trustees are expected to vote on the contract at meetings on May 15 and 16. The contract would raise base pay for faculty by 20.7 percent over four years. Additional increases for longevity and merit would make the package worth 24.9 percent to many members.

§ City of Minneapolis library workers ratified an agreement on May 16 to protect their wages and pensions under the proposed merger of the Hennepin County and City of Minneapolis libraries. The merger was stalled for weeks due to a county-imposed condition that would have forced city library workers to accept lower wages and a longer workweek. “Our union negotiating team was committed to laying a strong foundation for a successful merger,” said Marilyn Bell, a library aide at the Franklin Library. “We acted in the best interests of our members and library patrons.” “AFSCME is proud of this agreement because it assures job security for workers, access for library patrons, and financial stability for the system,” said Eliot Seide, director of AFSCME Council 5. “AFSCME members are ready to work hard with the city and county to deliver a successful merger and the finest library system in the nation.”

§ Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library Employees voted for a union May 23, 2007. In a vote of 146-69, at least 75 percent of eligible employees participated in the election, as required by the library’s board of directors, said Michelle Martin, an organizer. Employees began working for union representation about two years ago amid rising frustration over the management of the library and the expansion of the Central Library. Union leaders said their goal is to gain input in library decisions rather than simply to negotiate for better pay. About 350 library employees are eligible to organize with AFSCME Council 62.

June 2007

§ The AFL-CIO – ALA Joint Committee on Library Services to Labor Groups held the program, “Aging and Activism,” June 25 at the ALA Annual Conference. Discussion of the need for activism to ensure social and economic justice and full civil rights for all citizens, with a special focus on retiree legislative and political issues. This program featured Gene Cohen, M.D., Ph.D., Director, Center on Aging, Health and Humanities, George Washington University, and Edward Coyle, Executive Director, Alliance for Retired Americans. A booth in the Exposition Hall featured labor materials, including pamphlets, brochures and bibliographies. The AFL-CIO – ALA Joint Committee on Library Services to Labor Groups initiates, develops, and fosters, through the organizational structures of the ALA and the AFL-CIO, ways and means of effecting closer cooperation between the librarian and labor organizations and the large constituency represented by the labor organizations.

July 2007

§ Greater Victoria Public Library (BC, Canada) launched the “Overdue” campaign to remind municipal officials of their promise to deliver on pay equity on July 5, 2007.

§ Vancouver Public Library workers of CUPE 391 begin the longest strike in library history.<sup>3</sup> Thursday July 26th was day one of the strike. On that day 350 CUPE 391 members appeared on picket duty at the Central branch. The story of the CUPE 391 strike continues until October 20, 2007. This issue (Winter 2007/08) of *Progressive Librarian* includes the story of the strike by Anita Galanopoulos.

August 2007

§ The Progressive Librarians Guild issued a statement in solidarity with CUPE 391 on August 1, 2007.

§ Union Librarian provided extensive coverage of the CUPE 391 strike: “Knitters for Solidarity;” “Gentle Sherpas of the Public Library;” “Read-In at the Vancouver Public Library;” “Walking the Line in Vancouver;” “City Breaks Off Talks;” “Rally at City Hall;” “Primary Issue is Pay Equity;” “We believe in lifelong learning, truth and social justice;” “Pay Equity is a Human Right;” “Writers for Vancouver Library Workers;” and the “Buttoneers.”



**vancouver public library workers**

September 2007

§ The Vancouver strike continues with the strikers honoring Ron Dutton, a longtime CUPE 391 member and former branch head, division head, and PSM who retired today, after spending the last few weeks of his distinguished VPL career on the picket line.

§ The Greater Victoria Public Library, CUPE 410 representing Library Workers in the Greater Victoria British Columbia area is now in legal strike position and took its first strike action on Friday, September 7, 2007.

§ Susan Veltfort of AFSCME Local 1857 won the Mother Jones Award from the Washington State Labor Council. Susan was one of the

prime movers in organizing Washington State's largest public library system – the King County Library System – in 2003. Susan was on the negotiations committee when Local 1857 negotiated the King County Library System's first-ever labor agreement in 2004. Soon afterward the library management delivered a shock: A wrong-headed staffing model called "clustering" which forced many employees to rotate among several worksites each week. Susan, now president of Local 1857, was a key player in helping to organize a no-confidence vote among members in which 92% registered no confidence in the library director. The vote generated media attention, which brought management to the table, where it has since made major concessions on the issue. Susan is also a founding member of IGLU, the Interest Group for Libraries and Unions, within the Washington Library Association, the state's primary organization for library workers. IGLU's purpose:

- To explore the extent of the presence and role of unions among library workers in Washington State.
- To encourage ongoing research on unionization in libraries.
- To serve as a resource for both active and developing unions of library workers in Washington State. (AFSCME Library Workers).

§ Monroe County Public Library, Indiana, "Letter to Staff," September 24, 2007 outlined the drive to secure union representation at MCPL. On September 12th, the MCPL Board of Trustees held a work session to discuss the desire of MCPL for union representation. At this meeting, the board reviewed the proposed method for union recognition submitted by the organizing committee to the board in May. They discussed this openly and invited an AFSCME representative to the table in order to better understand the proposal.

October 2007

§ The Vancouver Library Workers of CUPE 391 ended the 89-day strike on October 20, 2007. (See Galanopoulos).

§ Mitch Freedman, past president of the American Library Association, spoke to CUPE 391 on October 24 on Library Workers and Equitable Salaries.

§ The CUPE 410 Strike at the Greater Victoria Public Library continued in October. Local 410 President Ed Seedhouse spoke (Oct. 31) on CBC Radio (Victoria), along with Mayor Ted Daly of North Saanich who is chair of the Greater Victoria Labour Relations Association. The two presented their versions of the pay equity debate. The 11-minute interview is available on the CBC site as an audio file.

#### Notes

1. See "There is Power in a Union-2006" *Progressive Librarian* 28 (Winter 2006.07): 101-104. See also YouTube for "There is Power in a Union" sung by Utah Phillips <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O93YpTYCWRk>; Billy Bragg <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6KO90EdKB-g>; and also with great graphics at OCSEA\AFSCME Local 11 slideshow <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHGsqSzfTjo>
2. The Republican Congress, no friend to labor, had changed the name of the Committee to make it seem less labor oriented using the impotent sounding 'Work Force' Committee.
3. I have not been able to ascertain a longer librarian strike anywhere in the world at any time. Please contact me if any reader has information about a longer strike.

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