Short History of labor conditions and organizing efforts at Swarthmore

(I) Sometime in the mid-1970's (1975-76, if my memory serves me right) in a time of precipitously rising energy costs, high inflation, and at the college fairly harsh budget constraints which were felt most by the dining room, housekeeping, and maintenance workers a serious move for a union was begun. The activity surrounding this drive ran from mid-fall to the middle of the spring. Workers in housekeeping played the most important role, followed by the dining room workers, with little serious involvement by the maintenance staff.

Three people led the drive, - one woman Mrs. Tommie Johnson, who worked in Parrish Annex, and two men Bill Boyer and Charlie ---------, both of whom worked in Parrish. Tommie Johnson and Bill Boyer are black and Charlie - white. The two men had some union experience; Charlie had been a member of the Teamsters for quite few years. They were the titular leaders, but in reality the real organizer and inspiration of the drive was Tommie Johnson. (In the background several students Mike Slott and Peter Selwyn and two teachers Rich Schuldenfrei and Tom Bradley, who had organized together cross-union strike support and socialist labor organizing under the New American Movement, worked to bring the workers together with union organizers, to disseminate information, and support the drive, amongst other things.)

1199C was asked to run the union drive and after several preliminary meetings some 59 or more workers voted to hold an union election. The largest group in support were the workers from housekeeping, where Mrs. Johnson had done her organizing.

The Administration, and William Stanton, especially, spent a good deal of time in meetings with workers speaking at length about “gratitude,” “prestige,” and “fidelity,” and spoke menacingly about major changes, if the union came in. The union organizer started well, but out of lack of experience made the classic error of mistaking this large support for a vote to bring in the union and did practically nothing up to the eve of the vote. For that reason and the effectiveness of administration’s efforts linked with the natural fearfulness of people without skills, alternative job prospects, and any union experience the union was voted down. Only 25-27 people voted to bring in 1199C as their bargaining agent and union, and they almost all had been brought in by Tommie Johnson, alone.

(II) Starting in the year 1989-90 there developed serious unrest and discontent among dining hall workers about the arbitrary and unjust actions of the SAGA dining service management and the speed-up and divisive work practices in the kitchen and dining hall. (Students Joe Razza and Andy Perrin, and Professor Tom Bradley along with Deborah Guasch consulted with John Braxton ('70), who worked for the TDU, and Mike Slott ('75) on how to move to bring people together and start a possible union drive. They also attempted to arrange meetings on and off the campus and to develop a history and account of what had gone with the workers as well as to meet with the emerging leaders to consider next moves.) Mike Slott who had organized for
1199C, after graduating, and now was heading an union drive for ACTWU at Bryn, Mawr was asked to advise. There was a plan in the future to bring Slott together with the dining hall workers, when and if we could arrange a meeting. A certain amount concrete material was collected to substantiate the workers’ claims, but for all the efforts to meet with any of the workers for any significant time on neutral, safe ground, no meeting ever materialized. There was not a little fear and nor not a lot of trust on the part of the workers which simply could not be overcome quickly or easily. With the end of the year the effort was dropped. A great deal was learned, not the least part being a talent for patience and perseverance. (After some hopeful beginnings and with a fair amount of vocal faculty support the union drive at Bryn Mawr faltered and failed.)

(III) In the fall of 1992 workers in the dining service, now under new direct college management, were confronted with the demand that they buy and wear specially designated blouses, trousers, and hats. Mike Murphy and Andy Perrin took up this issue and the matter of low morale amongst the workers. Articles in The Phoenix and general agitation in behalf of the workers in meetings with the administration helped create some trust and a possible future base for working together on work conditions, pay, and rights. And they greatly helped reverse the policy of compelling the workers to buy their own uniforms.

(IV) In the spring of 1993 because of continuing worker complaints about morale and work conditions Mike Murphy, Andy Perrin, Laurie Gerber, Tom Bradley, and others made some opening moves to create a worker, student, and faculty group that would collect grievances, publicize them, and act to mediate conflicts and to support and represent workers to the administration, wherever and whenever needed and desired. The administration was not at all interested or inclined to countenance any such “union-like” entity, and nothing came of attempts to get together with workers to discuss the feasibility or desirability of such a defense group. Again, there was some success in obtaining accounts and starting a chronicle to document the situation, yet that was all there was to show for the effort, except for a very useful, well-developed structural plan and description of the projected defense group, written by Perrin and Murphy.

(V) Late the same spring of 1993 construction, renovation, and replacement of the telephone and computer network was begun and Stong the contractor’s employment of non-union steel workers precipitated a union picket line by the steelworkers. Mike Murphy and others immediately alerted the college community and organized leafletting in support and probably most importantly set up a meeting on the campus, chaired by Marlene Murphy and Mike, at which the steelworkers’ representatives and others laid out their complaint and the reasons for the picketing. Union workers began to refuse to cross the “informational” picket line. In the end, the college worked out a compromise which met some, but not all the union’s concerns and work was continued and completed.
(VI) When one of the dining workers at Tarbles snack bar was fired without cause, or any clear cause that anyone could ascertain, Perrin, Murphy, and Bradley tried over a number of weeks to meet with him to see whether he wanted to make an appeal. While no meeting ever materialized, Perrin and Murphy did accompany this worker to personnel, and Murphy stayed with him during the entire encounter with the personnel officer and took notes, for the record. Subsequent efforts to develop an appeal and support failed, mostly because the fired worker in the meantime had found a better job. While this was a good outcome for him, it still left the injustice unaddressed and uncontested at the college.

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