

Social Unionism and the Popular Front: The Cambridge Union of University Teachers, 1935-1941

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In 1936, Local 5 of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) published *The College Teacher and the Trade Union*. The pamphlet briefly touted the October 1935 formation of a union by instructors at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Although Local 5 had its own College Section—incorporating teachers in the New York City area—the founding of the Massachusetts union had become “nation-wide news.” According to the pamphlet, the establishment of the Cambridge Union of University Teachers (CUUT)—also known as Cambridge Local 431—helped to publicize “a new and growing tendency among college teachers ... to organize into trade unions.” The creation of Cambridge Local 431 negated several myths: “the myth that college professors do not need the trade union; the myth that they will not join even if they need it; and above all, the myth that college professors will not affiliate with the organized labor movement as represented by the American Federation of Labor” (AFL).¹

Austerity policies bred by the Great Depression threatened school closures, layoffs, salary cuts, suspension of tenure, and attacks on academic freedom which, in turn, guided college instructors toward union organization. In addition, many liberal/leftist university teachers hoped to align themselves with the era’s popular front which encompassed rising labour and social reform movements. Harvard professor F. O. Matthiessen, a founding member of the CUUT, lamented the isolation of his colleagues from each other and “from any contact with the outside community.” By acknowledging the aims that teachers shared with the progressive labour movement, they “could demonstrate the falseness of the division between workers with their brains and workers with their hands and could gain a deeper sense of being a functional part of society.”²

The history of faculty unions during the interwar era has received increasing attention from scholars. Timothy Reese Cain, among others, has argued that these early unions “offered important outlets for faculty activity, provided opportunities for united action, and revealed key aspects of the conditions of faculty employment.”³ Historical analyses of unions at the City College of New York, Howard University, the University of Illinois, the University of Washington, and the University of Wisconsin have demonstrated the significance of workplace struggles over academic freedom, tenure, and governance as well as the importance of these organizations in the development of the AFT.⁴ Historians have found that

college unions like the CUUT “frequently dedicated their meetings and efforts to progressive political and social causes, putting them outside the mainstream of their faculty colleagues and, frequently, the larger AFT.”⁵ The Cambridge union certainly commented on larger economic and social issues and never engaged in collective bargaining to set wages or specify work conditions. That being said, a closer examination of the CUUT—especially the ideology and policies of its founders—reveals the ways in which the union’s advocacy of the popular front coincided with its efforts to secure fair employment and academic freedom for its members.

Echoing a national discussion, Cambridge activists weighed the advantages of bread-and-butter unionism versus social unionism. Bread-and-butter or business unionism usually entailed negotiating for basic workplace issues (wages, hours, and working conditions), maximizing the well-being of individual members and, by extension, ensuring the institutional survival of the union itself. Bread-and-butter unions purportedly were non-ideological and insular. Social unionism also dealt with workplace problems; however, they often advocated for a far-reaching socioeconomic and political agenda. In their pursuit of economic and social justice, social unionists urged working-class solidarity, alliances with community groups, and state action. For example, Clarence Taylor’s analysis of the New York City Teachers Union (TU) finds that the TU’s “type of social unionism embraced the struggle for racial equality, child welfare, the advancement of the trade union movement, academic freedom, and better relationships with parents and communities.”⁶ Business unionism and social unionism are ideal types; but, in the world of twentieth-century labour politics, a continuum existed between them. Thus, even the conservative AFL occasionally promoted reformist politics.⁷ Although they never used the term, the men, and the few women who formed Local 431 embraced social unionism. They sought a symbiotic relationship between expansive labour and societal reform, on the one hand, and collective and collaborative efforts to advance the interests of the community of teachers—public and private, elementary to college—on the other.

The CUUT’s social unionism grew organically from its members’ commitment to the popular front social movement of the 1930s and 1940s. As defined by Michael Denning and other scholars, this broad, radical social-democratic coalition encompassed liberals, socialists, communists, and independent leftists. It coalesced around anti-fascism, industrial unionism, anti-racism, civil rights for racial minorities, and economic democracy. For some CUUT members, especially those in the social sciences, their disciplinary expertise played directly into their understanding of national and global problems and led them to seek direct participation in the popular front movement. All the activists within Cambridge Local 431, regardless of their scholarly interests, perceived that they could protect their own interests and advance popular front ideals by joining the union movement.⁸

Certainly, members of the Cambridge union were traditional intellectuals in that they were trained by the university to produce and disseminate knowledge.

Most came from bourgeois if not elite backgrounds. That being said, the economic and social dislocation of the Great Depression combined with a growing threat of domestic and international fascism to help orient or reorient their thinking toward working-class needs and broad societal change. Graduate teaching assistants, instructors, and assistant professors on terminal contracts occupied the lowest rungs of the institutional ladder. They and their tenured colleagues frequently confronted administrators, trustees, and local governments brandishing austerity policies and repressive work rules. Equally important, union activists recognized the growing tension between themselves, administrators, and trustees regarding core concerns such as faculty governance and academic freedom. Any analysis of the formation of the CUUT requires a brief examination of these issues.

Democratic Governance and Academic Freedom

The capitalist forces that shaped the emergence of industrial and financial corporations at the turn of the twentieth century had an impact on U.S. higher education. By the early 1900s, as Richard F. Teichgraber has argued, college professors worried that universities were adopting ill-conceived business and scientific management techniques. A full-scale professors' literature of protest emerged to contest these developments. In 1918, economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen explained how universities had succumbed to the corporate model of governance, enhancing the power of boards of trustees and university presidents while reducing the status of faculty.⁹ Five years later, muckraking journalist Upton Sinclair lambasted U.S. universities for organizing themselves on business principles and, in the process, relegating college professors to "intellectual proletarians, who have nothing but their brain-power to sell." According to Sinclair, academic democracy necessitated "the overthrow of the plutocratic empire."¹⁰ In the early 1930s, radical student leader James Wechsler continued to equate institutions of higher learning with business corporations, their boards of trustees with corporate directors, college presidents with general managers, and professors with rank-and-file workers.¹¹

The extent to which corporate interests and their administrative minions controlled the early twentieth-century university remains open to debate. Roger L. Geiger found that the business-dominated boards of trustees feared by Veblen and Sinclair waned by the 1920s, while "faculty power was making inroads against autocratic presidents." According to Larry G. Gerber, a reciprocal relationship existed among faculty professionalization, expanded safeguards for academic freedom, and increased faculty participation in university governance.¹² The question of academic freedom offers a good case study of the relative strength of teachers and institutional authorities.

Joan Wallach Scott, among others, has described academic freedom as "a relational and contextual practice," varying according to historical circumstances and power relationships. Some supporters of academic freedom stressed their right to engage in any line of inquiry they deemed desirable, asking only to be judged by

the quality of their teaching or scholarship. Other adherents used the concept to advance unpopular or unorthodox views in classrooms or in publications. And still others, especially administrators, co-opted the concept “to protect the autonomy of the teaching establishment from ‘outside’ interference,” claiming, for example, the prerogative of cleaning their own house “by purging politically suspect teachers.”¹³

Both the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the Association of American Colleges (AAC), representing different clientele, formed in 1915 and addressed the meaning of academic freedom. The AAUP linked the concept to job security. In its Declaration of Principles, the organization denied the proprietary rights held by university trustees, arguing that knowledge was a natural monopoly subject to regulation in the public interest. “Society’s need for specialized, objective knowledge” thus necessitated academic freedom, which in turn required job security.¹⁴ Conversely, the AAC, representing administrators, sought to limit the rationale and application of academic freedom. University presidents and deans aimed to preserve “managerial prerogatives” and to protect “the resource base of their institutions from being jeopardized by professors who took positions openly at odds with trustees.”¹⁵

In a joint 1925 conference statement, the AAC and AAUP agreed to a code of conduct governing academic freedom and to the cornerstones of the tenure system. The latter included rule-governed appointments, probationary periods before tenure was granted and termination of tenured faculty only “for cause” and untenured employees “at will.” Regarding academic freedom, the two organs agreed that in the classroom, professors would adhere to their fields of expertise and present all sides of controversial issues: universities could not limit teachers’ freedom of expression regarding their subjects in the classroom or in their publications. Outside the classroom, professors had the same political right to free expression as any other citizen.¹⁶

The joint declaration notwithstanding, university administrators and teachers continued to disagree over the meaning of academic freedom. By the end of the 1920s, college and university presidents had adopted “a managerial concept” that applied academic freedom solely to specific disciplinary areas defined by professional expertise. In other words, professional experts were “confined to the teaching and publication of empirical ‘facts’ that were generally accepted by other experts” in their fields. When professors transcended “facts to theoretical speculations about untested alternative political, moral, or social arrangements,” they abandoned academic freedom. Professors also violated the boundary whenever they advocated “artificial equality,” advanced personal opinions on any subject in the classroom, used “the authority of professional expertise” to comment on contemporary controversies, or evoked any form of radicalism. Engaging “in public political activities, strikes, and boycotts; [writing] popular pamphlets and newspaper editorials; or [causing] public confrontations on campus,” all constituted question-

able behavior.¹⁷

Efforts to implement a managerial concept of academic freedom and to apply hierarchical business methods to govern the university were partially successful by the advent of the interwar era. Faculty resisted such endeavors, battling over peer review, tenure, and consultative faculty bodies. Maintaining the illusion of a balance of power between external capitalist interests and faculty became the task of administrators. An idealized tripartite accommodation among business, faculty, and administration developed over time and functioned best during times of relative social peace and political consensus yet unraveled during crisis periods. Conditions created and/or exacerbated by the Great Depression thus undermined the ability of trustees and administrators to coopt teaching faculty.¹⁸

Teachers responded to power struggles in one of two ways. The AAUP aimed to negotiate a compromise between faculty elites, on the one hand, and trustees, administrators, and political-economic leaders on the other. Since 1915, the organization had deplored cleavages between faculty and administrators, emphasizing the need for consultation and cooperation. In exchange for the “relative autonomy” of educational institutions via “individual procedural guarantees,” the AAUP made major concessions to boards of trustees and university presidents. Alternatively, university teachers aligned with organized labour, challenged capitalist hegemony, and fought for academic democracy. The AFT, especially under the leadership of leftists in college unions during the 1930s, believed that teachers could not secure their own economic welfare without taking an interest in the larger society’s well-being.¹⁹ It was within this social and intellectual environment that the Cambridge teacher-activists came to understand their class interests in opposition to those of trustees and administrators; to question the efficacy of objective knowledge and isolated scholarship; and to choose, instead, collective action.²⁰

Teacher-Activists

Instructors in Economics, History, Literature, and Philosophy played central roles in the CUUT’s formation and operation. Harvard’s Department of Economics, in particular, housed a cadre of left-leaning graduate students and young staff members who adopted a radical critique of capitalist society and welcomed unionism.²¹ Alan R. Sweezy, his younger brother Paul Sweezy, and Robert Keen Lamb typified the privileged individuals who matriculated at Harvard, first as undergraduate and then as graduate students. The Sweezy brothers, sons of an executive at the First National Bank of New York, attended the elite preparatory school, Phillips Exeter Academy, and followed its well-worn path to Harvard. Alan received a BA degree, studied in England for a year, and returned to Harvard where he completed a PhD in Economics (1934). He served as a full-time faculty instructor from 1934 to 1937. Paul earned a BA degree, studied at the London School of Economics, and then received a doctorate from Harvard (1937). He held various teaching positions at the school in the late 1930s.²² Lamb, the son of a Washington, D.C. physician, also

attended Exeter Academy and Harvard College. After working in Europe for a year, he entered Harvard's graduate program in Economics. As he completed his dissertation, Lamb worked for the university's publicity office and taught undergraduate courses.²³

Helen Boyden and Maxine Yapple were two talented economists studying at Radcliffe College in the late 1930s. Boyden, a Cambridge, Massachusetts native, graduated with a degree in history from Radcliffe. She was teaching in Cambridge and working on her doctorate when she married Lamb. Following Robert to Washington, D.C., and starting a family, Helen did not complete her PhD in economics until 1943. Maxine Yapple was born in Missouri and attended Stanford University, earning a BA and then a MA degree in economics. In 1936, while in the doctoral program in economics at Radcliffe, she married Paul Sweezy. Maxine taught at Tufts College in the late 1930s and received her PhD from Radcliffe in early 1940.²⁴

Two central figures in the union, John Raymond Walsh and Lewis Feuer, hailed from working-class backgrounds. Walsh grew up in Beloit, Wisconsin. His parents, a factory worker and a seamstress, imbued him with "ideas about a broader social democracy." Educated in public schools, Walsh spent a decade as a high school teacher before entering Harvard (1929) to study economics. Completing his doctorate in 1934, Walsh began a three-year appointment as a faculty instructor. Given his background and the growing significance of working-class movements, Walsh's teaching and research interests turned to labour issues and the rise of contemporary industrial unions.²⁵ Feuer was the product of Manhattan's Lower East Side and its Jewish socialist tradition. His mother toiled as a cleaning lady and his father as a garment worker. Feuer attended public schools and the City College of New York. At age nineteen he entered Harvard University as a graduate student in philosophy, receiving a master's degree (1932) and doctorate (1935), while teaching undergraduates.²⁶

Several tenured, leftist/liberal faculty members became union advocates: Harvard's F. O. Matthiessen (History and Literature), David W. Prall (Philosophy), Kirtley F. Mather (Geology), Albert Sprague Coolidge (Chemistry), Henry Hart (Law School), and MIT's Dirk Jan Struik (Mathematics). Matthiessen hailed from a wealthy California family, attended exclusive preparatory schools, received a degree from Yale University, and became a Rhodes Scholar. At Harvard, he earned an MA (1926) and PhD (1927). After briefly teaching at Yale, he returned to Harvard in 1929, where he remained for the rest of his life. A preeminent scholar of U.S. history and literature, Matthiessen rejected the "life of an isolated scholar," arguing that educators had to "shape and direct contemporary thought."²⁷ Prall, a Saginaw, Michigan native, received degrees from the University of Michigan and the University of California, Berkeley. After teaching in California for most of the 1920s, he arrived at Harvard in 1931, eventually becoming a professor of Philosophy (1938). A pacifist and civil libertarian, Prall participated in numerous anti-war and anti-fascist demonstrations during the 1930s.²⁸ Henry Hart made his way from Butte, Montana

to Harvard, earning an undergraduate degree (1926), a law degree (1930), and a graduate law degree (1931). A prized student of Felix Frankfurter, Hart clerked for Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis before returning to the Harvard Law School as an assistant professor. He supported civil liberties, the New Deal, and the fight against fascism.²⁹

The independently wealthy Albert Sprague Coolidge attended Harvard College (1911-1915) and later earned a doctorate (1926). From 1922 until his retirement in 1960, Coolidge taught in Harvard's Chemistry Department. An "ardent political activist," Coolidge served on the Socialist Party's National Executive Committee throughout the 1930s, chaired the Massachusetts Civil Liberties Union, and supported an array of progressive causes.³⁰ "Socially concerned" and "politically liberal," Kirtley F. Mather was a Chicago native. He received a PhD in geology from the University of Chicago (1915) and began teaching at Harvard in 1924. He joined Clarence Darrow's defense team at the trial of John Scopes who was indicted in Tennessee for teaching evolution, fought loyalty oath laws imposed on teachers, and embraced anti-fascism.³¹ Finally, Dirk Jan Struik, a Dutch-born mathematician, began teaching at MIT in 1926. He sought to combine mathematics and Marxism, working to unite "theory and practice in the struggle for social and economic justice." A founding editor of the Marxist journal, *Science & Society*, Struik fought against war and fascism and championed militant trade unionism.³²

These progressive teachers—representing a range of liberal and leftist values—confronted the decade's interrelated crises of depression and fascism. The economists felt compelled to address the failure of capitalism and to offer solutions. As Walsh later recalled, the depression served as "the greatest single influence" on him and his colleagues, making them aware of the disaster facing millions of Americans.³³ Neo-classical economic theory—a centerpiece of the Harvard curriculum—inadequately explained the severity and the length of the Depression; it offered only that economic booms and busts were both expected and unmanageable and that the government's sole function was to protect private property and not intervene in the marketplace. No one at Harvard taught Marxist political economy, so Walsh and his colleagues read and discussed these works on their own. Marxism appealed to Walsh's long-standing class allegiance with workers and his belief in democratic socialism. Alan Sweezy increasingly applied a "skeptical [Marxist] point of view" to his studies.³⁴ And Paul Sweezy became known for imbuing students with "a radical view of American society," helping them recognize that "the great contradictions of American society are deeply systemic or structural and probably cannot be resolved by piecemeal reform."³⁵

The radicalism of these social scientists conflicted with the conservatism of university department heads, administrators, and trustees. Harvard's ruling bodies—the Board of Overseers and the Harvard Corporation which included the university president, treasurer, and five fellows—abhorred President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal reforms. Grenville Clark, a Corporation fellow, for example,

created and headed the National Economy League, a private organization which demanded currency stabilization and “budgetary stringency.” When Walsh and his colleagues praised FDR’s monetary policy, some alumni formally protested to Harvard President James B. Conant, citing their mistaken fear “that unsound doctrine was being taught in the department of economics.”³⁶

Walsh and his colleagues linked the rise of fascism to capitalism’s failures. The increasing concentration of national wealth and income in fewer and fewer hands exacerbated the ability of middle and working classes to consume the goods and services that they produced. Repeated collapses, predicted Walsh, would impose “painful adjustments,” provoke “sharp social tensions which carry over in some measure to the next debacle.” Walsh reasoned that the only way to alleviate this dangerous cycle was to achieve “the progressive socialization of private property in industry,” which would benefit workers, farmers, and the middle class.³⁷ He warned that “as the workers of all classes” pressed for the changes “necessary to make life tolerable, the capitalists will—at some point—cease to acquiesce. Fearing democracy in the hands of their critics, they will reach out and strangle it. Economic power will arm itself with political despotism. This is the essence of Fascism.”³⁸ For union activists, “fascism-from-within” manifested itself in battles over civil liberties and workers’ rights, specifically, the struggle against teachers’ loyalty oaths.³⁹

Forming A Union

During the 1930s, media mogul William Randolph Hearst led a nationwide coalition of self-described patriots (the American Legion, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and various business groups) agitating for loyalty oath laws for teachers. Seeking to scapegoat teachers’ unions and undermine a broad struggle for societal change, Hearst-owned newspapers and radio stations propagandized that Communists had infiltrated the nation’s schools and colleges. To ensure adherence to what they considered American values and to stifle leftist political thought, Hearst and his allies pushed state legislatures to mandate teachers’ loyalty oaths.⁴⁰

Across the nation, college and university officials argued that the oaths, rather than instilling patriotism, weakened academic freedom and threatened the independence of their institutions. Conant and other university presidents failed to stop the Massachusetts legislature from enacting an oath bill in 1935. When it took effect in October, Kirtley Mather warned that the law would erode free thought and speech. Denounced as a Communist sympathizer by one legislator, Mather maintained that efforts to blacklist dissidents, place educators under the jurisdiction of state legislatures, and to “increase undemocratic tactics in the guise of loyalty to democratic ideals” expedited the spread of the “fascist spirit.”⁴¹

Oath debates inexorably led instructors to discuss how a union might combat homegrown fascism and protect academic freedom. In August 1935, Alan Sweezy, Paul Sweezy, and Lewis Feuer attended the AFT convention in Cleveland and inquired about creating a Cambridge local. During the early fall, the Sweezy

brothers, Feuer, Matthiessen, Lamb, Walsh, and others continued discussions about a union. In mid-October, approximately 40 teachers established the CUUT. Most union members came from Harvard, with a handful from other institutions (e.g., MIT's Dirk Jan Struik and Radcliffe's Helen Boyden and Maxine Yaple). The activists drew up a constitution, affiliated with the AFT, and elected Walsh president and Matthiessen vice president. Feuer became secretary-treasurer. Alan Sweezy, Boyden, Coolidge, Mather, Prall, and others served on the Executive Council.⁴²

"All persons employed for instruction or research at institutions of collegiate standing within the City of Cambridge" could join the union. After consulting with the AFT, leaders went further: "upon approval of two-thirds of the membership," any Cambridge resident who was "previously employed as [a] teacher at a college or university shall be eligible for full membership in this organization." Moreover, "associate membership" became available "to graduate students, former graduate students, or any persons of appropriate academic training" at any college in Cambridge, although these members could neither vote nor hold office. Thus, the CUUT sought to be as inclusive as possible and opened its doors to all interested academics in the community. Faculty instructors, assistant professors, and teaching assistants comprised the core of Local 431, but tenured professors also participated, believing that the union could address the oath dispute and defend the rights of young instructors.⁴³

From the outset, members voiced different perceptions of the union's purpose. Alan Sweezy argued that the union should not focus on raising its members' standard of living or improving working conditions. Rather, it should guarantee academic freedom for all teachers and preserve "the principle of merit ... in all appointments and promotions" regardless of an individual's "race or political opinions or activities." Moreover, Local 431 would encourage alliances with the larger union movement as a way to protect academic freedom and fight "reaction in its Fascist form."⁴⁴ Matthiessen spoke for those who "were no longer satisfied with academic freedom in the void." University faculty "had responsibilities as citizens which could be fulfilled only through group action. By joining together in a union, we grew to understand better our aims" and how to achieve them. Matthiessen believed that by cooperating with other groups, the CUUT could unite the university and community, generating positive change for all. Engaging in unionization and in labour struggles would help university teachers to clarify the meaning of academic freedom and to better understand higher education's existing social relations of production. Walsh concurred, advocating that Local 431 coordinate its activities with other college unions and area public school teachers to defend and extend academic freedom, fight racial, religious, class, social, economic or political discrimination, and defeat austerity policies. As union president (1935-1937) and the AFT's regional vice-president (1936-1937), Walsh led his colleagues in their support of organizing campaigns for area high school teachers and other workers. He also encouraged them to take stands on issues such as inequality, fascism, and racism.⁴⁵

Lewis Feuer objected to treating Local 431 merely as “a good will club to labor,” one that would “fulfill no real purpose in the lives of the people involved.” He characterized Alan Sweezy as “a well-to-do young bourgeois,” who wished to “unionize the Boston teachers” but not “complain about wages at Harvard,” or use the union “to fight for better conditions . . . for the oppressed assistants.” Feuer objected to the “attitude of teaching the working class from above,” insisting that “the real way of showing one’s allegiance with the working class is to fight for better conditions at Harvard.” This meant pushing for increased wages for all teachers, smaller class sizes, less emphasis on research, and expanded tenure opportunities for instructors. Feuer insisted that “unionization should begin at home.”⁴⁶ He also saw the union as protecting the academic freedom of rank-and-file teachers who were at the ideological mercy of the university’s “powers that be.” Yet another issue the union might address, according to Feuer, was “the problem of anti-Semitism in the Harvard Yard.” The university’s quota system for Jewish students may have led a majority of young Jewish instructors and assistants to join the CUUT. Union officials, however, veered away from this issue, perhaps disillusioned by the pervasiveness of anti-Semitism in the university.⁴⁷ While Feuer wanted Local 431 to operate like a bread-and-butter union, he acknowledged the probability of its playing a collaborative role in the larger labour and radical movements and its potential linkage with student organizations. Ultimately, Feuer agreed with his colleagues that a constructive function of the teachers’ union was to “educate for democracy.”⁴⁸

The majority of the CUUT’s founding members shared a vision similar to that held by both Walsh and Matthiessen. Harry Levin, a Midwesterner who graduated from Harvard in 1933 and stayed on to become a professor of Comparative Literature, recalled that he and his colleagues viewed organized labour as a progressive force. Joining the AFT “seemed the least we could do, as a protest against the Great Depression . . . a response to the New Deal,” and a defense against the teachers’ oath law. Echoing the words of his friend and mentor, Matthiessen, Levin held that “we wanted to bridge the gap between the university and the community at large, to affirm our solidarity with the local schoolteachers.” Even Henry Nash Smith, an apolitical Texan and graduate student in English, joined the union because it accurately manifested the day’s “main issue: namely, the relationship between . . . college and university teachers, and society at large.” CUUT’s contacts with local unions “was the only form of political activism” that Smith could recall from his years at Harvard.⁴⁹

In organizing Local 431, its leaders consciously sought to unite liberals, leftists, and a handful of communists into a coalition endorsing the popular front social movement’s opposition to fascism and anti-Semitism, its support of minority rights and civil liberties, and its dedication to unionism. The CUUT’s constitution stressed defending academic freedom and countering any form of “discrimination against individuals on grounds of race, or of social, religious, economic, political opinions or activities.” To weaken racist policies in the union movement, for exam-

ple, Helen Boyden, the CUUT representative to the Massachusetts State Federation of Labor, urged the federation to integrate African American workers into AFL unions and increase their numbers. Cognizant of President Conant's austerity agenda, the union pledged "to resist all efforts to reduce the amount and quality of education" at Harvard and elsewhere. The CUUT's legislative committee lobbied to repeal the loyalty oath, pass laws outlawing strikebreakers, and develop taxation schemes to fund public higher education. Another committee studied and recommended action on academic freedom issues, racial discrimination, the economic plight of teaching assistants, and instructional matters. Feuer headed a group that organized a series of workers' education classes.⁵⁰ "Our problem as teachers," Walsh later explained, "is whether we are going to retire to the ivory tower of contemplation, or are we going out on the battlefield?" Choosing battle, the CUUT led a campaign to repeal the state's loyalty oath.⁵¹

Teachers' unions across the nation fought against loyalty oaths at the state level. For example, after the New York legislature passed the Ives Teachers Oath Law, the TU held mass rallies and demonstrations pushing for the law's repeal.⁵² In a parallel development, the CUUT and other teachers' unions in Massachusetts successfully lobbied the state legislature to consider repeal of its law. Boisterous public hearings in March 1936 attracted thousands of concerned teachers, students, and labour leaders. College presidents again insisted that the oath threatened academic freedom.⁵³ Walsh, testifying as head of Local 431, argued that the oath "could be used as a wedge to deter teachers from participation in labor troubles or activities." He recounted an incident where local police and businesses forced a textile organizer to leave town. Area teachers, outraged by the effort to crush a union campaign, wished to protest, but were intimidated into silence by the oath law.⁵⁴ In a pamphlet published in March—written largely by Henry Hart—the CUUT explained that the oath threatened academic freedom, undermining the free exchange of political ideas by imposing arbitrary and illegal restraints on teachers' rights to speak on public issues. Reactionary forces could claim that the teachers had violated their oaths if the latter voiced ideas deemed subversive by the former. The reactionaries included gullible individuals susceptible to patriotic rhetoric, self-serving politicians, and "a far more sinister group," led by Hearst, who manipulated "politicians and people alike to serve the ends of private advantage and private privilege." Together, the three groups constituted a fascist threat. "It is not an accident that among the first steps taken by the dictators of Italy and Germany was the requirement of stringent teachers' oaths."⁵⁵ Such arguments infuriated state legislators who labelled union activists as Communists.⁵⁶

Red-baiting notwithstanding, the CUUT built a broad repeal movement that included unions, student groups, and local businesses.⁵⁷ When the repeal efforts in the legislature failed, the coalition campaigned throughout the summer and fall against the reelection of oath supporters. Forty of the sixty legislators who had voted against repeal either retired or lost reelection in November 1936. Subsequently

both houses of the legislature voted for repeal, only to face the governor's veto.⁵⁸ At the national AFT convention in August 1936, Walsh gave a well-received keynote address explaining how loyalty oaths threatened the academic freedom and civil liberties of scholars, teachers, students, and workers committed to socioeconomic and political change. Now was the "strategic time to defy the threats of academic freedom" and to engage in an "intelligent and relentless" resistance via the AFT. Walsh urged that teacher unionization become "a mass movement."⁵⁹ Months later, at a Manhattan rally of some 2000 people, sponsored by the TU, Walsh joined AFT President Jerome Davis, Roger Baldwin of the American Civil Liberties Union, and other speakers to protest New York's loyalty oath.⁶⁰

The CUUT and Labour Activism

Walsh readily admitted that he had "a certain evangelical devotion" to unionizing teachers. Recognizing that Massachusetts trailed other states in the unionization of kindergarten to grade 12 and university teachers, he urged the AFT to finance regional organizing campaigns. To aid in this effort, Walsh, Alan Sweezy, and Lamb used their own money to hire Esther Peterson, an activist who they had met at Bryn Mawr's Summer School for Women Workers. Peterson, guided by her mentors, helped to organize AFT locals in Massachusetts and Vermont. Local 431 officials also agitated against austerity policies implemented by public school districts, much to the annoyance of local business groups.⁶¹

The CUUT participated in an assortment of working-class actions outside the world of education. It boycotted area companies known to exploit their workers or which opposed unionization; helped establish the Union Cooperative Buying Company in Cambridge, a local expression of the national movement for consumers' cooperatives; sent representatives to regular meetings of the Cambridge Central Labor Union and contributed, in particular, to its development of worker education programs. It also agitated to unionize private and public sector workers: during the late 1930s, the CUUT gave valuable assistance to union campaigns among taxi drivers, waitresses, rubber workers, and others in the greater Boston area.⁶² Soon after Local 431's formation, Walsh called for the unionization of white collar workers and for a formal alliance with their blue-collar counterparts. Speaking before a mass meeting of artists, writers, musicians, and actors, Walsh argued that such a partnership could combat unemployment and the excessive power of business groups, and pursue reforms in public policy.⁶³

Walsh also envisioned the CUUT establishing "a good research bureau to serve the union movement in New England." He believed that social scientists within Local 431, drawing on their areas of expertise, could assist regional workers and their unions in assessing and resolving economic and social problems. In conversations and correspondence with local and national labour representatives, Walsh proposed that \$4,000 to \$6,000 secured from private sources and unions could fund "an economic service ... on a modest scale." He hoped that "after it had gone on

for a while, the unions would assume more financial responsibility for” the bureau. Ever the optimist, Walsh hoped that both the AFL and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) would support a research bureau.⁶⁴

Early in 1937, Local 431 joined another campaign led by the national labour movement to ratify a constitutional amendment regulating child labour. Congress first passed the amendment in 1924, but state approval stalled. In Massachusetts, a coalition of business owners, the Catholic Church, and prominent citizens defeated the effort. A second, more sustained round of state ratifications occurred in the mid-1930s. When the Massachusetts legislature reconsidered the issue, Harvard President-Emeritus A. Lawrence Lowell testified against the amendment, arguing that it would destroy parental authority, the Protestant work ethic, and states’ rights.⁶⁵ Walsh, representing both Local 431 and the regional AFT, spoke in favor of the amendment. Asserting that “I am ashamed to my feet” of Lowell, he accused Harvard’s former president and other amendment opponents of having “an inadequate trust in democratic processes of law.”⁶⁶

As it pursued its many causes, the CUUT also aligned with student activists. The Harvard Student Union (HSU), with its “network of loosely-knit leftist organizations and interests,” flourished on campus between 1936 and 1941. The group’s agenda shifted over time, in response to changing domestic and foreign conditions and the inevitable membership turnover. Nevertheless, the HSU closely collaborated with the CUUT on campus and extramural issues, championing trade unions and academic freedom, and combating racism, imperialism, war, and fascism.⁶⁷ The two groups cooperated, for example, in probing the Sociology Department’s dismissal of alleged radical instructors and tutors in May 1936. The CUUT collected data on the situation as a first step to bringing the matter before President Conant, while the HSU organized a student “committee to investigate [the department’s] reactionary tendencies.”⁶⁸

During the 1930s, college campuses across the nation witnessed strikes protesting war and fascism. The HSU and the CUUT jointly backed Harvard’s third annual peace demonstration in the spring of 1936. It attracted 500 students and endorsed the abolition of compulsory military training in state-supported colleges. With the onset of the Spanish Civil War in July, the HSU and Local 431 focused their anti-fascist activities on raising awareness of, and funds for, the Spanish Republic.⁶⁹ In March 1937, the two organs sponsored the French novelist Andre Malraux, whose wide-ranging talk touched on fascism’s threat to culture, artists’ support for the loyalists, and the complex link between economic and political democracy.⁷⁰ The talk drew 1200 people and raised hundreds of dollars for the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. According to Walsh, the event conveyed an important message about preserving democracy, while helping “intelligent people” overcome media and elite “prejudice and bias” against loyalist Spain.⁷¹

Harvard President Conant preferred to ignore faculty and student activists, but sometimes references to them were unavoidable. In 1936, a state legislator

bluntly asked why Harvard allowed a Communist like Walsh on its staff. In response, Conant obliquely referred to the principle of academic freedom, without mentioning Walsh's name. This kind of publicity worried Conant. Guarding the university from external interference was among his major goals—along with enhancing Harvard's scholarly reputation. Preventing outside meddling in university affairs necessitated avoiding public controversy.⁷² Yet Harvard's own anti-labour biases exacerbated efforts to avoid bad press.

Since the late nineteenth century, Harvard presidents had displayed animus toward trade unions. President Charles W. Eliot (1869-1909) considered unions threats to democracy and natural law. Under A. Lawrence Lowell (1909-1933), the university refused to hire union workers, embraced scientific management principles, and utilized speed-ups and job threats against campus labour—especially poor, unskilled women workers. In 1929, rather than comply with state law and pay scrub-women in Widener Library two cents more an hour, the university fired twenty workers and hired male cleaners at a lower wage.⁷³ Conant's accession to the presidency in 1933 marked a change in tone, but not in substance. A Harvard undergraduate in the 1910s, Conant remained disconnected from the Progressive Era's politics and values and made only "brief excursions into the humanities." Studying chemistry and physics, he quickly earned a bachelor's degree and a doctorate, and then joined the faculty. By the 1920s, he had become a distinguished professor of organic chemistry and part of a new breed of "hustling scholars" who advised industrial and financial corporations. Faculty and students considered Conant "an exemplar of the technocratic 'power elite,'" noting his detached use of formulas to solve problems.⁷⁴

Members of Local 431 understood that a union at Harvard was "an anomaly." When the CUUT formed, the campus reaction shifted from amazement to "warnings and outcries about the dangers of unionism, and prophetic visions of strikes and violence disturbing the calm of Harvard Yard." To appease such worries, Walsh and Matthiessen met with Conant in late 1935. The encounter did not go well. "After a cool and formal acknowledgment" of the two leaders, Conant "said little, asked no questions, and seemed almost churlish in his unresponsiveness." Walsh and Matthiessen felt as though "they had been talking to a statue, or more likely, to a man who had already made up his mind and had closed it to any further consideration." Conant's subsequent failure to recall anything of substance about this meeting reflected his contempt for any external organs or individuals who challenged, however indirectly, the university's normal power relationships.⁷⁵ A controversy in 1937 and 1938 highlighted these realities, pitting the CUUT and workplace democracy against the Conant administration.

The Walsh-Sweezy Case

Harvard, with a \$126 million endowment and annual budget of \$137 million, saw private donations fall from an average of \$10 million annually during the 1920s to

\$3.8 million in 1932. Fearing that New Deal spending would ignite inflation and endanger endowment income for years to come, Conant slashed departmental budgets, especially in the social sciences and humanities. Simultaneously, he insisted on eliminating younger instructors deemed unsuitable for promotion to assistant professor by their respective departments. Terminating faculty instructors had the benefit of easing “the university’s incestuous hiring practices.”⁷⁶ These conditions, along with the goal of enhancing Harvard’s academic reputation, led the president, in 1936, to develop the two-out-of-seven rule for the Economics Department: the department could promote two of its seven faculty instructors to the rank of assistant professor. The five remaining instructors “should be forced to leave within a reasonable length of time.”⁷⁷

The department chose one instructor for promotion in 1936 and a second in 1937. Three teachers, including Robert Lamb, secured other positions. The remaining faculty instructors, Raymond Walsh and Alan Sweezy, received another three-year stint with the proviso that, should their work merit it, they would be reconsidered for promotion. Conant and Dean George Birkhoff rejected this recommendation and issued terminal two-year appointments.⁷⁸ On April 5, the local press carried news of the dismissals, implying that the two men’s radicalism and union activities contributed to their plight. Students, faculty, and alumni denounced the decision. Labour unions—especially teachers’ unions—sent protest letters. Conant’s assertion that the terminations had been made “solely on [the] grounds of teaching capacity and scholarly ability,” generated more outrage as it suggested that Walsh and Sweezy were incompetent. A follow-up announcement claimed that the economists had “no future” at Harvard because, “in the opinion of those within the University best qualified to judge, there are others among their contemporaries of greater potentialities.”⁷⁹

Union activists condemned Conant’s statements as possibly libelous and accused the university of intolerance toward radical political thought. The CUUT’s executive board met several times to discuss what actions it could take. Henry Hart—a “cool, persuasive strategist,” according to Feuer—suggested having an independent investigative committee comprised of senior faculty members. Walsh, Prall, Matthiessen, and others agreed. Matthiessen produced a campus-wide petition urging that selected senior professors investigate the dismissals and potential threats to academic freedom. One-hundred-thirty-one junior faculty members and instructors signed the petition.⁸⁰

As the petition circulated, criticism of the university’s anti-unionism and anti-radicalism mounted. Robert Lamb, now teaching at Williams College, assessed the controversy for *The Nation* magazine. Noting Harvard’s class interests as “one of the largest capitalist institutions in the country,” Lamb argued that administrators favored, or at least tolerated, professors who worked for or consulted with government agencies and private corporations, but not those who cooperated with labour. Student supporters like HSU President Rolf Kaltborn emphasized the university’s

dislike for activist-scholars. He warned that the terminations ensured “future uniformity of conservative opinion” at Harvard and reflected the university’s position that political activism was not scholarly and “a dissipation of energies.”⁸¹ In a formal declaration, Local 431 contended that the decision threatened academic freedom and advised “younger teachers that advancement is best secured by the adherence, at least in public, to orthodox views and the pursuit of conventional inquiry.” Supporting “progressive labor legislation and [engaging] in trade-union activities” imperiled academic careers.⁸² Independent of the union’s public statement, Albert Coolidge wrote directly to Conant, characterizing the firings of “the two most prominent Union members” as “a great misfortune.” Walsh and Sweezy were “inspiring teachers” who provided students with “a sympathetic understanding of the aims and aspirations of the labor movement.” Arguing that trade unions were “destined to play an increasingly important, if not dominant, part in the near future,” Coolidge contended that Harvard desperately needed staff who had actual experience and familiarity with the “problems of labor and the confidence of its leadership.”⁸³

Administrators and the senior members of the Economics Department detested the uproar. “Unsympathetic” to the “unorthodox” views of Walsh and Sweezy, they remained unimpressed with the two men’s union activism and their meager scholarship. Administrators agreed that Walsh, in particular, spent too much time and energy on the union.⁸⁴ Many of Harvard’s natural, physical, and social scientists consulted for private businesses or the state. Although questions sometimes arose about the efficacy of this practice, faculty committees and administrators did not deem such external activity as problematic, as long as the paid academic experts remained aloof from overt class conflict. Cooperating with working-class organizations was highly suspect and acting outside of the traditional boundaries of academic work—such as standing on picket lines or serving as a union official—constituted, by definition, partisanship, dogmatism, and intellectual bias.⁸⁵

The larger academy’s aversion to trade unionism played a role here. Since the 1920s, AAUP leaders had opposed faculty unions. Arthur O. Lovejoy, a founder of the organization, refused to equate professors with industrial workers. In 1937, he reasserted that the unionization of academics was “essentially inimical” to their “special and peculiar responsibility” of defending the standards and integrity of the profession, namely, academic freedom. Academics who engaged in labour struggles eroded the university’s primary goal: to protect free scientific inquiry.⁸⁶ Local 431’s social unionists disagreed, insisting that unionizing faculty and defending the larger labour movement were the means of preserving and expanding academic freedom. Walsh, Matthiessen, and others explained that academic freedom existed only within a specific social context. As George A. Coe, one of Lovejoy’s many critics, observed, labour’s emancipation was “necessary to the maintenance and development of democracy” which, in turn, was a precondition for academic freedom.⁸⁷

Harvard administrators feared external influences on campus. Both Co-

nant and the chair of the Economics Department, H. H. Burbank alleged that “outside” leftist groups were pressuring the university to promote radical economists and union supporters and, thereby, corrupting institutional decision-making. In 1936, Burbank warned Conant “that there be might be a good deal of storm from the ‘left’ if we did not give Dr. Walsh special consideration.” The annoyed president responded: “it seemed to me that it would be impossible to run a University if I submitted to this sort of intimidation.” Outside pressure (the teachers’ union) thus constituted a threat to Conant’s definition of academic freedom, which was the university’s ability to make its own decisions free from external influence.⁸⁸ Such circumspection rarely hampered business influences in university decision-making.

Widespread agitation forced the president to acquiesce to the union-driven petition, although he feared the bad precedent “under which any group of instructors would feel entitled to investigate any other department.” Conant never wanted a nebulous “group of instructors”—the CUUT—threatening institutional procedures or his managerial prerogatives.⁸⁹ Two close confidants of Conant—Corporation fellow Grenville Clark and Walter Lippmann, a member of the Board of Overseers and chair of its Visiting Committee to the Economics Department—worry that ignoring the calls for a faculty committee investigation would aggravate campus discontent, intensify strife from below, and potentially empower the union. Clark and Lippmann remained convinced that the faculty committee would go “into the matter tactfully and considerately” and exonerate the institution.⁹⁰

The Committee of Eight’s report, issued in 1938, rejected the charge of political bias, thereby upholding Harvard’s image and soothing administrators’ fears. But the committee also found that the terminating appointments were “impersonal and mechanical,” that the underlying policy was “ill-advised” and rigidly applied, and that the administration acted in an unwise and unfair manner. Conant and the Corporation were livid; they refused to reinstate Walsh or Sweezy. From their perspective, the only legitimate function of the faculty panel was to clear the Economics Department, the president, and the dean of charges—circulated by the teachers’ union—of violating academic freedom. Clark told committee member and law professor Felix Frankfurter that campus radicals continued to blow the affair all “out of proportion.”⁹¹ However, twenty tenured professors sent a private letter to Conant in mid-June asserting that the committee report “consists of scrupulously defined conclusions, reasoned from a body of detailed evidence,” while the administrative response “simply answers reason with authority.” Separately, Frankfurter warned that the “evils of authoritarian rule” were seeping their way into “the government of a great university.”⁹²

The Cambridge union applauded the Committee’s work, endorsing its recommendations and denouncing the administration’s response. It commended the report’s “serious attention” to educational policy and its “implications as to the rigidity of the University’s administrative procedure, the widespread confusion regarding standards of promotion and tenure, and the one-sidedness of the curricu-

lum in economic and social fields.” Most importantly, the report explicitly “recognizes the injustice and un-wisdom of the way in which Drs. Walsh and Sweezy were dismissed and recommends their unconditional reinstatement.” Unfortunately, the Corporation’s rejection of the recommendations continued to demonstrate that the administration had learned nothing. “An injustice has been recognized, but not righted.”⁹³

Conant, the Corporation, and conservative faculty members abhorred such criticisms, seeking to quash any further public discussion of the issue. The president rebuffed faculty claims of administrative authoritarianism. It was only because of charges of “political prejudice” that the Walsh-Sweezy case “was reopened” and “a very special and extra-constitutional procedure was employed.” Conant reminded the faculty of the university’s power structure: “the Corporation, the Board of Overseers, and the Visiting Committees *are* the constitutional channels for examining any questions of maladministration by the officers of the University.” He denied that the Economics Department ever misunderstood his instructions and reiterated the budgetary and structural problems that had given rise to the two-out-seven rule.⁹⁴ Several faculty, who had long despised the union and its causes, came to Conant’s defense. Francis P. Magoun (Comparative Literature), for example, dismissed the whole notion of faculty unions and scorned the allegedly “controversial” subjects that Walsh, Sweezy, and the union embraced. Like Conant, he loathed outside interference in the university whether from “neutral” committees (Committee of Eight), the press, or the union. Sociologist P. A. Sorokin disputed the validity of the entire report except its exoneration of Conant “from political biases.” Amazed that some Harvard “professors continue to agitate around this trifle,” Sorokin believed the Committee, not to mention the union, “represents only a small minority within the faculty.”⁹⁵ Conant, his faculty supporters, and the university’s ruling bodies accepted the report for one reason: it cleared Harvard of the union’s charge of violating academic freedom.

For union activists, the controversy exposed the extent to which administrative prerogatives impeded academic democracy. Union leaders interpreted the ouster of Walsh and Sweezy as evidence of the university’s role in maintaining and reproducing capitalist social relations. Conant’s revolution at Harvard, including the mechanical application of the two-out-of-seven rule, revealed a hierarchical power structure and limited faculty governance. Years later, Matthiessen noted that Harvard’s “policies have for long now been shaped by the president and the deans in conjunction with the businessmen and lawyers who make up the typical group of trustees. The individual teacher is scarcely more than a hired hand.”⁹⁶

The Walsh-Sweezy controversy was not unique, as it came on the heels of at least two other cases involving the dismissal of popular front and labour union activists at U.S. colleges. In 1936, for example, Morris Schappes, an English instructor at the City College of New York, an open Communist and activist in the TU, was denied reappointment after eight years of teaching. Protests and petition-drives

organized by students, faculty, and the union forced the New York Board of Higher Education (BHE) to reverse the decision. Walsh, on behalf of the CUUT, protested the dismissal, noting that this was a “clear case of [Schappes] victimization because of political convictions and activities growing out of them.” In a politely worded letter, Walsh warned of a potential “serious blow to intellectual freedom” and urged the BHE to give Schappes “the benefit of sympathetic and careful judgment.”⁹⁷

Just as the Schappes situation unfolded, Jerome Davis, who had taught at the Yale Divinity School for twelve years, received a one-year terminal contract. The Yale Corporation had tired of Davis’ strong trade unionism, pro-Soviet views, and overall commitment to popular front causes. Members of the Yale union, AFT Local 204, complained that the dismissal threatened academic freedom and reflected the Yale Corporation’s “reactionary attitude ... to the changing social order.” A cause célèbre among the left, Davis was elected to the presidency of the AFT in the summer 1936. Soon thereafter, both the AFT and the AAUP investigated his dismissal. The two reports could not have been more different. The cautious AAUP committee, which had exclusive access to Yale administrators, found no direct evidence of violations of academic freedom, but cited Yale for ineptness—specifically, continuing to reappoint Davis without awarding him tenure—and recommended that Davis deserved something more than a one-year terminal contract. The AFT investigation was headed by Arnold Shukotoff, a colleague of Schappes and a leader in the college local of the TU, as well as a member of the Communist party. Among the other members serving on the AFT committee was Walsh. The committee oversaw a more vigorous investigation than its AAUP counterpart, while supporting a mass protest against the Yale Corporation. In the end, Shukotoff’s committee concluded that Yale indeed had violated Davis’ academic freedom, dismissing him because of his political views and union activities. It demanded Davis’ reinstatement. Ignoring the AFT, Yale adopted the AAUP’s suggestions.⁹⁸

The Decline of the CUUT

The Walsh-Sweezy affair was bittersweet for the CUUT. Although two key activists had been forced out of Harvard, the union itself entered a period of increased activity. Stimulated in part by the controversy, the CUUT’s membership doubled in size from around 100 in 1937 to over 200 by 1939. Led by Matthiessen, Coolidge, and Paul Sweezy, Local 431 continued to advance a popular front agenda. It aggressively defended academic freedom, including Harvard’s hiring, in 1938, of Granville Hicks, the editor of the Communist publication *New Masses*. It agitated against Nazi persecution of Jews, sponsoring the Harvard Committee for Refugees, which urged expanded scholarships for dozens of German Jewish refugees. With Paul and Maxine Sweezy in the lead, CUUT economists emphasized the continued need for massive New Deal programs, even as national attention shifted to foreign affairs.⁹⁹

At the same time, the union devoted increasing attention to the workplace. The Conant administration and the Committee of Eight each explored appoint-

ment, promotion, and tenure procedures in 1938 and 1939. And the union did the same, all the while deploring Conant's unilateral actions. A union report, issued in February 1939, differed significantly from the Committee of Eight's findings and from the eventual policies implemented by Conant.¹⁰⁰ Not surprisingly, a major point of dispute involved democratic governance. The union insisted that the Harvard hierarchy had "completely muffled democratization of procedure" as applied to the appointment and promotion of instructors and the selection of department chairs. Rather than continuing the practice whereby administrators appointed department heads, the CUUT proposed a democratic system in which all department members would elect the chair. "Democratic federalism," argued one activist, required that the president relinquish "some of his very great power over the departments." On the matter of who would serve on a department committee making staff appointments, unlike its counterparts, the CUUT insisted that all ranks be represented, including "at least one mere instructor." The union also demanded that the president and the Corporation "show cause" each and every time that they countermanded departmental decisions. Overall, union activists worried that the Committee of Eight and Harvard's extant power structure came very "close to" designating the department as "merely an 'informal advisory group'" to university administrators.¹⁰¹ By March 1940, a frustrated union concluded in one of its last unanimous statements:

Harvard, like most American colleges and universities, is a very model of undemocratic administration, that the Faculty has responsibilities and certain academic privileges, but no real power, except the right to recommend or suggest, and that the autocratic powers of the President are derived from an absentee, self-perpetuating government, the Corporation, of which the faculty members are servants and employees.¹⁰²

The CUUT, like the larger popular front social movement of which it was a part, experienced turmoil in 1939-1940, due largely to the onset of World War II. The Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939 led to an abrupt reversal of the Communist International's focus on building an anti-fascist coalition. This caused severe rifts within the U.S. Communist party and contributed to the undermining of leftist forces operating in the AFT.¹⁰³ However, Local 431 did not immediately fall apart. The union's liberals, independent leftists, and Communists continued to work together on university-related governance and promotion issues well into 1940. They also collaborated to protect academic freedom and civil liberties in the face of a resurgent right-wing attack—via organs such as the House of Representatives' Un-American Activities Committee. Whatever their position vis-à-vis the European War, all union members lamented the shift in national focus away from New Deal programs to foreign affairs. Even as late as February 1940, union leaders hoped to

launch a new membership drive that would fill the ranks and allow the CUUT to “play a socially important role” in organizing K-12 teachers, devising worker education programs in the Cambridge Central Labor Union, etc.¹⁰⁴

Divisions over foreign affairs within the Cambridge popular front coalition, as was the case elsewhere, did not easily fall into an interventionist-isolationist dichotomy. Paul Sweezy, who had emerged as a central activist by 1940, closely monitored the debate at Harvard and identified “at least eight points of view which are sufficiently distinct and common to warrant characterization.” Using Sweezy’s definitions, it is probable that at least six of the eight groups had a presence in Local 431. The pacifists, many of whom were Christian socialists, opposed all forms of militarism. A second group of “simple isolationists of the left” (including “socialists or radicals in the populist tradition”) emphasized resolving domestic problems, such as widespread unemployment and poverty, without regard to the international situation. “Complicated isolationists of the left” (specifically the Communists) viewed the war as “a struggle between two equally bad imperialist powers.” A fourth group, seeking to avoid direct U.S. belligerency, approved of a defense program that aided Great Britain and China; “their ultimate objectives range from the restoration of the *status quo ante* to mild social reform along traditional lines.” A fifth group perceived “Hitlerism as the ultimate evil” and acquiesced to sacrificing reform at home in order to defeat fascism abroad. Finally, there were those who deeply opposed fascism—especially a German victory—but nonetheless found the British or American alternative less than desirable. These individuals advocated for a “struggle on two fronts ... against fascism abroad and against the present control and direction of domestic policy.” Most of this latter group believed “that the solution of economic problems and the ending of war can be achieved only under some form of international socialism.”¹⁰⁵ Despite their obvious disagreements, representatives of these groups coexisted within the CUUT until the spring 1940.

A vote over whether Local 431 should make a token donation to the HSU’s anti-war chest resulted in a major rupture in May. A handful of Communists, as per the party’s official opposition to the “imperialist” war, favored the donation. They garnered support from the union’s long-time pacifists who wished to support anti-war student activists. Henry Hart and other hard-core interventionists vigorously opposed the resolution because of its symbolic value. Hart went so far as to argue that the union should restrict itself solely to bread-and-butter issues: “The affairs of teachers *as teachers*, at the institutions in which we teach, are the Union’s primary concern. If we have to agree about everything else, the continuance of the organization—with a membership of any substantial size—becomes simply impossible.” Much to the chagrin of Hart and his followers, the union decided by a single vote to make the donation. Frustrated by this action, Hart and other liberals resigned, effectively halving union membership over the next few months.¹⁰⁶ Harry Levin, F. O. Matthiessen, and other non-communist social unionists were distraught. Levin reminded Hart that the CUUT always had embraced resolutions and actions

with clear social and political implications; however, it “never meant setting up official union dogmas or attempting to dragoon the opinions of individual members.”¹⁰⁷

Within months, a much smaller Local 431 changed its name to the Harvard Teachers Union. It continued to speak out on university policies and contemporary social and political issues, but its impact became increasingly negligible. Days after the attack on Pearl Harbor and the U.S. entry into the war, the union publicly reaffirmed its commitment to social unionism and popular front goals: “As teachers and trade unionists,” Local 431 urged the protection of civil liberties and academic freedom “even in times of crisis.” It warned that “a defensive war against Fascist tyranny” should not become “an aggressive war for American empire.” And it hoped that labour would “be accorded a place in the formation of national policy commensurate with its importance in the community.” Union officials particularly cautioned that the wartime emergency “not be used as a pretext to destroy labor’s organizations or organizing rights.”¹⁰⁸ This last statement proved prophetic as the subsequent Cold War generated private and state political repression and an anti-labour crusade. Cold War liberalism, which, ironically, both Conant and Hart eventually embraced, helped to destroy the popular front social movement. Local 431 limped along in the postwar era, led by the old-guard Socialist, Albert Sprague Coolidge, until its demise in the fall 1950.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

The Cambridge Union of University Teachers represented the strengths and weaknesses of social unionism during the popular front era. Although not as effective in securing basic protections for its members as say New York’s College Teachers’ Union Local 537, the CUUT did push Harvard’s power structure to confront legitimate grievances from rank-and-file instructors. By forcing the Conant administration to create an independent faculty committee to investigate the Walsh-Sweezy case, the CUUT created a crucial venue for discussing appointment and tenure decisions and academic freedom. The CUUT’s prominent role in defending academic freedom—through fighting the teachers’ loyalty oath law in Massachusetts—contributed to a larger discourse on the role of university faculty in societal change. In its brief existence, the CUUT successfully linked the popular front commitment to antifascism, civil liberties, and industrial democracy with the immediate issues of democratic faculty governance and academic freedom. Historian Andrew Feffer’s assessment of Local 537 in New York applies equally to the CUUT: the union insisted that academic freedom and “educational integrity” could not be guaranteed “until colleges and universities had been turned into more-reliably democratic institutions.” It is no mere coincidence, that leaders in both unions utilized the same operative phrase in this regard, specifically to “educate for democracy.”¹¹⁰

Historian George Lipsitz has observed that academics “work within hierarchical institutions and confront reward structures that privilege individual distinc-

tion over collective social change.” During the interwar era, American colleges and universities theoretically allowed, perhaps even encouraged, faculty to mull over counter-hegemonic ideas relevant to societal concerns. But those institutions also pressured their teachers “to segregate themselves from aggrieved communities, and to work within the confines and ideological controls of institutions controlled by the wealthy and powerful.”¹¹¹ Such was the plight of the popular front and social union activists within Local 431. They strove to organize and to align themselves with working-class communities, as they challenged contemporary capitalism and fascism. Matthiessen well understood this: “freedom can be gained and protected only by groups functioning together, with their sense of social responsibility as highly developed as their sense of individual privilege.”¹¹²

NOTES

¹ American Federation of Teachers, Local No. 5, New York, *The College Teacher and the Trade Union* (New York: AFT Local 5, 1936), 3.

² Andrew Feffer, *Bad Faith: Teachers, Liberalism, and the Origins of McCarthyism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 138-40; F. O. Matthiessen, *From the Heart of Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 77 (quotes). For an assessment of the Depression's impact on higher education see, Malcolm W. Willey, *Depression, Recovery, and Higher Education: A Report by Committee of the American Association of University Professors* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc. 1937).

³ Timothy Reese Cain, "Only Organized Effort Will Find the Way Out!": Faculty Unionization at Howard University, 1918-1950," in *Higher Education for African Americans before the Civil Rights Era, 1900-1964*, ed. Marybeth Gasman and Roger L. Geiger (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 114-15.

⁴ Timothy Reese Cain, "Learning and Labor: Faculty Unionization at the University of Illinois, 1919-1923," *Labor History* 51, no.4 (November 2010): 543-569; Timothy Reese Cain, "Unionised Faculty and the Political Left: Communism and the American Federation of Teachers on the Eve of the Second World War," *History of Education* 41, no.4, (July 2012): 515-535; Timothy Reese Cain, "Only Organized Effort," 113-50; Timothy Reese Cain and Philip J. Wilkinson, "Influence Without Bargaining: Unionization at the University of Wisconsin, 1930-1957," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* 16, no.2 (2019): 99-122; Feffer, *Bad Faith*, 137-45; Clarence Taylor, *Reds at the Blackboard: Communism, Civil Rights, and the New York Teachers' Union* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 11-74; Jeanette Anne Lester, "The American Federation of Teachers in Higher Education: A History of Union Organization of Faculty Members in Colleges and Universities, 1916-1966" (Ed diss., University of Toledo, 1968); Andrew Knudsen, "Communism, Anti-Communism, and Faculty Unionization: The American Federation of Teachers' Union at the University of Washington, 1935-1948," University of Washington Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium, https://depts.washington.edu/depress/AFT_Local_401.shtml (accessed October 11, 2020).

⁵ Cain, "Unionised Faculty," 524 (quotes); Richard F. Teichgraeber III, "The Arrival of 'Up-or-Out' Tenure: James B. Conant and the 'Tempest at Harvard,' 1936-1939," in *Shaping the American Faculty*, ed. Roger L. Geiger (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2015), 109; Seymour Martin Lipset and David Riesman, *Education and Politics at Harvard* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975), 163.

⁶ Lester, "The American Federation of Teachers," 89-94; Alice Kessler-Harris, "Trade Unions Mirror Society in Conflict between Collectivism and Individualism," *Monthly Labor Review* 110, no.8 (August 1987): 32; Kim Moody, *An Injury to*

All: The Decline of American Unionism (London: Verso, 1988), xiv-xvi; Taylor, *Reds at the Blackboard*, 1 (quote). Labour historians studying the 1930-1950 era have contributed to our understanding of the phenomenon of social unionism, even if they have not used that particular term. See an analysis of “civic unionism” in Rosemary Feurer, *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

⁷ Alan Derickson, “Health Security for All? Social Unionism and Universal Health Insurance, 1935-1958,” *Journal of American History* 80, no.4 (March 1994): 1333-1356; Cain and Wilkinson, “Influence without Bargaining,” 100.

⁸ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Verso, 1998), xviii, 22-25.

⁹ Richard F. Teichgraber, III, Introduction to *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men*, by Thorstein Veblen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 1-20, 10 (quote).

¹⁰ Upton Sinclair, *The Goose-Step: A Study of American Education* (Pasadena: Upton Sinclair, 1923), 455-57 (quotes).

¹¹ James Wechsler, *Revolt on the Campus* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), 66-73.

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⁹⁸ Cain, *Establishing Academic Freedom*, 152-55; Lester, "The American Federation of Teachers in Higher Education," 114, 115 (quote); Feffer, *Bad Faith*, 143-44.

⁹⁹ "Membership Drive," *Bulletin of the Cambridge Union of University Teachers* 1, no.1 (December 1938): 1; "Teachers' Union Defends Harvard," *Boston Globe*, April 23, 1938, 19; "Many Protests in State Against Nazis," *Boston Globe*, November 16, 1938, 1, 3; "Harvard Men Plan to Bring German Student Refugees," *Boston Globe*, November 26, 1938, 1, 4; "W.P.A. Backed by Economists," *Boston Globe*, December 26, 1938, 1; "F.D. Influenced by Report of Harvard and Tufts Men," *Boston Globe*, January 12, 1939, 16.

¹⁰⁰ "Report of the Union Committee on Appointment and Tenure," *Bulletin of the Cambridge Union of University Teachers* 1, no.4 (March 1939): 1-4; "An Open Letter," *Bulletin of the Cambridge Union of University Teachers* 1, no.7 (June 1939): 1-4; "Reasons for Increasing the Associate Professorships," *Bulletin of the Cambridge Union of University Teachers* 2:1 (October 1939): 1-4; "Tenure and Appointment Discussions: The Present Stage," *Bulletin of the Cambridge Union of University Teachers* 2:2 (December 1939): 1-3.

¹⁰¹ Letter from Sam Beer to Henry Hart, June 8, 1939 (quotes), Folder 2: CUUT [Walsh-Sweezy], Box 32, Hart Papers; "An Open Letter," *Bulletin of the Cambridge Union of University Teachers* 1, no.7 (June 1939): 1-4.

¹⁰² "Non-Resident Government at Harvard," *Bulletin of the Cambridge Union of University Teachers* 2, no.4 (March 1940): 1 (quote).

¹⁰³ See, for example, Cain, "Unionised Faculty and the Political Left," 529-31.

¹⁰⁴ "The C.U.U.T. and the National Situation," *Bulletin of the Cambridge Union of University Teachers* 2:3 (February 1940), 1-3, 3 (quote).

¹⁰⁵ Paul M. Sweezy, "University Attitudes on War and Defense," *Bulletin of the Cambridge Union of University Teachers* 3:1 (December 1940): 1-2 (quotes).

¹⁰⁶ Henry Hart, Message to CUUT Meeting, n.d. (probably May 21, 1940) (quotes, emphasis in original); Letter from Harry Levin to Henry Hart, May 22, 1940; Let-

ter from F. O. Matthiessen to Henry Hart, May 23, 1940; and Letter, Henry Hart to F. O. Matthiessen, May 25, 1940, Folder 9: CUUT, Box 31, Hart Papers.

¹⁰⁷ Letter from Harry Levin to Henry Hart, June 14, 1940, Folder 9: CUUT, Box 31, Hart Papers.

¹⁰⁸ “Harvard Teachers’ Union Would Protect Rights of Labor,” *Boston Globe*, December 11, 1941, 27.

¹⁰⁹ Letter from Albert Sprague Coolidge to Irvin R. Kuenzli, December 21, 1950, Folder: Local #431, Box 10, Defunct Locals, AFT Records.

¹¹⁰ Feffer, *Bad Faith*, 140-41 (quotes). Lewis Feuer used the phrase in 1935.

¹¹¹ George Lipsitz, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 277-78.

¹¹² Matthiessen, *From the Heart of Europe*, 142.