

HUCTW Open Letter
to
HUCTW Members and the Harvard Community



February 14, 2011

2011: A Challenging New Era

As 2010 gives way to 2011 and record snowfalls accumulate, the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers is entering an important new period. Six months ago, members of HUCTW ratified a new Agreement after negotiations that required patient determination and creative energy from Union and University leaders alike. As the University slowly recovers from losses it suffered in “The Great Recession,” managers and staff in nearly every Harvard unit are discussing important questions about how to handle rebuilding opportunities.

As Harvard regains financial strength, members and leaders of HUCTW will continue with constructive efforts to make our voices heard. The healthy debate about fiscal priorities and strategies for building a great and sustainable University, begun in the “hard choices” era of 2009-10, will go on for years. Our Union’s efforts in the near future will be focused, as they have been throughout our history, on making sure that an informed and thoughtful staff perspective is in the policy-making mix. The clear and constructive articulation of our ideas and concerns about the workplace is the most important thing we can do to improve our working lives, and the strongest contribution we can make to Harvard’s excellence.

This letter is the first in a series discussing ongoing issues, joint union-management processes, and the implementation of new programs from the 2010 Agreement. In three letters to follow, we will inform Union members and open a broad discussion about three critical areas where active Harvard-HUCTW partnership efforts are underway in 2011.

Health Care

Although federal health care legislation currently being implemented brings important and positive changes in a number of areas, health care costs nationwide continue to rise, with severe pressures on employers and employees. In the University Benefits Committee (UBC), where HUCTW leaders work collaboratively with Harvard administrators and faculty experts, we have made a number of innovative policy changes in recent years that help to contain costs for the University and employees. The UBC has also held important discussions about difficult compromises that can ease cost pressures without sacrificing the overall strength and quality of our health insurance program. We need to continue exploring new strategies to keep the program affordable and to avoid the severe cuts occurring in many other workplaces.

The Bargaining Unit

For many years, the jobs eligible for inclusion in HUCTW were understood to be overtime-eligible positions in salary grades 47 to 55. In the 2010 Agreement, the opportunity to participate in our Union has been extended to include OT-eligible positions in Grade 56. In recent years, we have seen a dramatic increase in awareness and concern about the importance of being included in HUCTW. Many staff members who work near the boundary line of Union eligibility, in exempt jobs in Grades 55 to 57, are understandably interested in the financial progress, employment security, and opportunities for participation in thoughtful discussion about the Harvard workplace that HUCTW provides. Another new feature in the 2010 Agreement is a call for a union-management group called the Joint Committee on the Bargaining Unit (JCBU) to begin an urgent study of how Harvard schools and departments are applying the federal Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) “exemptions,” which exclude certain jobs from being overtime-eligible based on job responsibilities. The way in which those exemptions are used directly affects which Harvard jobs are included in our Union and which are not. In particular, the JCBU is to carry out a regular review of new job postings in order to “flag” questionable exempt postings for further review, to discuss and decide on clearer standards for determining HUCTW eligibility, and to assist in communication and education efforts on those standards throughout the community. Given the diversity of job types and organizational settings in our University, as well as the legal complexity of interpreting and applying the FLSA, the clarification of standards for Union eligibility is bound to be a challenging task. At the same time, it is an important organizational priority to be sure that the jobs which should be in HUCTW are included.

Participation

For more than 20 years, school- or department-level Joint Councils have been identified in Article I of our Agreement as important and valued structures allowing union members to participate in making plans and solving problems at the work unit level. A cornerstone of HUCTW-Harvard partnership is the idea that serious and substantive engagement of staff members and managers in local joint union-management discussions can improve the working environment and organizational performance. In our Union’s actual experience over 20 years, results from Joint Council activity have varied, ranging from impressive success stories to moments of frustration and confusion. Overall, it has become clear from a collection of Joint Council and joint work redesign efforts that staff participation at the department level is a critically important and promising area of activity. Particularly in the past few years as reorganizations in many departments have focused on difficult questions concerning scarce resources, reduced staffing levels, and the search for cost-cutting innovations, many HUCTW members have expressed an urgent interest in creating strong and meaningful opportunities for participation. In the 2010 negotiations and the months following, the University and our Union have been working together to support Joint Councils and to explore the creation of new local participatory structures, through the activities of a Joint Governance Coordinating Committee (JGCC). The JGCC is a continuing joint committee process, whose goal is to foster more and more meaningful union-management activity at the unit level.

Please watch your email in the near future for more letters in the series, discussing these ongoing efforts in more detail. Also, please share your ideas and questions by

reply email, by calling the Union office at 617-661-8289, or by talking with an HUCTW Organizer or local Union leader in your part of the University.

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