Preface

Much has been written in recent years about the individualistic nature of the knowledge- and technology-driven "new economy," about the decline of unions, and about Americans' growing aversion to participating in membership and community organizations—even in elections and other responsibilities and institutions that undergird our democracy. But these observations don't tell the whole story.

I am the president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), a union of more than 1 million members which has been growing steadily for decades and enjoyed a net membership increase of 100,000 in just the past year. Although ours is a union of "knowledge workers," their individualism hasn't prevented them from banding together both to improve the quality of the work they do and to better the working conditions under which they labor. They also turn out to vote in large numbers and tend to be highly active in civic and community affairs.

My experience isn't just an anomaly. In fact, there has recently been a lot of labor-related activity among professional and technical workers. Just a year ago, the American Medical Association (AMA), arguably the strongest and most respected professional association in the country, voted to form a union. Around the same time, unionization became a national priority of the American Nurses Association (ANA). Also last year, the New York State Psychological Association, an organization of highly educated professionals who are largely self-employed, voted to affiliate with the AFT. In Washington State, the engineers and technicians at Boeing, part of another traditionally nonunion sector of the workforce, voted to affiliate with the International Federation of Professional and Technical Employees (IFPTE), AFL-CIO. For forty days during February and March 2000, they conducted the largest strike of private-industry professional employees in U.S. history. In July 2000, the union won the right to represent another 6,550 professionals at Boeing's facility in Wichita, Kansas. Meanwhile, high-skilled workers at Microsoft and other information technology companies in the Seattle, Washington, area are being organized by the Washington Alliance of Technology Workers (or WashTech), which is affiliated with the Newspaper Guild of the Communications Workers of America (CWA). This organization provides members, including contract and long-term "temporary" employees, with education and training, accurate information about the companies where they work, an advocate for better wages and working conditions, a virtual community of peers, and a voice in the state legislature.

What's going on here? Obviously, an exploration of this question is of interest to the leaders of technical and professional unions. But it is also of concern to all of us who are interested in the health of our democracy, including economists, academics, business people, and those who make and study public policy. The papers that follow were prepared for a recent roundtable conversation among individuals from these sectors, sponsored by the Albert Shanker Institute.

The first document is a study of three specific groups of employees whose workplaces have been affected by the activity of employee organizations—including registered nurses and allied employees in New Jersey, information technology workers in Washington, and the engineers and technicians at Boeing. The second is a national poll of four groups of professional and technical employees from growing segments of the economy—engineering, information technology, nursing, and teaching. Through the poll, we sought to learn about these groups of professionals, generally—their values, interests, and fears in regard to their professions, their jobs, and their organizations. But we also wanted to take a look at the attitudes of a subset of individuals, specifically those with recent experiences with labor organizations. So, the two pieces are presented in tandem. In addition, we also polled a special subsample of one profession—the engineers and technical workers at Boeing in Washington State—and the results make for truly interesting comparisons.

What did we find? The data paint a picture of a group of individuals who are happy with and highly committed to their professions but often dissatisfied with their working conditions. The opportunity to make a contribution is what they value most in their professional lives, but workaday matters, such as salaries and benefits, are what they believe need the most improvement. They often hold negative stereotypes about unions but offer conditional support for these institutions, especially where there are professional frustrations or problems with management. They want to work collaboratively with their managers, but it is only in the most organized professions—teaching and nursing—that a majority feels that a process exists for discussing both individual and group concerns with management. Whether or not they want a union, they share a desire for the organizations they join to serve their professional needs and interests—including providing them with access to professional training and helping them improve the quality of the services they provide.

In other words, the data—like the individuals they describe—don't lend themselves to simple analysis. Yet they offer some tentative conclusions that merit further inquiry by all interested parties.

- **When these workers form unions or another type of professional or employee organization,they do so, in large measure, out of a sense of professional responsibility and concern about the quality of the services they provide.** When questioned about what they value most as professionals, those from all sectors—not just the so-called helping professions of teaching and nursing—said that "making a contribution" was their highest priority. The second and third most popular answers being offered were "opportunities to be creative" and "excelling at my job." When these professionals were questioned about the qualities they most desire in an organization, eleven characteristics were cited by a majority of respondents. Only four of these had to do with traditional union functions, such as salaries and health benefits. Among the top answers were "understands professionals," "offers professional training," "works with management," and "speaks out for quality."

- **As noted in the in-depth study, professionals tend to be "joiners by nature," with a large percentage already belonging to professional associations,unions, and other types of employee organization**s. Indeed, according to the poll, 55 percent of all professionals in the groups we polled support the formation of a workplace-based employee organization, including a plurality of every professional category, except the engineers.

- **Both through the polling data and in-depth study, we found that, under the**

right circumstances, professionals are willing to set aside negative stereotypes about unions to join or form their own labor organizations. In fact, despite the common belief that professionals are less prone to unionize than bluecollar workers, data from the AFL-CIO Department of Professional Employees and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics prove otherwise. Indeed, at a time when only 15.6 percent of all U.S. workers are unionized, almost 23 percent of professional/specialty employees are represented by unions.

- **The data suggest a broad area for collaboration and common-cause between employers and professional unions.** As any current member of a professional union can tell you, part of the daily function of these organizations is to support their members' efforts to strengthen the standards of their profession and do the best possible job for their clients—ideally through a cooperative relationship with management.This reality actually reflects a notion of "trade" unionism with roots in the medieval guild system. Members of a craft or a profession band together to provide education, training, and professional certification; develop a system of pension and health benefits that offer flexibility to those with multiple employers throughout their professional careers; and help workers improve the quality of the goods and services they provide. In an era when "flexibility," "quality," and "niche marketing" are the watchwords of the new economy, such a system is of obvious benefit to employers and employees alike.

- **This being said, many professionals and their employers still hold a one-dimensional view of unions as tough and combative.** The data tell us—and this shouldn't come as a surprise—that when employers create a hostile working environment, workers find appeal in the collective power of unions. As with union members in other parts of the workforce, professional and technical workers are willing to be militant when they must, but they don't seek conflict and prefer to work collaboratively with management when they can. In fact, the very existence of a union offers the possibility for deeper labor-management cooperation than would otherwise be possible. For example, employers could use their workers' democratically elected representatives as partners in developing ideas to improve the quality of products and services, as well as to analyze the economic effects of resulting changes in the workplace, and to think through how adjustments could be made fairly, as well as efficiently. In other words, the fact that professional unions have a role in both the economic and the professional spheres means that unions can give workers a voice on the job, as well as in the profession. This helps to explain the choice of some professional associations to affiliate with or transform themselves into unions.

- **Although the stereotype is that unions create conflict,it is more accurate to say that many unions have been created by conflict. It is through their role as successful mediators of conflict, however, that unions grow and thrive.** If they are to survive with the support of members, the unions that form as a result of a cri-

The challenge now is to move beyond conflict—that is, to figure out how unions can be organized with a focus on the positives they bring, rather than the negatives they counteract.

sis in the workplace must act as vehicles by which problems are resolved. In my experience, when they are working well, unions also act to prevent crises from ever occurring. (The concept of "peace through strength" applies to more than just foreign policy.) This point is confirmed by the data showing that workers in the most unionized sectors tend to be the ones who feel they have a process for communicating with managers on both individual and group concerns. The challenge now is to move beyond conflict—that is, to figure out how unions can be organized with a focus on the positives they bring, rather than the negatives they counteract.

What is the future of professional unionism in America? We know that the workplace of the 21st century will be built upon many new and unfamiliar labor arrangements. For example, many doctors and psychologists are self-employed professionals, yet their terms of employment and ability to serve their clients depend on massive for-profit companies over which they have no control and little influence. We'll also see many more project workers, such as those at Microsoft and other information technology companies, who are highly skilled and educated people who have no regular connection to a company or, for the most part, to each other—and therefore no benefits, no pensions, and no clout. To many young professionals just entering the workforce, the security of a traditional employee-employer relationship must seem like a thing of the past—perhaps one reason why these young people express a greater interest in workplace organization than do older colleagues.

All of this should lead us to consider new models of representative organizations that fully serve professional interests—from professional development and research to advocacy and legislative action—and are also strong enough to tackle difficult and divisive problems when they need to. Such organizations may vary widely in form and in function. But, like unions, they must be democratic institutions that give voice to and help to meet the diverse needs of their members. They must be capable of addressing economic as well as professional points of conflict, but must also be able to attract and meet the needs of professionals who love their work and have no pressing problems with their employers. To move down this road, the union movement must reach out to associations and draw them into cooperative relationships to address issues that relate to the profession. And finally, we must find new ways to reach out to and work with employers, not just in pursuit of enlightened mutual self-interest, but with an eye toward helping members improve service to clients, establish high standards for their professions, and strengthen the institutions for which they work.

—*Sandra Feldman*