

## My Career at AFSCME

I was rummaging through my files today (February 16, 2009) and came across a folder labeled AFSCME. Since I am writing my memoirs (though rather sporadically) I thought, this should kick-start the story of my career as Education Director of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. The file begins with a wish list of my plans for the AFSCME Education Department dated December 9, 1964, memos and outlines of training programs for members and staff during the spring and summer of 1965. It ends with an undated letter I wrote to President Jerry Wurf about the strained relationship between myself and Education and Research Director Elwood Taub.

To begin at the beginning: I knew Jerry Wurf casually from the time I joined the staff of the Jewish Labor Committee in 1956. He was the director of District Council 37 of AFSCME, and as a Jewish labor leader, and a former YPSL (Young People's Socialist League), he was automatically a JLC leader. Politically, we thought alike, slightly to the left of JLC. We both supported the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, and Jerry was on the New York Board. When he could not attend Board meetings, he asked me to go in his place. More about Jerry: He was born in New York in 1919, contracted polio at 4 and walked with a limp ever since. He went to NYU, worked as a cafeteria cashier in 1940, as an organizer for cafeteria workers Local 448 in 1943, where he was known as the "malachamovis" (the angel of death). Jerry was hired by AFSCME President Arnold Zander as an organizer for DC 37 in 1947, and became regional director in 1956. He was very tough and very smart.

In 1962, I left the JLC and went to work for the Amalgamated Laundry Workers as their Education Director. Soon after, I ran into Jerry, and he told me he was disappointed that I would take a job with the Laundry Workers. He called them a phony union, and said that if he knew I was interested in leaving the JLC, he would have hired me.

In 1962, Jerry and several other young AFSCME leaders, had formed an opposition group, the Committee on Union Responsibility, and he ran for president against the union's first president, Arnold Zander. Jerry lost, but vowed to continue the fight. Over the next two years, Jerry and his supporters mounted a very effective campaign, and he won the presidency, narrowly, in May 1964. It had been a bitter fight, and a thorough housecleaning followed.

In November 1964, I received a call from "Executive Assistant to the President" Bob Hastings, asking me if I would be interested in being AFSCME Education Director. Jerry asked him to call me. I was taken by surprise, and asked Bob if I could get back to him after talking to my wife. Sylvia and I weighed the pros and cons, and concluded that it would be a wonderful opportunity. A good time to make a change. I called Bob back, we talked salary; I flew to Washington to work out the details and to look for a place to live.

I was very excited about the position. Being the education director of an international union is a lot more challenging than a local or a joint board. I did not know that the job

had been offered to several others in labor education who had turned it down. Jerry was well known as someone who was hard to work for. I started in December, and spent the month shuttling between Washington and New York, as I tried to do my job, find a place to live and help Sylvia move.

The first few months were very challenging, getting to know the union and the staff. I was sent to New York in January to help with a major strike. I also went to Puerto Rico in February to conduct an education program. Just as I was putting together a program of staff training, Jerry announced that he is merging the education and research departments, and is hiring someone named Elwood Taub who had been the Education and Research Director for the International Woodworkers Union (IWU). My new title would be Assistant Director of the Department of Education and Research. It came out of the blue. I was disappointed, but I may have been over my head, and Elwood Taub was an experienced international union education director. Things will work out.

Things didn't work out. Elwood dismissed my program ideas, had no interest in my input, and transferred the materials that he developed for the IWU to AFSCME. Both the former research director and I were relegated to responding to Elwood's memos, and answering research inquiries.

In my letter to Jerry mentioned above (which appears to have been written around July) I described how I was pushed aside by Taub, never consulted, and given research assignments with little or no guidance. The letter was an appeal to Jerry to intercede, or to reassign me to another position in the union. Jerry chose to do neither. He did give me time to look for another job. The last few months were awkward. I spent half my time working, and half my time looking for other work. Jerry and I had little contact with one another. My dream of being a part of the movement to reshape public employee unionism was over. Being in Washington, I looked for a job with the government in labor or civil rights.

By the fall of 1965, I found a position with the US Commission on Civil Rights and I remained with the Commission for 21 years. My career at Afscme lasted less than a year. Many people referred to the place as a revolving door. Vic Gotbaum, a close friend of Jerry's, who left Chicago to take over the New York District, said that "his meanness drove a substantial number of highly qualified people from his union." Despite that, he transformed public employee unionism.

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