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last 10 years.

The election was little more than a referendum on the handgun ban. After two courts ruled that the ban was constitutional and could only be reversed by the voters, not the courts, opponents organized the "We the People" party, declaring their disapproval of the "dictatorial and outrageous conduct of the present administration in this whole area of gun control." Said Joan Deckart, an anti-ban trustee not up for re-election: "If the 'We the People' party comes out opposing gun control and wins, that is as good as a referendum in Morton Grove."

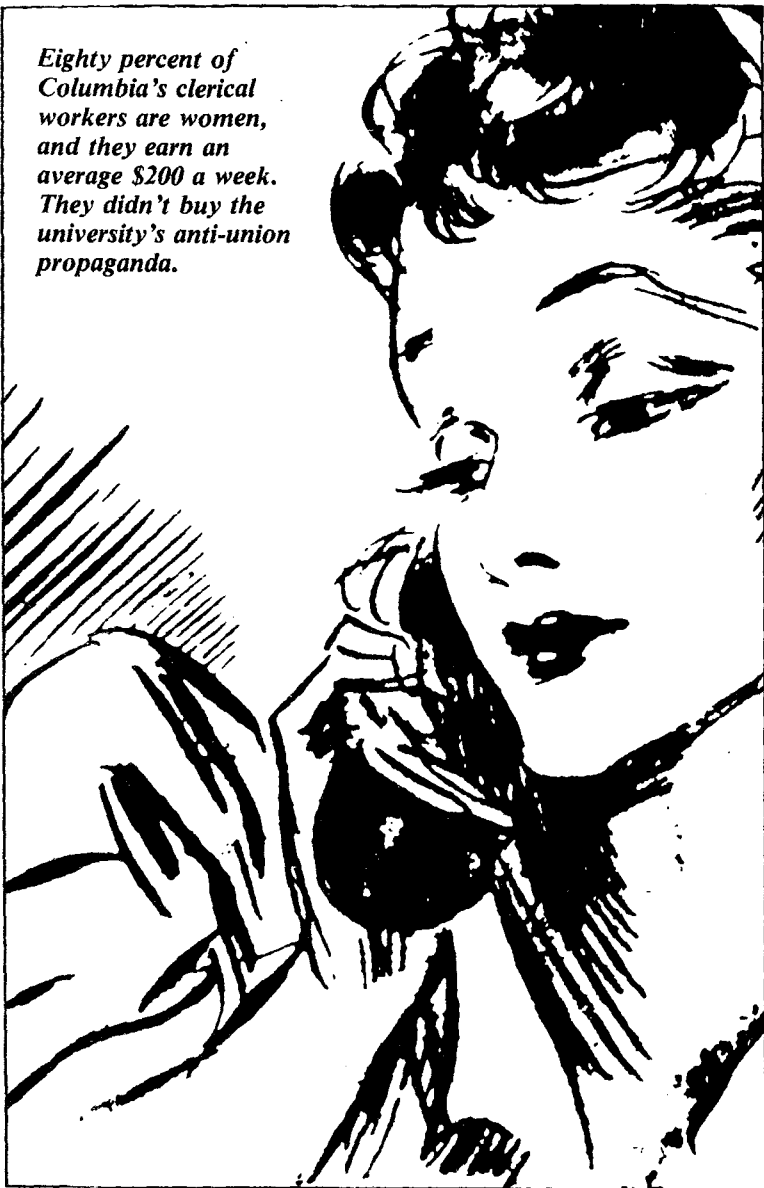
On election day, however, ev-

ery member of the party was defeated. One of the losers, Seymour Primer, blamed the media for making the race a one-issue campaign.

But the battle isn't over, says Mayor Richard Flickinger, pointing out that the NRA has said it will appeal to the Supreme Court. Since the ordinance went into effect in February 1982, three people have been arrested, convicted and fined the minimum \$50. Morton Grove officials have sent copies of the ordinance to 517 towns and cities around the country, but only Evanston, Ill., has passed similar legislation.

—Michael Brennan

Eighty percent of Columbia's clerical workers are women, and they earn an average \$200 a week. They didn't buy the university's anti-union propaganda.



## Union wins at Columbia

NEW YORK—Columbia University clerical workers, overcoming a strong anti-union campaign by the university administration in a close election, voted May 4 to join District 65 of the United Auto Workers union (UAW).

The union election, the first at Columbia since 1976, was delayed three years because management wanted supervisors to vote on representation. The local National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) initially agreed, but District 65 refused to go along, and the NLRB reversed its decision on April 7, making way for the election.

Clerical salaries at Columbia average \$200 a week, barely a living wage in New York. Most of Columbia's clerical workers are under 35, and 80 percent of them are women. One-third leave their jobs every year.

Job classifications, or the lack of them, have made for troubled labor relations there. Many people work to get tuition remissions

and take courses requiring a flexibility from which the university benefits most. In the absence of specific job descriptions, salaries vary greatly among the many departments and semi-autonomous programs. "There are people here who don't know what they're supposed to be doing," says Lee Fleming, a former Columbia worker now with District 65.

Even after the NLRB decision, the university fought the union drive. Fleming says workers were bombarded with anti-union propaganda, distorting how much of their salaries would go for union dues, the terms of the union's health plans and portraying District 65 as "strike-happy." The night before the election, campus security police handcuffed five union organizers—off campus—who were putting up posters. City police ordered their release.

The next day's vote was close—468 to join the union, 442 against, and 97 votes that Columbia is disputing before the NLRB. Yet union organizers say they have no doubt of their victory and are looking forward to similar efforts at Yale, Cornell and Harvard.

—Myles Gordon

## Briefing: Up from slavery in N.C.

DURHAM, N.C.—The motto "First in freedom" can still be found on many old North Carolina license plates. But agricultural growers' opposition to a proposed state law outlawing involuntary servitude has provoked farmworkers and their supporters to coin a slogan of their own: "Last in freedom, first in slavery."

The controversial statute, House Bill 684, is the result of years of lobbying by farmworker advocacy groups. The bill would make it a felony to "knowingly and willfully" "kidnap," "entice" or "hold any person in involuntary servitude." The proposed statute would also make it a crime to employ a person with the knowledge that the employee is holding people in involuntary servitude, a measure designed to crack down on "crewleaders," the middlemen who import migrant workers to North Carolina. The penalties for violating the act are substantial, ranging from \$100,000 to \$1 million for corporations, and up to five years in prison in addition to a fine for personal criminal liability.

"I thought that we abolished slavery in 1865," said the bill's sponsor, Democratic Rep. Malcolm Fucher. Prior to introducing the legislation, Fulcher admitted that he was "a little bit embarrassed at having to introduce such a bill." He added, "Who, after all, in the 20th century, would tolerate slavery?"

There have been 10 federal convictions for enslaving farmworkers in North Carolina during the past three years. In January 1982, three labor contractors, known as crewleaders, were convicted in federal district court in Raleigh on charges of conspiracy to hold workers in involuntary servitude. The incident resulted in the death of a farmworker who was sick and in need of medical attention yet was forced to work in the hot sun.

More recently, on April 14, 1983, four people were indicted by a federal court in Tampa, Fla., on charges of enticing farmworkers into slavery and

conspiring to hold workers in involuntary servitude. The indictments cover activity in North Carolina as well as in Florida.

The state's migrant labor system encourages such violations. Every year approximately 35,000 migrant farmworkers—mostly blacks, Hispanics and Haitians—travel up from Florida to North Carolina to crop tobacco and pick cucumbers, bell peppers and sweet potatoes.

When a grower needs workers, he files a work order with the North Carolina Employment Security Commission, claiming that there are not enough local workers available. The ESC, in turn, issues a clearance order to crewleaders in Florida, who then round up workers. Crewleaders, not growers, are then responsible for paying and housing the workers.

In 1981, the state National Lawyers Guild chapter published a report on crewleader violence against farmworkers in North Carolina. According to the report, some crewleaders recruit the unemployed off the streets, luring them with alcohol and promises of work. The next thing a recruit knows, he wakes up in North Carolina and learns he must pay back the money the crewleader "fronted" to him for the ride up before he can think of leaving.

Testimony presented at various public hearings by health and legal services outreach workers reveals the same conditions. The farmworkers are physically restrained from leaving migrant camps. Dogs patrol the camps at night, preventing the workers from escaping. Food, frequently consisting of a spoonful of grits, a bologna sandwich on white bread and chicken necks or fat back with beans and rice, is sold for an average of \$45 per week. Alcohol and cigarettes are resold in the camps illegally at exorbitant prices.

Farmworkers in North Carolina are not covered by any protective legislation, and are specifically excluded from workers' compensation, unemployment insurance, state minimum wage laws and child

labor laws. Water for drinking and washing and toilets in the fields are not required. And competition between the migrants and North Carolina's own seasonal farmworkers has prevented effective political action.

Currently, the U.S. Department of Justice is the only agency able to investigate slavery complaints in North Carolina and determine whether the evidence warrants federal indictments. The proposed anti-slavery statute would enable the State Bureau of Investigation to look into these complaints and would allow state courts to hear such cases.

The report presented by the North Carolina Legislative Study Commission on Migrant Farmworkers found enforcing state law would be easier and faster than relying on federal law. Although the Justice Department receives many complaints, most do not result in



indictments due to insufficient evidence. Often farmworkers who are witnesses disappear into the migrant stream, in fear for their jobs and lives if they testify.

But there is powerful opposition to the bill. Robert Broughton, general counsel for the private North Carolina Farm Bureau Federation, representing the state's agricultural growers, believes there is no need for the legislation. "We don't see the problem," Broughton stated. "The federal statutes are fairly comprehensive. ...The Bureau's main objection is the bill's broad definition of involuntary servitude which may be subject to abuse."

W.B. Jenkins, also with the Farm Bureau, adds that the proposed anti-slavery statute is "an insult to every farmer in the state. It implies that there is slavery in North Carolina."

—L.A. Winokur and Alex Charns





By Daniel Lazare

NEW YORK

**W**HEN JUDITH LEVINE talks, she sometimes sounds like a garment worker complaining bitterly about low wages or a factory hand sounding off about some particularly arrogant foreman. Instead, she is a freelance writer railing against magazine editors and the unseen, but all-powerful, publishers behind them.

"I was considered a relatively successful freelancer because I was grossing \$12,000 a year," she said. "I became a freelancer because I thought I would have some integrity. But after several years I discovered that I neither had any integrity nor was I making a living. I was being evicted from my apartment and having my phone turned off. I owed \$750 to my dentist, \$750 to my shrink, \$1,500 to friends and probably \$1,000 to my parents. Even the most efficient writers usually end up getting paid less than \$5 an hour for working on a piece. You don't get paid for rewrites and editorial time, and you don't get paid for sitting around waiting for your editors while they do something else."

"You may have to wait anywhere from three months to a year to be paid," Levine continued. "In order to do a piece for the *Village Voice*—a piece that may take me a month and that I'll get paid \$400 for—I've got to work part-time as a copy editor to pay for it. Rupert Murdoch [publisher of the *Voice*] is making a fortune and I'm paying for it."

#### Solidarity forever.

Writers have been complaining about such abuses since the rise of the commercial press in the 17th century, but for perhaps the first time ever in the U.S., they are now banding together to do something about it. On April 30 and May 1, about 40 freelance journalists, playwrights, novelists and poets got together in a cinderblock classroom in the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute to draft a constitution for an infant labor organization known as the National Writers Union. Like good professionals, the delegates were terse and to the point, and the document was finished on schedule. Then, after a chorus of



Steve Kogan

## IN THE NATION

### WRITERS

# Obstacles do not daunt new union

the U.S. There were attempts in the '30s, but, as far as I know, they never got off the ground." In Western Europe, where labor laws are far less restrictive, freelancers are frequently covered by newspaper unions, such as the National Union of Journalists in Britain. In the U.S., similar groups of workers such as playwrights, screenwriters and graphic artists—all of whom sell their work on the open market rather than working directly for employers—are covered by unions or quasi-unions, like the Dramatists Guild and the newly organized Graphic Artists Guild.

The union currently has 1,500 dues-paying members and has won its first contract, a recent two-year agreement with *Mother Jones* setting minimum rates for contributors (\$1,000 for a first assignment, \$1,200 for a second and \$1,500 for a third) and establishing rules to cover such sensitive areas as "kill fees" (set at 25 percent of the purchase price), rewrites and timetables for informing writers that their work has been accepted, paying them and publishing their work.

#### Horror stories.

These are reforms of vital importance to freelancers, each of whom has a horror story to tell about articles that undergo endless rewrites only to disappear forever into the black hole of some editor's desk drawer. "There isn't a writer—I don't care how big—who hasn't had these kinds of experiences," said Eagan. "One of the things I've discovered is that the bigger you are and the more you're earning, the more ways publishers find to do horrible things to you."

"The next year is obviously very crucial for us," she added. "We've got to win as many contracts as we possibly can, covering books, magazines and paperback publishers. Within two years, we will probably have 5,000 members and numerous enforceable contracts." Although they divulge no names, organizers say their next target may be a glossy magazine or trade publication, and the union by no means wants to confine itself to the left-liberal publications like *Mother Jones*. In five years, she hopes, the union will be so well-established "that everyone will take us for granted."

For the moment, though, the balance of power is still overwhelming against the union. Writers still peck away at their typewriters in isolation and editors still treat them with impunity. Nonetheless, there was a touch of excitement in the air at the National Writers Union's constitutional convention. It was the heady sense of a political and economic movement that has put down roots and is growing.

The idea for a national writers union first arose at a meeting in a New York apartment in February 1981, which had been called to discuss plans for the American Writers Congress, held in October of that year under the auspices of *The Nation* magazine.

"There was tremendous enthusiasm in the room," Eagan recalled. "But every week, somebody new would come around and say it couldn't be done—it was illegal, writers were too individualistic, etc." When the congress was held, there was reluctance to put the idea of a union up for a vote for fear it would be defeated. Instead, it passed by an unofficial tally of 2,000 to four.

If progress has been fairly steady since, organizers owe a measure of thanks to the Reagan administration, the recession and more than a decade of inflation, which have caused working conditions to deteriorate alarmingly and spurred writers to act. Most magazines have increased their rates only slightly since the early '60s, meaning that compensation has been effectively cut by a half to two-thirds. Book advances have been growing smaller and smaller, and many publishing houses have been pushing much-resented "work-for-hire" contracts in which authors are asked to forego royalties in exchange for a slightly larger fee up front.

#### Little mercy for writers.

Such is the fate of any unorganized social group in an inflationary economy. Senior citizens, who constitute a powerful political lobby, have fought tenaciously against cuts in social security benefits, while labor unions were successful in keeping wage increases ahead of inflation (although at the cost of rising unemployment). Writers, though, remained weak and unorganized and, as a consequence, have been shown little mercy.

"Things have actually gotten worse in the last two or three years," said Peter Weissman, a 38-year-old newspaper and magazine writer turned novelist who is active in the New York local. "We had one writer offered a \$15,000 advance for a novel, but no royalties. He had been published maybe 20 times, but this had never happened to him. He was stunned to be offered a work-for-hire deal."

A 1981 study by the Authors Guild found that published book authors averaged \$4,500 a year from their writings, which is a far cry from the public's image of authors as prosperous, tweedy types who only emerge from their Martha's Vineyard retreats to negotiate awe-inspiring deals for paperback and movie rights to their latest best-sellers. "Somehow," Weissman said, "we have to let people

know that writers earn less than nearly anybody else—that they're actually below the poverty line."

The union's members are a diverse group. Poets seem to predominate in San Francisco. In New York, the book authors who are members tend to be in their 30s and 40s and mainly concerned with the bread-and-butter issues of contracts, copyrights, libel insurance and royalties, Weissman said. Magazine freelancers from New York are about 10 years younger on average and more overtly political. Delegates to the constitutional convention also came from the South, the Midwest and the Washington, D.C.-Maryland area.

The National Writers Union's frank labor orientation sets it apart from other, purely professional groups. "One of the things the union is trying to do is to prevent publishers from breaking the rights of all writers by using freelancers as scabs," said Jeff Weinstein, who writes a restaurant column for the *Village Voice*. Aid and encouragement have come from District 65 of the United Auto Workers, the Newspaper Guild, the Communications Workers, the Writers Guild (which represents screenwriters), the Graphic Artists Guild, the Service Employees International Union and even the National Football League Players Association. A constitutional clause setting minimum publication requirements for membership was kept loose enough so as not to exclude the great mass of poorly paid, struggling freelancers, yet sufficiently tight to establish the union as a serious labor organization.

#### Vexing problems.

Nonetheless, a number of vexing organizational problems remain. Newspaper unions, for instance, have long been leery of freelancers because they represent a source of labor for publishers that is cheaper, requires few fringe benefits and (until now) has not been known to strike. Freelancers may establish a long-standing relationship with a publication, but it is nonetheless more tenuous than that of a salaried, full-time employee. Freelancers may only know their editor as a voice on the telephone. And they may realize they have been "fired" only when their telephone calls are no longer returned.

The legal problems facing the union are also daunting. Groups like ASCAP (the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers), the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists and the Dramatists Guild have been recently challenged in the courts (successfully in the case of the first two) on the ground that their efforts to set prices and establish work-rules is monopolistic and amounts to restraint of trade. Labor is exempt from anti-trust regulations, but the distinction between a *bona fide* labor union and an association of small producers is vague and has more to do with politics than anything else. Pressure from below by labor and writers is crucial on this point, just as it was crucial in sweeping away anti-labor legislation in the '30s.

"This is a very big obstacle for us," said Levine. "But all unions were at one time illegal. The law changes with practice."

Added Eagan, "We're not going to do anything unless we're certain we can win. Publicity and bringing pressure to bear—these are some of the things we can do to win."



"The next year is crucial for us."

Steve Kogan

"Solidarity Forever," they got down to the business of electing officers.

Andrea Eagan, a 39-year-old writer for women's magazines who has also written a best-selling teenage advice book, was chosen president. John Dinges, who covers Central America on a freelance basis for the *Washington Post*, was elected organizing secretary, while Robert Reiser, a playwright from Westchester County, N.Y., was made treasurer. Levine, who writes frequently on feminist topics, was made an at-large member of the union's steering committee.

"What we did was something that has never been done before," Eagan said later. "We established a writers' union in