

# ***THE CATALYST***

*(kat'ə-list) n., an agent that provokes change*

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**PULSE**

**BCEJ/**  
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## **A SPECIAL ISSUE**

*Almost all of this issue is taken up with our proposal for a Fair Labor Committee, which Jo-Anne Lema, VP for Administration and Finance, will present to the Budget Administrators Roundtable on February 13. We thought it useful that the entire campus know about the proposal and why we have made it. Two days ago, we distributed the proposal to the campus by email, but we want to be sure that those without easy access to computers will be given a chance to consider it.*

## **THE RATIONALE FOR A FAIR LABOR COMMITTEE**

For a year now, BCEJ/PULSE has been working for both a living wage at Bucknell and the establishment by Stef Rogers of a University Fair Labor Committee (FLC). In the past several weeks, with ongoing consultation from a number of support staff members, BCEJ/PULSE members have developed the proposal presented here for a FLC. The committee we propose would include five non-supervisory staff persons, one each from dining services, physical plant, maintenance, and secretary/clerical, all elected by their own constituencies; one member at-large elected by all non-supervisory support staff people; one faculty member and one student, non-voting members, to act as liaisons, and elected by their own constituencies.

**EXTRA!  
EXTRA!  
BUCKNELL  
FAMILY  
GETS MORE  
UNEQUAL!**

See details on page 4

The most substantial reason we advocate a FLC is that both student and faculty members of BCEJ/PULSE have for the past eighteen months received a continuing flow of confidential information from Bucknell support staff members about work-related grievances. Some of these staff members do not trust their supervisors to deal with their complaints fairly and adequately. Some have brought their problems to supervisors without success. And, sometimes supervisors, who agree with complaints of the staff they supervise, don't have the power to do anything about them. We have received complaints of

one kind or another from people at every level of the support staff system, from utterly powerless temporary dining service employees, to directors of entire divisions of work at Bucknell.

## **Specific Grievances Brought to Us**

Below are a few, but only a few, examples of grievances that have been described to us by people who have nowhere to go with their complaints because they do not trust the grievance procedures currently in place at Bucknell (and most employees we have talked to do not trust those procedures).

- A dining service worker who is told by a supervisor that he will probably be fired if he talks to a union representative.
- Support staff workers who believe that merit recommendations by immediate supervisors are arbitrary. (This is a view shared by many of them.)

- A non-professional staff person who has had more and more work piled on her head but whom her supervisor continually rebuffs when she applies for a higher classification.
- A professional person who has been hired to do demanding and sophisticated work but doesn't get benefits.
- Dining service workers made to use antiquated, and often unsafe, equipment on the job.
- A member of a committee designed to evaluate a particular work area who feels those concerns expressed by the committee were ignored by the administration.
- Custodians, pressed into work on the grounds, some of whom are people who have worked with each other for years, or decades, who are told by a supervisor they cannot talk to each other while they work, or congregate.

Despite this widespread evidence of a flawed grievance system, when we have proposed a FLC to top administrators, they have, without exception, told us they believe that it is a system that works for almost all staff employees. We see their judgment as thoroughly at odds with the unending flow of complaints we have received. It is also badly at odds with what occurred at a recent meeting that two of us had with a half dozen non-supervisory staff workers. At this meeting, we asked, "Are you yourself, or do you know anyone on the support staff who is afraid to bring a complaint to his or her supervisor?" All these people, heartily and without hesitation, said, "Yes!"

The reason so many people bring their complaints to BCEJ/PULSE is a consequence of Bucknell's hierarchical governance system, and the need for a FLC, in most cases, has little to do with the sensitivity, support, or other characteristics of individual supervisors. Our view is that most are decent, kind, and well meaning. Nor does it have to do with the quality of the work of the people for whom they are the bosses. The reason is that at most universities now, and certainly at Bucknell, one finds a many-layered structure of power, authority,

and status, with a definite top and a definite bottom, and with supervisors at every level. This top-down employment structure generates fear among many employees, particularly those at the lower levels. Wouldn't most of us be reluctant to approach our own bosses with certain job complaints, and aren't some bosses themselves aware of problems that they don't themselves have the power to resolve because of their own positions in the hierarchy?

Often, but less frequently in recent years, workers have sought union representation in situations where they can only take their grievances to their bosses. However, unions are in decline, in part due to the unending hostility from employers. For instance, in 1999, in the face of union organizing efforts among its dining service workers, Bucknell did what employers typically do: its top administrators sent a letter to dining service employees that threatened them with distorted information about unions, their history, their purposes, their successes and their failures. This anti-union environment, plus the real limitations of unions in the view of many workers, has eliminated unions as a possible source of representation for most workers everywhere, and all of them at Bucknell. Such a situation, obviously, leaves workers on their own to bargain with their employers for wages, working conditions, and all the rest.

This hierarchical structure of work at Bucknell has produced a number of significant outcomes, aside from the specific grievances described above, that lead to the call for a FLC. Of these, the most prominent are:

- About 40% of the support staff earn less than a living wage;
- Most do not have the power to shape the conditions of their work, or at least they feel at though they do not have that power;
- Many, perhaps most, feel that Bucknell is committed to do all it can to promote the interests of its faculty members and students, but takes its support staff for granted.
- Perhaps all, and certainly most, support staff members are either themselves, or know someone, who is afraid to discuss work-

related problems either with his or her immediate supervisor, or those above.

Thus, our main reason for advocating a FLC is to provide more democratic employment structures at Bucknell, ones whose most immediate beneficiaries would be support staff employees, but which would produce gains for all of Bucknell. Without question, employees who are paid what they consider a fair wage, who are less worried about their workplace security, and who have an outlet other than their bosses for discussing their problems and their ideas about changing the nature of their work, will be more productive employees, more imaginative, prompt, and loyal. Countless academic and other kinds of studies, in the U.S. and around the world, show these results of fair labor practices unambiguously. Further, because Bucknell is a university, not exclusively a profit-driven institution, further empowering its typically least-powerful employees will be a gesture towards equality and justice and thus a gesture in the direction of its own *Mission Statement*. Paying people less than they can live on, and not allowing them fair and reasonable avenues of redress are, simply, unfair and unjust.

## **Other models for the Fair Labor Committee**

BCEJ/PULSE has studied comparable committees that have emerged at other campuses across the nation where students, staff, and faculty have mounted fair labor campaigns. At Wesleyan, for example, even though many of the workers are unionized, advocates of the already successful “Justice for Janitors” campaign called for a “Judiciary Board” to oversee wage contracts and working conditions. Earlham College’s campaign calls for an “Employees’ Council” with the power to help determine wage/salary distributions throughout the campus. And, as part of successful and ongoing campaigns at Harvard, Johns Hopkins, and Fairfield, advocates have all sought to fuse the adoption of a living wage with a “labor committee” of one kind or another to monitor working conditions, and to be an ongoing advocate for staff personnel.

## **FLC Practices and Responsibilities**

*The FLC would act as an “ombudsman” for the support staff at Bucknell. It would be the eyes, the ears, and when necessary, the voice of the support staff, its principal advocate in the ongoing discussion at Bucknell about who we are, where we are going, and how we will treat each other along the way. A corollary benefit would be that it could also bring to the forefront problems of staff people that supervisors themselves cannot remedy, such as being powerless to promote particular staff up to higher levels of classification based on the growing responsibilities of their jobs.*

The FLC would meet monthly, or more often under special circumstances, and would hold both day-time and evening hours to maximize its availability to support staff members for private and confidential meetings. The Committee would act independently and, when appropriate, confidentially. It would be available to staff persons to discuss with them (a) grievances that they do not want to take to their supervisors, or to Personnel, or (b) to discuss with them any and all aspects of the conditions of their work.

In the case of a support staff member who seeks redress to a grievance, if the FLC agrees that a harm is, or will be done without its own intervention, it can by majority vote decide to take one or more of the following actions (and, in the case of all such actions, none will be taken by the FLC without the expressed consent of the individual staff person involved.)

1. Attempt to mediate between the staff member and the supervisor, privately and confidentially.
2. When the immediate supervisor is unwilling or unable to redress a staff person’s complaints, the FLC would take the matter to that supervisor’s supervisor, again confidentially and privately. This moving up the chain of command would continue until the grievance is redressed.
3. When the FLC believes that it is not possible, within existing university structures, to have a grievance redressed, it might choose to appeal to top administrators, to the faculty, to students, perhaps to the whole campus, as a way to mount a public campaign to try to have those structures changed. In such cases, it will be the obligation of the FLC to protect the anonymity of an individual who might be the source of the grievance that cannot be solved within existing structures.

## **Related Obligations of the FLC**

Whereas in dealing with grievances, the FLC would be reactive, in its other work it would be proactive. Most generally, it would act as a locus of discussion between itself and other actors on the campus about ways to reshape the nature of, or patterns of, work at Bucknell that might make it more safe, more meaningful, more efficient, or some combination of all three of these. We have been contacted by several people, from every corner of the institution, who have told us there is no workable mechanism in place at Bucknell for their input on jobs they know better than anyone else. Obviously, some employees have supervisors who welcome suggestions and implement useful ones. Many staff persons, however, do not have that kind of supervisor.

*The FLC would also have the obligation of issuing an annual report to the campus about the “State of Working Conditions at Bucknell.” This report would do at least three things: (a) Provide a brief review of its work on grievances; (b) Report on the distribution of compensation at Bucknell, highlighting such aspects of that distribution as the amounts received by those at the top and those at the bottom; (c) Describe the larger context of working conditions at Bucknell, such as initiatives by trustees or administrators that might directly bear on the long term welfare of support staff workers relative to other workers at Bucknell.*

The following are three examples that cry out loudly for greater support staff representation in Bucknell’s governance. Five years ago, Bro Adams successfully marshaled Bucknell away from a longstanding parity between rates of annual pay raises for faculty members and staff members by initiating a policy, still in effect, that annually pays faculty members a higher rate than staff members. Also, during the 1996-2001 period, during which time a “freeze” has been in place for support staff positions, new top administrators have been added in Development and Admissions, and twenty new faculty positions have been added. Last, a week ago the trustees approved Stef Rogers’s recommendation of a 7.3 % increase in faculty compensation for next year and a 4.5% increase for support staff. Had a FLC been in place during the past few years, one can imagine it would have tried to intervene on behalf of the support staff as the

decisions about pay rates and job slots were being made, given that all of them have increased the number of faculty members and top administrators, and the compensation of the former, relative to that of the support staff.

## Minor Costs

*Support staff members who serve on the Fair Labor Committee would be paid an overtime rate for the hours they spend working on the Committee's business beyond their normal working hours, and up to 10 hours per week. Faculty and student members would serve voluntarily. The FLC would also be given a budget in order to host speakers, hold receptions, and engage in similar activities necessary to meet its obligations.*

## Conclusion

The FLC as BCEJ/PULSE members have, in consultation with staff members, conceived it, represents a structural change designed to increase the voice of lower-level employees in their employment situations. *It does not replace the existing grievance procedures, but provides an alternative route and additional ways for the campus community as a whole to learn about and address working conditions at Bucknell.* This is a very low cost way dramatically to reduce fear, improve staff employees' working lives, and thus overall lives, and move Bucknell in ways to begin overcoming the structures of inequality, incivility, and injustice at Bucknell, all of which will stay in place until someone imagines a different way to do things and then struggles for it. Thus, this proposal.

## HOW OUR "FAMILY" JUST GOT MORE UNEQUAL

**This is a story that emphatically underlines the need for a Fair Labor Committee because it results importantly from the fact that almost all support staff members have no say in the structure of compensation on the campus. The story is that the trustees have ruled that next year the faculty will get an average pay increase of 7.3%, compared to the average staff increase of 4.5%. Further, the**

**biggest winners on campus will be the full professors, who will get an increase of 13%. This means that the distance between the compensation of the faculty and the staff, which has been increasing for five years now, will take a big jump next year. For example, in a Department where a full professor is making \$90,000 and the secretary is making \$20,000, next year's raise for the professor will be about \$12,000, and that of the secretary will be about \$900. That's generating inequality with a vengeance! The justification for giving the bigger raises to the faculty is that they are paid less than faculty at other colleges like Bucknell. The full professors got the highest raises because of "wage compression"—the "market" has caused the salaries of professors hired longer ago (often full professors), to be disproportionately low compared to the salaries of people hired more recently (often assistant and associate professors). Administrative efforts to redress this situation are now three years old, and it was thus a demand for higher pay that was in line ahead of our own demand that Bucknell pay a living wage to the 240 people who work here and don't make one. However, taking "first things first" has greatly increased inequality at Bucknell, and whatever the accomplishments of this new pay structure might be for faculty rights and morale, in our view, in one major respect it makes Bucknell a lesser institution. Speaking of morale, one wonders what this growing inequality might do to that of the support staff.**

**WANT TO CONTACT OR JOIN US? If you would like to join BCEJ (Bucknell Caucus for Economic Justice)/PULSE (Partnership for Unveiling Labor and Sweatshop Exploitation), submit information to us about job practices at Bucknell (we rigorously protect anonymity), or add your name as an endorser of the Campaign, you can contact one of us by e-mail, or through campus mail, at Box C-3925.**

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