To Strike or Not to Strike: 
The University of Minnesota Clerical Workers’ Decision 
Teaching Note

Case Summary

This case covers events leading up to the strike of the workers of AFSCME Local 3801 and Local 3800 in the fall of 2003. The case solicits historical background of the state of labor at the University of Minnesota and the history of AFSCME at the U of M specifically in order to give context to the strike. It shows that, because of a pattern of devaluing clerical workers at the U of M, these workers have historically been the least-paid and their collective bargaining agreements the weakest of all the University unions. Leadership of AFSCME 3800, a union whose membership is 94% female, attributes this devaluation to institutionalized sexism. The common perception is that the male-dominated Teamsters union at the University has consistently received better contract offers from the administration. In order to show the University that they represented a union that would stand up to adversity, the AFSCME leadership tactically felt that a strike would be in the best long-term interest of the union. During the period of the breakdown in negotiations, not only the administration’s negotiators but also the other unions at the U met the prospect of an AFSCME strike with disbelief by. No one believed that the “secretaries” would strike, since it would be “mean.”

This case explores the dilemma confronting AFSCME members in the face of a potential strike. Three broad categories of workers resisted the strike: non-voting “fair share” clerical workers who felt alienated from the union, members who felt the University was offering the best deal it could, and those who could not afford to strike without strike support funds. The case explores each of these perspectives to give the students the background information needed to understand the reluctance to strike. The case also includes the perspectives of several AFSCME leaders who advocated striking and were called upon to communicate this to the membership.

The case also features extensive appendices, giving background information on the position of the administration and the AFSCME leadership, some actions by the Strike Support Committee, the public employment law that guarantees University workers the right to strike, and an excerpt from the “weblog” kept by AFSCME negotiators documenting the process that led up to the strike vote. These will give students more information about the different positions of each side so they can articulate a more informed opinion on this issue.

Kristen Houlton wrote this case for the Center on Women and Public Policy in 2004-2005 as part of a graduate course on case studies on women and public policy. The Center on Women and Public Policy provided supporting funds. © Center on Women and Public Policy 2005.
Case Objectives
To get the students to:
1. See class struggle as a feminist issue.
2. Recognize the social forces at work in universities.
3. See universities as employers.
4. Recognize institutional sexism.
5. Work through the possible defenses against the accusation of gender bias.
6. Think critically about information and opinions offered by authority figures – namely employers.
7. Be able to articulate a position on a contentious issue.

Pedagogical Purpose
This case aims to help students see the gendered conflicts too often hidden in the background of a University. This case it meant to highlight the direct disadvantage felt by certain members of a working population specifically by virtue of their gender.

Methodology
Alarmingly little has been written about the AFSCME clerical workers’ strike in the mainstream press. This case is my contribution toward increasing public knowledge of the exceptional actions taken by these University employees. To inform this work, I relied extensively upon personal interviews with those in union leadership and rank-and-file members. What print documentation of events leading up to the strike that does exist is mainly found in the University of Minnesota student newspaper the Minnesota Daily. Its articles served as a primary source. Information about the University of Minnesota in general was gleaned from the U’s website. This paper has benefited enormously from the contributions of the members of PA 8690, the U of M Philosophy Department Hume writing group and, most especially, Andrew Hamilton.
Questions for Student Discussion

1. What can be said generally about the employment situation of the clerical workers at the University of Minnesota?
2. What makes their union different that the other unions on campus?
3. Did it matter that most union members were women?
4. How does this local union’s position relate to class conflicts found at a university?
5. What is a strike? What do unions try to accomplish by striking?
6. What reasons did the union leadership offer in support of a “reject and strike” vote?
7. What was the position of the University administration about a possible strike?
8. What is a “fair share” employee? How did some of them react to the possibility of a clerical workers strike?
9. Was the position of the clerical workers the same on all University of Minnesota campuses? If not, how was it different?
10. What was the primary reason that some clerical workers felt they would not be able to participate in a strike?
11. What were the major obstacles facing AFSCME if there was a strike?
12. What would you recommend to the AFSCME leadership – do you agree that they should have recommended a strike?
13. What would you recommend that AFSCME members do if there is a strike?
Glossary

AFSCME: American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. A local chapter of this union represents the clerical workers at the University of Minnesota.

Bargaining unit: A group of employees who are represented by a labor union in their dealings with management. Employees may elect to join the union. They are then union members in addition to being members of the bargaining unit.

PELRA: Public Employee Labor Relations Act. This is the governing document for the treatment of public employees. Specifically, PELRA – MN covers the State of Minnesota public employees. The clerical workers employed by the University of Minnesota are considered public employees according to this document.

Rank-and-file: Term used to describe the workers in a bargaining unit, to differentiate them from leadership.

Reject and strike: common phrasing to describe a possible response by the union to a management proposal in negotiations. In AFSCME 3800, union leaders gave membership the vote to either accept the contract that was offered by the administration or to reject the proposed contract and, consequently as a tactic to achieve a better contract, strike.

Strike: Workers in a bargaining unit refuse to perform their employment duties in response to employer’s action. Striking workers generally form a picket line (a protest where workers hold signs criticizing the employer) in a prominent location outside the place of employment. This is commonly meant not only to embarrass the employer, but also to disrupt business by preventing people from entering the facility.

Teamsters: The International Brotherhood of Teamsters. A local chapter of this union represents workers at the University of Minnesota.

Teach-in: An informal class about a specific issue, generally meant to inform a group of people about an important issue affecting them and to inspire activism about that issue.

Union steward: A steward is a member of the bargaining unit who acts on behalf of union members with management. Typically, a unit is divided into several geographic or profession-specific groupings, with a steward assigned to each. The steward is the public face of the union for most members, accompanies members in to meetings with management, handles grievances, and otherwise works to enforce the contract on the ground.
Annotated Bibliography for Further Reading


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