Class issues: An extracurricular education

by Lillian Daniel in the February 22, 2005 issue

At the opening gathering during my first year at Yale Divinity School, the new students met in the beautiful chapel, with its tall ceilings and clear congregational-style windows. Someone smartly bearded told us how lucky we were to be there. Meanwhile, in the old refectory with its paintings of various dignitaries on the walls, the university's unionized workers were gearing up for yet another contract fight.

The students had to prepare for the impact of a workers' strike. There were grumblings about the dirt in the bathrooms. "Did you hear," a common complaint began, "that because of the union regulations, it takes three weeks to have an order processed to change a light bulb?" Some argued that the unions protected incompetent workers and thereby led to inefficiencies in the system. Those people didn't seem bothered by inefficiencies created by the university's tenure system.

In talking to the members of the union, another story came out: about how in the 1980s a group of secretaries, many of them single mothers—an identity that challenged the notion that the secretaries were working at Yale for pin money—had stood alongside the grounds and maintenance workers, the dining hall workers, the cooks and the plumbers, who went on strike so that the clerical workers union might be formed.

At Yale, the struggles between management and workers looked like an allegory of what was happening across the American economy, as towns like New Haven which had lost their manufacturing base found themselves tossing upon the erratic waves of a service economy. Yale was the company in this company town.

Most of us had come to the divinity school not with the idea that we would rule the world, but out of a desire to serve. As we struggled with our vocations, whether to enter parish ministry or the world of social work, whether to continue on for a Ph.D. or to pursue a pastoral life that fed and built the intellect, we also wrestled with personal struggles, like whether a marriage could be saved, or whether the

denomination we had been raised in was the one we were called to stay in.

Amidst these vocational dilemmas, the Yale workers also asked questions about a calling. Were they called to go out on strike, to sacrifice pay, to picket and march in front of their workplace while their bosses, or even their co-workers, went inside to work? Among the workers, as among the students, individual stories ran up against one another and sometimes clashed.

Whose hardship could justify stepping away from the strike, a strike that would, if history proved right, end up providing all the workers, including those who had crossed the picket line, with a better standard of living? It was often the workers whose stories seemed the hardest who were most willing to strike. They spoke of future generations, perhaps their children, who would work at Yale and of how they saw themselves as part of something larger than themselves. Questions of calling were being played out among people who in some cases pieced together two or three part-time jobs, and who, with less time for leisure and contemplation, were making ethical and moral decisions that rendered absurd our late-night conversations at the student coffee shop.

Still, we had our moral decisions too. For teachers and students, and for the graduate student teaching assistants who were organizing as well, the issue was whether, in the event of a strike, classes should be moved off campus, so that no one would be crossing a picket line.

The responses of classmates and teachers varied. Some argued that the work we were doing was of such importance that holding classes at a convenient time and place, the regular time and place on campus, trumped a struggle between workers and the university that would far outlast our time on campus. Yet in those very halls we were being taught that to be part of a story larger than our own should call forth vocation and prophecy, not cynicism.

Some argued that moving the classes would actually hurt the workers, since the classes would still be taking place. The union itself explicitly encouraged moving classes, so the students making that argument were standing in a long tradition of Yalies ready to speak on behalf of those who had not requested their advice. Another common theme was that the union was manipulating the workers, leading them to strike when it was not in their best interest. Stories of the hardship that striking workers would face were often told by those who had a vested interest in

their not striking.

Yet over all, the divinity school was known as a place sympathetic to the workers, as well as to a variety of points of view. Some teachers and administrators simply made the decision to move classes. Often they leaned upon local churches—or even a movie theater—for classroom space, bringing about a lively town-gown partnership that ought to have been that strong in ordinary times.

Other teachers claimed to be sympathetic to the workers but waited for students to raise the issue. The power relationship between students and teachers was not as stark as that between workers and management, and so some students did raise their hands in class to argue that no one should cross the picket line. In these moments, it was as though the workers who cleaned the toilets, typed the syllabi and served the food suddenly burst into our curriculum.

After some decision had been made, often to meet on campus but to “respect the rights” of some students to miss the class, we were back to theological ethics, pastoral care or preaching. But it felt as though the Holy Spirit had suddenly turned up the volume knob on our sound systems; not only would the music be louder, but the static would be louder as well.

When I consider my experience of theological education, my mind and heart drift back to the moral and economic struggle between the workers and the management at Yale, a struggle that began long before I was a student there and continues to this day.

In the academy, where argument can so easily turn into a competitive sport, we momentarily bucked that trend with real conversations about real people. It prepared me for moments of chaotic conflict, prepared me for the beating heart of the ministry where there are no dispassionate analyses, only the passion of real life in God’s messy salvation story.

If the struggle were to be judged on the amount of air our lungs exhaled propelling our arguments, then the struggle was successful. But if it were to be judged by the percentage of classes moved, perhaps it was not.

Looking back, some numbers did matter. These were numbers that raised wages and increased pensions, so that perhaps more of New Haven’s children might grow up to attend schools like Yale. The results did matter, and only one whose life has

never risen and fallen with the wage scale could think otherwise. But I like to believe that the air time mattered too, that even in those circular conversations we were being schooled and witnessed to in the faith.

One zinger thrown out every now and then in the heat of argument was this: “If you care so much about labor issues at Yale, you had better make sure that, when you are working in a small parish or a struggling nonprofit organization, you pay your workers what these workers are getting.” This comparison of a small institution like the church down the street with the multibillion-dollar institution run by the Yale Corporation was followed by the exhortation, “I’d like to see you try!”

I suspect that the intended instruction was: “Stop trying here. Stop having the big fights so that when you face the little ones, they will feel so complicated that inaction will feel easier.”

In any case, I have carried the Yale struggle with me. I always remember that our imperfect institutions, from the church to the academy, will be remembered not only by the lofty ideas of the luminaries at the top, but also by the dreams and visions of those at every rung of the economic ladder.

All of us are created in the image of God, but when we seek to move upwards together, that ladder may shake so much it threatens to toss us off, or break under the weight of our climbing. Christians follow a ladder shaker of the highest order, whose word reaches us not just from the yellowed notes that become sound in a lecture hall they have graced before, but from the anger of the picket lines where struggle is no stranger; nor should it be, in a world that has not yet been fully redeemed.