

Working Paper

***Connecting Work and Family  
in the Higher Education Workplace:  
Past Successes, Future Directions***

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## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
Work-Family as a Driving Force.....	2
Benefits Negotiated by Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW).....	2
HUCTW and Harvard’s Union-Management Relationship.....	5
The Harvard Local’s Path for the Future: Work Redesign.....	6

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## **Introduction**

Kris Rondeau is the Director of Organizing for the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees' Higher Education Division. She is the lead organizer and chief negotiator for the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW), UMass Medical Center and UMass Medical School, both in Worcester, and is now organizing Tufts University. She has directed successful union drives at the University of Illinois and the University of Minnesota. The model of organizing she helped create at Harvard typifies the collaborative, forward thinking labor-management partnerships which the MIT Workplace Center focuses on.

“Connecting Work and Family in the Higher Education Workplace: Past Successes, Future Directions” given by Kris Rondeau on December 5, 2002 as part of the MIT Workplace Center’s fall 2002 seminar series on “Labor-Management Partnerships for Working Families.”

## Work-Family as a Driving Force

Because I am a woman and because I organize workplaces with large numbers of women, I am very driven by work-family concerns. Unfortunately, I am in the minority. Work-family issues do not drive employers or unions enough, nor is enough being done to help families. I use the analogy of a toolbox—we are patching work-family solutions together like we would patch together a home improvement project. We are just fixing problems at work in a piecemeal fashion using whatever tools we have. No one is looking at the master plan. There is no architect. The fact is that there is something fundamentally wrong with the way work is organized. Until work is reorganized, we have to continue to use the toolbox.

Even those who could be significantly helped by family-friendly benefits are not driven to push for them. The buy-in for work-family benefits follows a very curious progression in the consciousness of workers. When we introduce a new work-related idea (as opposed to a family-oriented idea) to a particular union, we usually talk to 500, then 1,000 members, and by the time we've spoken to 2,000 members, the whole community knows about and understands the idea and the support for it grows. It is not like that in the work-family arena. When we approach people to discuss work-family benefits, many people say, "I raised my kids." "I stayed home." Or even, "Who needs work-family benefits?"

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Despite this negative reception, we went forward as union leaders and fought for these benefits at Harvard and at other workplaces because we believed that people needed them and that these benefits would become meaningful to the rest of the community.

What we learned is that the general acceptance of work-family benefits flips completely in the community. At first people say, "No, we don't need a childcare subsidy. People should raise their own children." But when a childcare subsidy is instituted they say, "Great, let's get more." This complete turnaround happened at Harvard and at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester, a public sector institution. First the employees and the employer said they did not want the benefits and that people should raise their own children. At the last minute during contract negotiations, we said, "What about a little money for childcare?" And the employers agreed and then it seemed like everyone was behind the childcare benefit.

## Benefits Negotiated by Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW)

When we formed the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW) in 1988, the turnover rate was approximately 40 percent a year. One thing that contributed to the high rate was that Harvard did not have much in the way of work-family benefits. When an employee began building a family, often that person had to leave the workplace permanently. Paying for childcare was just not feasible for clerical and technical workers. Harvard had five or six childcare centers that were partially subsidized, but *tuition* for those centers was not subsidized. The employer simply paid the rent and overhead for the centers. Tuition at that time was \$10,000 a year, and it is

now between \$13,000 and \$14,000 a year. These high-priced childcare centers were all Harvard had in terms of work-family benefits at that time.

In negotiations since 1988, we have added or expanded benefits programs in the following areas:

- Health care—those who earn less than \$60,000 (our membership), pay the least amount for health care and domestic partners are covered.
- Pensions
- Disability coverage—including short-term disability coverage.
- Vacation and other time off—a minimum of four weeks vacation. The university is closed for a week for winter recess between Christmas and New Year’s. Those with less than five years of service receive three weeks vacation plus winter recess and those with over five years of service get four weeks and winter recess.
- Paid parental leave—13-week paid maternity leave plus new mothers can use sick and vacation time to extend their leave, paid—paternity leave, and adoptive leave.
- Financial assistance—for childcare, education, and adoption.

Harvard now subsidizes childcare, more than just paying the rent and overhead for the centers as they did when HUCTW was organized. When we negotiated the first childcare subsidy, the biggest tension was about what to call it. At the suggestion of the university negotiator, we called it a “fellowship.” The childcare fellowship is a direct subsidy for any kind of licensed childcare, such as family day care, after-school, camp, or summer programs. It is very similar to the 1199 program described above in the working paper “Meeting the Family Care Needs of the Health Care Workforce: Reflections on the 1199 Child Care Fund” by Carol Joyner (WPC#0007). HUCTW’s program is not as institutionalized as the 1199’s nor do we run our own programs.

Harvard’s part-time staff has complete access to the same benefits as full-time staff. When benefits for part-time workers are prorated, the benefits are just too expensive for most working women to afford. We have had some fights around this issue at Harvard (see case example below), at UMass Medical School and at UMass Memorial Health Care, but now each of these employers does pay full-time benefits for part-time workers.

### **Case Example: Prorating Benefits**

Harvard prorated benefits for their managerial part-time workers. In the Harvard local, we have about 650 part-time workers and when Harvard came to HUCTW and asked us to agree to prorate benefits, we said no. We fought prorating benefits for two years. We had an informational picket line up in front of Mass Hall for two and a half months and in the end we won. We got full-time benefits for part-time workers reinstated for all the constituencies on campus.

Our hope is that the rest of the labor movement will start to push this issue forward. A young person in her 20s who is entering the workplace will work until she is 65, 70, or even 75 years old. At some point, she will go to part-time work, possibly more than once. As a two-parent family grows, the total hours that the parents work outside of the home diminishes, and it is usually the mother who goes part-time to handle the care-

related issues. With this in mind, we look at the worker in the context of her whole life and know that she is going to be part-time at some point.

Our union has a cradle-to-grave view of work and the workplace. We stay connected to our retirees and negotiate cost-of-living increases for them. Workers at Harvard can ease into retirement by taking “sage days”—time off to prepare for their new roles, perhaps as community builders.

In the Harvard local, we have about 1,000 problem-solving cases a year. Most cases are worked out at informal levels and about one case a year goes to mediation for a final decision. About 500 of these cases are about flexibility in scheduling. For years we have had advice from people who urge us to change the culture. But since we cannot get the culture to change, we solve each individual problem with our “toolbox.” We negotiate each case and the bottom line at Harvard is if you want a flexible schedule, we can negotiate it without too much trouble.

Telecommuting is allowed per our negotiations, but in our opinion it is too isolating for low-wage workers. It means isolation from the social fabric of the workplace, and it causes a person to be vulnerable to job loss.

Job shares are allowed, too. It takes a lot of work to put together job shares, but they are amazingly effective ways of getting the work done. We have about 25 to 30 job shares now, each one lovingly assembled by the people who do the work and their coworkers. Whether job shares provide higher productivity or higher quality would be a very interesting thing to study. Often hiring supervisors think they cannot deal with two benefits packages or with paying health insurance for two people. But, in fact, the advantage to the employer is measurable, and it should be studied. Job shares work for workers, but they also work for employers.

In contrast to childcare, the responsibility of elder care is very difficult—childcare is a great problem to have. If you are going to have no time and no money, what better reason than a child? It is a nice thing. Elder care is the great conundrum and flexibility in scheduling to allow for elder care is a great challenge. HUCTW has many programs for people who are trying to deal with this issue, but they are not enough. What is very important for employers and unions to know is that caring for an elderly relative can last for a long time. What these employees need are employers who really understand that and who can create a safe place for a worker to come into work and yet not have to follow rigid schedules. Flexibility is crucial for dealing with elder care.

The current array of benefits addresses nearly every area of human concern that HUCTW and Harvard negotiators have been able to negotiate.<sup>1</sup> The turnover rate at Harvard is now 18 percent, which is still high, but it is a big improvement over the 1988 pre-union 40 percent turnover rate.

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<sup>1</sup> “Open Letter to the Harvard Community: Steady Progress, A New Agenda, Continued Commitment,” written by the leaders and staff of HUCTW, November 2002.

## HUCTW and Harvard's Union-Management Relationship

HUCTW believes that we have a model of organizing that works and that can be used anywhere. When I talk about our organizing model around the country, workers respond with enthusiasm. The HUCTW model of organizing is different than a traditionally adversarial union model. At Harvard, we organized clerical and technical workers by meeting and getting to know every person in the bargaining unit and by creating a community of workers. This takes a long time and a lot of effort but by knowing our members we have a large network of people who are personally connected to the union community in a positive way.

At HUCTW, we also believe that it is possible to assert the workers' rights under the law *and* build communities and union membership without a collective bargaining agreement. You do not need a majority to have a union. You do however have to have a majority to force the employer to bargain, but you can do a lot of other things without that majority.

***The HUCTW model of organizing is so different than the traditionally adversarial union model in which you have to hate the employer to join a union.***

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Our cases involve self-representation and they are all addressed at a fairly complex level, but they are all negotiations, and they are all friendly. We resolve conflict and build community at the same time. I think legal adversarialism is wrong for the workplace. In 14 years, the Harvard local has had about 14 mediations. This means that out of 1,000 problem-solving cases or grievances we handle each year, an average of one per year is settled using a mediator. By using our negotiating and cooperation skills when working with both union members and with management, we save money. By helping our members negotiate the solutions to their problems, our members gain valuable skills.

### **Case Example: Negotiating Layoffs without Using Seniority**

We tried an experiment that warrants study. Our contracts do not have any kind of strict seniority in them, even though we respect seniority and often do use seniority as an important guiding principle. About two years ago at University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester, 450 people had to be laid off and 90 of them were in our unit. There were two other groups that had layoffs—nurses and cafeteria and service employees of the United Food and Commercial Workers. Both groups had regular strict seniority and bumping. We made an agreement with management that we would go into departments where there were layoffs scheduled and enlist volunteers based on friendships, need, sense of community, who could handle a lay off, and who could not. In the beginning, we were skeptical about it working and management was squeamish, but we arranged 90 cases in our unit that way and it worked. It was a grueling, yet incredible experience. For one thing, we had 90 layoffs in which we did not have people angry at the end. People who could not afford to be laid off were protected by their coworkers.

A wonderful model for work has yet to be created. An unorganized worker is at a disadvantage in the world. Redesigning work in health care poses different issues, (see next page “Case Example: Negotiating Lay-Offs without Using Seniority”). I do not think Harvard would be brave enough to do something like what is described in the case example, but health care is different than academia. In health care, the work *has* to get done. Problems have to be solved. At University of Massachusetts Medical Center we have strong, healthy relationships with some of the top leaders and middle management because the management is absolutely committed to getting the work done and that makes them non-ideological. It makes them open and interested in problem-solving and less afraid of the union and the workers. Although it is in financial crisis, I have greater hope for health care than for Harvard, which has plenty of financial resources. Harvard has enough money to work around problems instead of changing the system. In the Harvard schema, solutions are patched together for every single problem that comes along, despite all its money. We are still using the toolbox here. Harvard is not a model, but is a place where people have worked hard to try to build something promising.

### **The Harvard Local’s Path for the Future: Work Redesign**

While all the benefits we fight for and institute are very important, there is something inherently wrong in the workplace. Something is broken and it is very, very hard to provide a complete solution for people who have others to care for outside of work. Work design is a core family issue and without redesigning work we are not going to be able to take care of our families. Work is structured badly—it is not flexible enough, interesting enough, nor meaningful enough. Power relationships are unhealthy, and the work design consultants who say we should redesign work in America to improve quality and productivity are off base. While I care about quality and productivity and am interested in those issues, work-family is

***HUCTW has never given up on a vision of union-management partnership and community engagement.***

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just as important. The family is in trouble and people are suffering and it is because work is broken.

HUCTW has a three-pronged approach to work redesign. One is participation at work—meaning work design. All the benefits and flexibility negotiated by the local fall in this category, which continues to expand. Part of work redesign could entail moving to a

### **Case Example: Teams and Designing Leave**

In our small union-organizing group we work as a team. Four teams make up one big team and each of us has our individual responsibilities. We have been able to do things in that tiny culture that I did not think were possible. For example, we are parents to 29 children now and when someone is going to have a child by birth or adoption we ask them to design their own parental leave. They can take as much time off as they want and can design the leave they want. For the first 15 children, we were not really sure if we would be able to handle this flexibility, but we went ahead anyway. Ours is a small group and it works. This flexibility can work in health care and in higher education environments, too.

team model with flattened hierarchies. It would include lots of learning and cross-training.

The second prong is learning—creating opportunities for continuous learning for all of our members. This includes a parents' education program we are creating and a school-to-work program we now sponsor. A bigger part of continuous learning is supporting the culture change that is necessary in work redesign. In the Harvard local, we place special emphasis on men, primarily fathers, and help and support them being caregivers. We believe that the more we do that, the more accepted work-family benefits will become. This focus and learning helps our women members as well.

The third prong is community-building. Community-building at Harvard is a complex idea, but we would like our members to view themselves as community builders in relation to others in and outside our community. We created a 501c3 to accept foundation money so that we can do community building. The "Open Letter to the Harvard Community of 2002" says, "HUCTW has never given up on a vision of union-management partnership and community engagement."