

Academe Online

From the President: Dues Reform

By Cary Nelson

Those of you who were at the AAUP's annual meeting this year had the opportunity to attend our immensely successful international conference on academic freedom. From an experience that has often mixed moments of inspiration with the rhythms of an annual death march, the annual meeting overnight was transformed into a major intellectual event. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* alone carried nine separate stories about the conference. People enjoyed themselves. We will expand the conference next year.

Those attending our various business meetings also participated in a parallel conversation about simplifying and reforming our dues system. With our membership and finance departments now functioning well— after undergoing a virtual dark night of the soul in 2005 and 2006—the way we assess dues remains the most intractable barrier to building a larger and more influential AAUP.

In 2007, I visited a small, private liberal arts college seeking to reestablish its AAUP chapter. The assistant professors with whom I spoke pointed out that, after deductions for retirement and health care, their takehome pay came to \$2,000 a month. They had a problem with \$180 annual AAUP dues. The following year, I asked members at several schools how many of their colleagues earned less than \$60,000 a year. Sometimes I got a one-word answer: “all.” Meanwhile, annual dues in some states were rapidly heading toward \$200. I knew that at those rates we could not recruit new members with low salaries outside of collective bargaining chapters. Such encounters, and many messages to the staff from willing but stymied local activists, led to a special introductory dues offer: \$60 annual dues (“Is academic freedom worth \$5 a month?”) for faculty earning less than \$60,000 a year, \$120 annual dues for those earning more. Now we have to embody the lessons learned in a more progressive dues system.

Faculty in collective bargaining chapters for the most part already have a version of progressive dues. Their AAUP union chapter collects roughly 1 percent of base salary, so faculty earning \$50,000 pay half as much as faculty earning \$100,000. We need something comparable for non-collective bargaining chapters.

At the annual meeting, we distributed a first draft proposal for dues based on salary bands, the same system used by many disciplinary organizations. Indeed, that was the system the AAUP used in the 1970s and early 1980s. Many members saw their dues increase and chose not to renew their memberships when we abandoned that system for the current flat-rate dues. Under a salary-band dues system, some non-collective bargaining members would pay less than they do now, while others would pay a little more. Unlike now, when poorly paid “entrants” suddenly confront doubled dues, those who remain poorly paid would never see major dues increases.

There are several options for collecting dues from collective bargaining chapters: using the same bands to calculate collective bargaining members' dues; collecting a flat per capita amount from the chapter for each member; or using a flat percentage of aggregate base salaries (say, 0.2 percent or less). Whatever the approach, we want to simplify the duescollection process for collective bargaining chapters, to separate the procedures for reconciling membership rolls and billing dues. The Collective Bargaining Congress's executive committee will help gather reactions to the proposals put forward.

A fairer and more progressive dues system will not in and of itself rebuild membership. Members will still need to walk the halls and invite their colleagues to join. But a fairer dues system will give activists a new tool and will help build national membership on campuses without active chapters. We have been working with chapters to gather more information this summer, with the aim of distributing a proposal later this year.

Let me emphasize that we are not attempting to institute a major dues increase, though we might want to consider a small adjustment of \$10 in annual dues to create a fund to hire on-the-ground organizers and to

spread our support of state conferences across the membership as a whole. Members expressed support for those ideas at the annual meeting and in conversations since then. Faculty discontent with financial retrenchment and the unilateral imposition of furloughs suggests that now is the time for increased organizing. Although we are already moving forward with plans to deploy organizers in key campaigns, a still more aggressive effort seems warranted. The next step is to discuss all options with our elected leaders, both nationally and locally. Of course, any increase in dues rates will require approval by the annual meeting.

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