

Yale, the Unions and New Haven
(Spring 2002?)

Months back, I began receiving messages from my employer, Yale University, inviting me to celebrate their tercentennial along with William F. Buckley, Tom Wolfe, Sam Waterston, Paul Simon and Calvin Hill. At the beginning of the month, I was invited by David Sanders, an organizer for GESO, the Yale Graduate Students union, to march along with the working people of New Haven for economic justice.

When faced with the choice of spending a couple of hours with a pair of right wing scribblers, an aging pop icon, a TV star and a jock, and doing what's right I know which side I am on. (Even if most Democrats who left the union rally early to make be on time for the Yale celebration, do not.) And if standing up for workers' rights means walking side by side with union functionaries who have made no secret of their contempt for the Green Party, including one who came very close to physically assaulting me a year ago for passing out Nader literature, I'll do that too. Are we in the Green Party foolish for our completely unrequited support of organized labor? This has been an active subject for discussion in Green Party circles in recent weeks. I say no, but I may be in the minority.

That the event was a triumph for the unions was apparent from the fact that I was only one in a sea of what were probably ten thousand faces of all colors, religions, and social classes. I had heard from my friend local 34 political organizer Gwen Mills that the unions are making a concerted effort to reach out beyond their membership to involve all the communities of New Haven. The objective, which marks a fundamental and very hopeful shift in union organizing strategy, is to convince the entire city that everyone, not just union members, has a stake in the success of the Yale organizing drive. If last evening was any indication, the idea is catching on like wildfire and, if so, this is some of the best news to hit New Haven in many years.

Not everyone there was entirely enthusiastic about the style of the rally. One union member, a bookish, unflamboyant, classical music lover like myself, had little affinity for the charismatic quasi-religious fervor emanating from the stage. While the high-decibel gospel music and the bible thumping was uplifting for some it was also a turn-off to some of the Yale employees who are now being organized into the big union tent. He also felt this was symptomatic of a larger problem of the national unions' continual cluelessness in attempting to apply blue collar organizing models to workers at Yale many of whom in no way see themselves as working class-their wages notwithstanding.

Also somewhat disconcerting was the ultimate goal of the candlelight procession. When the huge throng approached the Yale Bowl it turned out that we were only permitted to walk in complete silence for a hundred yards on the outside of the stadium. I would later hear from several friends inside the bowl that our presence outside went completely unnoticed by the mass of assembled Elis. So if the purpose was to impress on the Yale establishment our strength in numbers, that message fell flat. And the rally received no coverage on the evening news with the tercentennial getting all of the attention.

But if the point was to show that even with rates of unionization at all time lows, New Haven remains a union town, the case is closed. Just as the recent WTC attacks have made us realize how vulnerable we all are to homicidal fundamentalist lunatics, the encroachment of the corporate juggernaut into all corners of working life including the ivory tower has made even the most secure among us recognize that unions represent the thin blue line protecting all workers from economic terrorism. For this reason, strong, effective, uncompromising and innovative unions are needed now more than ever. And whether or not the great intellects at Yale can see it or not, this is a no-brainer for the people of New Haven.