

## *Nontraditional Organizing of University and Museum Employees: A Conversation with Maida Rosenstein of the UAW*

by *Geraldine Casey*

Higher education and cultural institutions have increasingly been the focus of new union organizing. In the New York metropolitan area, the most successful organizing has been conducted, to the surprise of many observers, by the United Auto Workers (UAW). When curators and other employees at Manhattan's world-famous Museum of Modern Art represented by the UAW struck the museum for months in 2000, the rising pro-union sentiment among many professional workers drew international attention. The UAW also made history at New York University by winning the right for graduate teaching and research assistants at private universities to form and join unions. The UAW and NYU then quickly managed to settle the first contract between a private university and a graduate employee union, addressing many of the inequities faced by the TAs and RAs. More recently, the UAW concluded a union election for 2,000 graduate teaching and research assistants at Columbia University.

Maida Rosenstein has been a leading UAW organizer among university teaching and research employees as well as clerical workers, and is now the President of UAW Local 2110, based in New York City. Last April, she spoke with Gerrie Casey.

**Q: Could you first tell us a little bit about your personal background, your own history in terms of how you grew up and how you become a union organizer?**

**MR:** Well, I grew up here in New York and ended up going to college in New Jersey from 1969 through '73. I was an art major there so I graduated very well-prepared to earn a living! I wanted to get a job that wasn't in the corporate world. I came from a pretty progressive background. And I thought maybe I would go to graduate school.

So I got a job as a clerical worker at NYU, as a University secretary. One day I was walking through Washington Square Park and I saw a notice posted that said "We are trying to organize a union. Come to our next meeting." I already had a very positive viewpoint of unions because of my family background...

**Q: So were your parents activists?**

**MR:** They were -- they were liberal lefties. I don't know whether you'd call them activists. They were active when they were younger. And so I grew up where unions were a good thing, even though I had no experience with them. And I thought the initial strategy of secretaries and clerical workers having a union was really strange. But I responded to this sign and walked into a club. I was also coming off the sixties view where being an activist was a good thing and not a bad thing. And so, going to a meeting was a good thing not a bad thing.

So I went this meeting and it turned out people were trying to organize a union for the clerical workers at NYU. That was my first sort of contact with union. The union was District 65, which later on became part of the UAW.

**Q: This is back in the early seventies? 1970?**

**MR:** It was probably around 1975. That campaign really never took off. We didn't know what we were doing. We had an organizing committee and we spent a lot of time writing very long leaflets. But, we didn't really give them to anybody, and we didn't talk to anybody. But, basically that was the first contact that I had. And I remember going over to 13 Astor Place, where the union's headquarters was, and being very impressed. My parents knew about District 65 s and they had been to the union headquarters in the old days. So I felt like, wow, this is really a place that had some history to it.

I was kind of going to graduate school at the same time. I was trying to be a painter and I was sort of fumbling around with my life and my identity. Not unusual for those times. And I decided that I ought to get my act together and get a professional degree, a

real job. So I thought I would go to library school. And I applied to library school at Columbia. And then I decided to get a job up there so that it would cover my tuition. And -- you know, get some tuition benefits. So I got a job as a clerical worker at Columbia.

**Q: What year was that?**

**MR:** That was in 1977.

**Q: And then what happened?**

**MR:** Well, I was working for a while when the woman who was the [District 65] union organizer said, "You know we might be organizing up at Columbia. So can I call you if we do?" And I said, "Sure, of course." So, a couple of years later, she did call me. Maybe it was in '78 or '79. She did call me and we had a little house meeting. She said they were going to start a campaign at Columbia. And it took a long time to get off the ground. I mean, I think we had that one meeting and then I didn't hear from her again for months.

And then a campaign started. I wasn't real involved with it at first. I was very supportive but I was probably a little wary of getting involved. In the meantime, my pursuit of graduate school was not going all that well. And I was, you know, chugging away at the 9 to 5 job.

**Q: What department were you in?**

**MR:** I was in the history department as a secretary there for several years. Then in 1980 I took a job at the School of Social Work. But eventually I did get more involved in the union and joined the organizing committee. In 1981, we actually filed a petition with the National Labor Relations Board for an election at Columbia. And I've got to say I was on the organizing committee but I wasn't super active in it. I was probably more peripherally involved.

But when we got to that point where we filed the petition, I got more involved in it and made more of a commitment to it. The petition was caught up in litigation so this campaign went on for a long time. I became a regular on the organizing committee for several years. Soon it became really the most important thing that I was doing in my life. Far more important than trying to go to graduate school, a lot more real than trying to be an artist. And certainly more consuming and of greater interest to me than the office job that I had.

I drove my office crazy too because I was so involved in the organizing. You can imagine -- they would've loved to have gotten rid of me. And they actually seized the opportunity to do so when in 1983 we had an election. We won the election but there were a huge number of challenged ballots. So we went back into litigation at the Labor Board. And the union at that point decided they were going to bring on a couple of people from the committee to continue the organizing so that we wouldn't lose ground given the turnover among the workforce. So I was asked to go on staff.

I was really scared to become a union organizer. First of all, I didn't see myself as having the organizing personality at all. And second, I was just so afraid of being stuck into that hole, you know, totally consumed by the organizing campaign. So, I -- so there was a part-time job available -- openings in the office that I work in at the School of Social Work. And I asked to be transferred to the part-time job and I said to the union that I would work part-time on the union campaign and I would still work part-time at Columbia. I think I was just postponing the inevitable. But I did that for a few months and then --

**Q: You say that was due in part to give you some protection from being completely subsumed by the union?**

**MR:** Yeah.

**Q: What did you think the personality of a union organizer was?**

**MR:** Oh, you know somebody very outgoing, social person who loves talking to people and was good at public speaking and was a complete take charge person. And I didn't see myself in that way.

**Q: Looking back on that, what do you think... that perception that you had of yourself?**

**MR:** I think -- I actually think I had mistaken -- I had a mistaken impression about what the important things were about being a union organizer. I thought being a union organizer was -- I don't know -- somehow a... difficult and was great at making public speeches.

**Q: And how did that shift? What did you learn later about being a union organizer?**

**MR:** Well, I think there are other things that became obvious once you're doing the work that that doesn't tell you. You have to be able to -- it's hard work. It's work that you have to work at very hard and it takes a great deal of dedication and commitment to work through it. And you have to be willing to work through problems and deal with very down side. You have to be willing to work with losses if that's necessary. You have to be willing to push people. And --



**Q: Does being a woman -- did that have something to do with you being a little unsure about being a union organizer in the beginning?**

**MR:** Probably because I don't think there were too many models for women leadership at the time. And -- I mean union organizers that I've met, men and women seem so knowing and competent. And they knew all about labor movement. And they were sharp politicians. I mean, they knew all about so many of these things. And I thought that would be very...

But I was also afraid of getting stuck in union organizing. And I still had in the back of my mind that somehow it was going to be some other life out there. I was going to somehow do something else. And that this was sort of a temporary thing that I was involved in.

And so I took a part-time job and worked for the union part-time. And of course, like within a few months of my taking the part-time job, the office that I worked for decided to eliminate the part-time job. And they said, "Bye." I got laid off. So I ended up having to work full-time for the union -- you know, they took me up.

So I sort of came into it without -- I never really -- I unwillingly was sort of unwillingly protesting all the way. I ended up working on the staff of the union. It wasn't anything I ever thought. It was almost like lack of direction that I ended up working for the union. It was really -- it saved me in a lot of ways, as a person, because I didn't -- I didn't really -- I didn't ever have a direction. And I didn't really -- I could've ended up staying on as a clerical worker for a long time thinking for years that I was going to move on to something else. And -- you know. Like you said --

**Q: Tell me about that -- about how you're describing your orientation towards your work until you became an artist or professional. To what degree does that belief persist today?**

**MR:** I don't think it does very much anymore. At least not the clerical workers that I meet today. I think when -- in the seventies, there were probably a bunch of people -- women like me -- who took jobs at universities who had, you know, while they were doing something else. You know, they were artists or they were writers or they were just waiting until something else happened.

I don't think that's true so much anymore. There were many more white women at Columbia when I was there. And the demographics have changed a lot. There are a lot more black and Latino workers now at Columbia. And they're not waiting to become artists. And well some may be in school and people still go there in order to get tuition benefits. When I went to school in the sixties and seventies, people prided themselves on being artistic, on being unorthodox, unconventional. And that's not out there anymore.

**Q: So are you saying that there are people who are now going into clerical work and see it as a full-time and permanent job?**

**MR:** There's still a turnover among a group in there. So many, many of the workers who go there are interested in furthering their education and using the tuition benefits there. We've actually negotiated a provision that allows people to use tuition to go to other institutions.

**Q: Like public ones?**

**MR:** Yes, that's right. So we got a whole batch of people who are going to school at the same time. Some of them are also supporting families.

**Q: But the tuition benefits go to the family members or just the worker?**

**MR:** Primarily the worker. There are few circumstances in which you can have your kids use tuition -- tuition benefits, if the kid goes to Columbia but not too many. So.

**Q: And so once you went on staff, then what happens in terms of your own history with the union?**

**MR:** Well -- it was so hard. It was so hard. And I think this is true for most organizers. It's like the first year the learning curve on these jobs is long, and the first year was just murder. And I -- first of all, the internal politics of the organization: I didn't know anything about and I was really unprepared for it. And it's a tough atmosphere. The pot is always simmering in a union. And you're consumed with your job, you're consumed with conflict. And so it was hard.

But I was primarily doing organizing at Columbia. We had the election behind us but we were not recognized as a union. So we had to continue to organize workers. And I did that and that part was good. It was fun even though it was hard.

And I did that for a couple years. Finally in 1985, we got recognition for the union. And we started negotiating contracts.

**Q: So what was the bargaining unit at that time?**

**MR:** That was 1,100 clerical workers.

**Q: And technical workers too?**

**MR:** Well basically no. It was clerical, administrative, support staff unit. There are workers in there now -- I mean, because of the technology, there are workers that might be called technical.

**Q: All right. So you got your recognition for 1,100 clerical and administrative support staff in 1985.**

**MR:** Right. And we started negotiating a contract. I was the like the assistant in the negotiations but didn't know anything about them. We were negotiating this contract in District 65. And it was a good contract, a big win for New York. Eleven-hundred workers doesn't happen that often. And it had so little in the way of resources to do this.

But I think partly because of the delays at the Labor Board and the shop that we had -- there were people knew that the university had been screwing around with them so much -- through these delays, the workers were just at this pitch of anger against the university. And so it was really a tremendous contract negotiation. I mean, the people were all trying to get a good contract. And we actually had a strike that lasted six days. That was in 1985. October. And then we settled and we got a good first contract.

**Q: What was the most important issue in that first contract?**

**MR:** Well, wages, which were low, and not only the fact that they were low but the wages were all mixed up because there had been no union and so people had been paid all kinds of different things for the same job or the same thing, different job. And you know, the hiring minimums were extremely low. So we had to do all kinds of corrective action in that way. And get all this memorialized and straightened out.

And healthcare was a big issue because now the Labor Board case was pending. The university had cut the healthcare benefits. People were really enraged over that.

**Q: They had eliminated them or just cut them back?**

**MR:** They just cut them back. They raised the deductibles and so we had to correct that, which we did. And there were all kinds of other major issues having to do with the basic contract language. I remember we had major negotiations about an issue of personal work. You know, because there was a clause that people were made to do personal work.

**Q: Which would be what kind of thing?**

**MR:** Well, there was someone I knew had been asked to pick up the dry cleaning for her professor.

**Q: So this has been a hot issue and the university was uncomfortable about negotiating around it?**

**MR:** Well it was a long-standing issue in the organizing and I remember it stuck out because it was kind of a feminist issue. Also because frequently it played out on male professor, female secretary. It didn't have to be like that but it was frequently.

And we actually memorialized that in a poster we did at our ten-year anniversary. There's a beautiful -- we had a member who was an artist who did a beautiful exhibit for us, for the union. She literally painted the representation of collective bargaining provision for the various shops within the local. And the one she did for Columbia was a personal provision. And we made it into a poster. I'll give you one, if you want.

She's a very fine artist and it's a beautiful poster. But another thing we got was "spouse equivalent;" it was probably called at that time, or "domestic partner" coverage for bereavement. This was a breakthrough. Since then we've gotten domestic partner coverage for health benefits but that was just for bereavement.

**Q: But this must have been one of the first trade union contracts that stuck hard language on the issue of a spouse equivalent for any kind of rights? So it was trend-setting in a way, right?**

**MR:** Right, right. And we got an equity fund to try and deal with some of the inequities. We did this analysis on the basis of race and gender which we looked at the back across pay rates to see whether there was a pattern whereby white workers and male workers who didn't earn very much earned more than women workers and workers of color. And this was something we tried to grapple with over several contracts. But the first contract we got an equity adjustment.

**Q: To bring workers at the bottom of the scale up to a more appropriate level?**

**MR:** Right, and to try and equalize within grade.

**Q: At one point did District 65 sort of dissolve into United Auto Workers?**

**MR:** That wasn't until '91 or '92 actually. So we were still just District 65, part of the UAW. But all I really knew about the UAW was that once or twice a year there would be UAW conferences and conventions, and I went to some of them. And I was very excited because they were huge and massive, thousands of delegates. It was amazing.

Although I have to say, they spent a lot of time talking about the auto industry. And so I didn't relate to it at all. It was impressive but it was sort of removed. And so District 65 was a pretty kind of small and local sort of union. But we had a building on Astor Place. And so, while we were not a large union because we had that building we sort of had some presence in the city. People would use the building for all kinds of reasons. It was like a 12-story building.

**Q: It had a culture.**

**MR:** Yeah. It had a long history and a lot of progressive people in New York. knew District 65. And then the Columbia election kind of put us on the map again. Because it was a big win in New York.

**Q: So, what happened next?**

**MR:** Well, we had the first conference, but I was assigned to handle the grievances. To be kind of a contact administrator or business agent. They called them "organizers" at District 65. So, I was still called an organizer. We worked with our section of the union which was called the "Technical Office and Professional Division." It was mainly women. And the Vice President for the section at this point was a woman. So, we were separate from a lot of the union. I spent a lot of my time up at Columbia. We had sort of a crummy office up there that I stayed I most of the time.

**Q: This is on campus or off-campus?**

**MR:** It's actually on campus. It still has this kind of [LAUGHS] ...It's the 190th Street and Amsterdam area. It's a dungeon. My only experience was in going to the negotiations at Columbia. So I had to kind of learn everything from scratch.

**Q: So you had stewards at that point in the local?**

**MR:** Well, we elected stewards. We weren't really a local at that point. I guess you'd call it the Columbia local. We elected stewards and so on. And I was supposed to work with the stewards. And none of us knew how to do anything. None of us [LAUGHS] -- you know, we sort of learned. We kind of trained ourselves. There was a contract. We struggled with it. We tried to figure out how to do things. But none of us knew how to do anything. And then I handled a lot of grievances. It was like a sink or swim situation. So, I'm kind of grateful for that experience in a way because over a period of a few years I just handled hundreds of grievances and I really became immersed in that.

**Q: That's great. And you probably went into training to know how to do it too?**

**MR:** Eventually I did.

**Q: So there was a very loose structure. You guys were really kind of on your own?**

**MR:** Well there was an organizer and the Vice President for our section was the person, Judy Chrisman, who was the main organizer. So, you know. She couldn't provide enough structure except for the times we were administrating contact reports for our contracts. Well, it was very overwhelming because it was a huge place, large unit and there were a lot of grievances. The university was still quite antagonistic.

**Q: And did you organize the Medical School at that time?**

**MR:** No. The clerical workers in the Medical School were in a different union.

**Q: What union were they in?**

**MR:** They were in a union called the Supporting Staff Association, which is now a local of SEIU. But then it was very loosely affiliated with SEIU. They had their own union and at the time there wasn't a lot of interaction between us.

**Q: Was there any discussion up at Columbia about deciding to choose District 65 over other unions?**

**MR:** Well the AFT came in and tried to organize while we were trying to organize District 65. But they never got a process.

**Q: And why was that?**

**MR:** Well, I think that District 65 already had more of a foothold. They represented the clerical workers at Barnard and at Teachers College. The organizers had worked to form an organizing committee and I know I wanted District 65.

**Q: Why?**

**MR:** Because I knew that it was a progressive union. And I had heard about it.

**Q: Could you break that down -- how is it progressive?**

**MR:** Well, I knew they were against the war in Vietnam.

**Q: Was it issues around workplace democracy? Or --**

**MR:** More their opposition to racism. They had a record of being pro civil rights, and there was a lot of talk about organizing women workers. And --

**Q: Now as that assumption about the differences between 65 and, say, the AFT -- was that commonly held? Or did people know about that? Was that a factor for other workers on the campus?**

**MR:** I don't know. I mean it was probably for the people on the organizing committee. Every organizer in District 65 was a woman -- they were the ones organizing. And they just were more cutting edge, you know?

**Q: At the time that the Columbia local was organized, District 65 had already merged with United Auto Workers. And then by '91, District 65 as a separate entity dissolved and it was all UAW. What was it like to have the United Auto Workers representing white collar, women clerical workers? And how did that fall out in terms of the way the membership saw their union? And how did the union trying to capture the imagination of workers, considering that it got its space organizing auto workers on an assembly line and production?**

**MR:** I think that while we were part of District 65, the relationship with the UAW was kind of remote. And as I said, once and awhile we went to a very big conference or convention and then it was very impressive because they were huge. Although I don't think we related that much. But, later on when we were going to be divided into actual locals in the UAW it was no different.

I mean first of all, 65 itself was falling apart. So, the UAW was somewhat of a savior of our section of the union. They had a structure in place, which seemed very good coming off the disorganization that was in 65 at that point. And it seemed like a very good thing to be going into a union that had a well-developed structure that we could fit in.

And then the union region that we were going into, Region 9A, had recently elected new leadership and we would elect the new leadership.

**Q: Who was that?**

**MR:** Phil Muir. We knew that he had been sort of an insurgent director and he put together an amazing coalition of co-workers to support these workers and he had kept the strike going for four years.

**Q: And the coalition included what kinds of people?**

**MR:** Community college and local elected officials, community organizations -- just an amazing array of people. And he had kept this thing going against all odds and in four years ended up winning this fight. So, we were excited in a way about getting our own local. And we'd gone through a lot in District 65 with the health plan.

**Q: This was when the union was sort of losing its resources.**

**MR:** Well our health plan fell apart. And the end days of District 65 were really horrendous. The level of a pitched battlefield.

**Q: So here you're going to get a chance to be in a stable -- well, what looked like a stable union -- but also had some vitality?**

**MR:** Right. And have our own local. We were very excited about the idea of having our own local and having our own treasury and having a little more control over our own resources. And so, we felt even though it was crazy, we didn't have a place to stay because the UAW sold the building. So we had to find an office and we were sort of camping out in the National Writers Union office for awhile.

**Q: So you were gypsies and vagabonds.**

**MR:** Right until we found a place. But it was, you know, it was exciting to set up as a local at the time.

We were very focused on the fact that it was the Auto Workers. I think now, since we've been a local, I've had a lot more experience with people saying, "Well, why are you in the UAW? Why are you auto workers?" We had strike at the Museum of Modern Art in 2000. And I sat on the picket line all the time and people would talk to the union and we'd ask visitors not to go in. And people would say: "The auto workers? What are the auto workers doing at the Museum of Modern Art?" So you get used to having to deal with that question all the time.

**Q: What would be an answer?**

**MR:** Well, this is the union that we're a part of and it's a very strong union that we wanted to a part of and actually it's a union that has many different kinds of workers in it. And they organized at NYU and we were organizing graduate students at Columbia. You can imagine the way the university tried to make out of that.

**Q: Tell us about that.**

**MR:** Why would graduate students want to be in the Auto Workers? And they even went a step further. The argument became more subtle: "It's okay for the clerical workers to be with the Auto Workers. But why would graduate students? It's not appropriate for the graduate students to be in our union."

**Q: It sort of played on people's illusions of professionalism and elitism, right?**

**MR:** We did deal with this before that. Because when we had our election at Columbia the university said, "Why would you want to be in the auto workers?"

**Q: They didn't want you to be in any kind of union. So they kind of challenged that.**

**MR:** That's right. Right. So we tagged as part of the anti-union campaign.

**Q: Can you talk a little bit about the problems and the potentials that come out of organizing drives that explicitly seek to integrate gender, race and class issues or labor issues within a campaign? Because you mentioned your equity fund. You've talked about the fact that many of the workers are women and experience their workplace as women workers. And were there some particular points of tension and/or new things that you learned by talking about those issues?**

**MR:** I think that comes up in almost every campaign you have, where you have a crisis whether it's a strike or election that it really brings all of these issues to the fore. I mean there's a difficulty, but it's really a great opportunity for people to learn solidarity as well. And in a very down-on-the-ground way.

You know, when we were on strike at the Museum, there was a unit we had at the Museum that included everybody from the floor clerk and the people who are called "visitor assistants" to people who are professionals like librarians and curators and so on. Very pro-union. It's a good thing that we have all these different people who are in the union because it makes it stronger. The fact is, I think, they never really saw each other as part of a whole. And that's when we went on strike, and people were on strike for five months.

And all those barriers have to break down. People who never knew each other, even though it's not a huge place, never would've had occasion to really talk or know anything now not only knew each other, but knew a lot about each other. And I think they felt immensely strengthened by the fact that they were workers in these varied occupations there. And it played out that I think ultimately it was a good thing for people to deal with.

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