

Interview with George Helfinstine

Interview by John D. Wrathall

4-15-1987

On Collective Bargaining at NMU

START OF INTERVIEW

(John D. Wrathall): Okay, I guess I had some kind of general questions first to ask you then you can answer those as best as you can and that'll hopefully lead into some more specific things. I guess first I wanted to ask when were the first collective bargaining proposals that you remember or know of at NMU?

(George Helfinstine): In the spring of 1968 ____, I'm dead certain yes. Early spring of '68.

(JW): What kind of a relationship was there between those proposals and the McClellan affair? Was it sparked by the McClellan affair?

(GH): Yes, it was sparked by the McClellan affair and it occurred while Johnson was the interim president. I had never met Harden – Harden had left before I got here in '67 so it had to be when Johnson was in and it was definitely tied to the whole McClellan issue and academic freedom.

(JW): And, well I know looking at the AAUP minutes that they, too, I guess were calling for some form of collective bargaining. So, how much...?

(GH): I was in both organizations so there were the same people that were interested but the AAUP at that time, I don't recall their calling some people in it, ____, I don't remember the organization ever being involved in that because I was the treasurer of the AAUP that year and we were going to have to collect money on that McClellan thing.

(JW): Right.

(GH): So, maybe they were I can't say they weren't. I remember some people in the AAUP were interested but I can't remember the organization itself pushing for it.

(JW): That could be what I may have seen in the minutes. Maybe just some...

(GH): Because some of those people later became very active even with NEA and collective bargaining.

(JW): Right, but the NEA actually made an official proposal or were you just talking about it....

(GH): Well there were only three of us there was Mr. Farley and myself, and Roland Switzgable – who is now retired. And it was the three of us who tried to collect cards and we were the ones who met with president Jamrich when he came here – actually before he was president I believe – it was in that period when he had been appointed president before he took office that we had talked to him about collective

bargaining and the desirability of forming a union and if I'm not mistaken by that time we had collected cards. And we went to him to ask him what kind of changes he proposed and that we were trying to form a union, and the kinds of things we were interested in. Did you have other questions or did you want me to go on with that?

(JW): Well, I guess along that line then, yeah what particularly did Jamrich say to you?

(GH): Well I can't really remember particularly the details, I remember the one thing he wanted was for us to hold off a year and give him a chance. That he felt for us to form a union before he had an opportunity to prove to the faculty what he could do and the kinds of changes he would make, that he deserved that year. But Bill and I have talked about it – we did not have enough cards to form a union. You had to have 30% of the faculty sign cards. We didn't have that many, but nobody knew that but Bill Farley and I, and Switzgable, because we had kept the cards. But we went over, really, with a kind of bluff that we had collected cards – we didn't tell him how many – simply said we were collecting cards and we were trying to form a union and what would he like to do about it and that's – we were hoping to get some concessions. We hoped to get him to say that he would like to, you know, that he would like to make some changes. Because we were not in a position in any way to threaten, we simply went over to say we were trying to form a union. We didn't have enough cards. We could not have, unless something very drastic happened, there was no way we could get enough cards and at that time there was another very strong union issue, I don't know if you're familiar – does someone have that tape or page out of newspaper on the McClellan issue where there was a whole page of people who signed in favor of the administration's position on the firing of McClellan and that was about half as I recall.

(JW): We don't have that. It would be good if we could get that because we have a whole bunch of editorials about that particular page but we don't have it.

(GH): I'm sure The Mining Journal has a copy of it on microfilm or something.

(JW): I'm sure, yeah, I'm sure we could get a copy of that.

(GH): But that page indicated people on that other side. Well a lot of administrators and a number of faculty were on there and as you recall it was settled out of court and it was a secret settlement and none of us really know but McClellan and the people involved what that amounted to. See I had gone to Washington representing Northern that year at the AAUP convention. You understand I was also in the AAUP but we were trying to collective bargain through NEA because there were the resources with NEA to really help us – we had Arnold Korpi, and actual person – who could do it for us. And he was willing to, you know he printed out the cards and helped us crank out, or furnished the ditto machine, and the dittos and all that sort of thing. I went that year to AAUP in Washington D.C. to represent Northern about the McClellan case, that is, to the officials of the AAUP – they wanted to know the story of the case – so I went there essentially. So there really was kind of a dual role. I was working in the AAUP at the same time we were trying to organize. My recollection was that there was not enough strength, not enough support in the AAUP for a union – for us to go that route. At that time AAUP nationally was not at all union organized.

(JW): Right, yeah, that's what McClellan has said on it.

(GH): Oh they were, because at that meeting, and I attended I think about four national meetings, and at that meeting – at every meeting – there was always the thing about union. But the people who sat up

on the stage, the officers of the AAUP tended to be Harvard, Yale you know they were Ivy League college people who saw us as almost foreigners – those of us in smaller state schools.

(JW): Well what kind of cooperation was there between the NEA and the AAUP on the collective bargaining issue say in '71 for instance?

(GH): The second time they tried?

(JW): Yeah.

(GH): Okay. That was really a collection of both, but we tried – I think there 15 or 18 of us very active in it – of course all AAUP members, there was no NEA on campus so weren't members of the NEA, but we all felt that our strength would lie in the NEA because of the help they could give us. Again it was Arnold Korpi, it was the state NEA – we brought the state NEA president up here and he spoke to faculty and was here for a couple days. As I recall, as a public school teacher downstate, there was a Michigan Association for Higher Education too, that is, for college people – an affiliate that was mostly junior college people at that time. So the people in the AAUP, as I say all of us were members of the AAUP, we decided that our best bet would be go NEA and not have the AAUP involved at all. We felt that the membership of the AAUP in general would do us in. McClellan's talked to you then, he probably talked to you about our strategy, that what we actually did we were all officers in the AAUP – we voted for NEA to be the bargaining agent, to sign that card, and then we actually blocked the AAUP getting on the ballot. In other words we as officers were able to vote that AAUP not get on the ballot. Not just as officers, it was whole membership vote, I don't NEAn to say it was just the officers, but we did push for the idea that our strength would lie in one organization and not two beyond the ballot. As it turned out we kind of outsmarted ourselves because people resented that and some of the AAUP people who would have voted for us didn't because of that strategy. That's a personal perception of it, I don't know how other people perceived it, but we did make that decision that the way for us to do it was to get the membership of the AAUP to vote not to get on the ballot and leave it NEA alone.

(JW): Well now I did hear something about how at the last minute there were some AAUP members who felt that they ought to try to get collective bargaining through the AAUP and decided to vote against the NEA because then that would allow them to bring the issue up again later with the AAUP as the collective bargaining agent.

(GH): Well that's possible. I think we probably – it would have been a better strategy looking back, if we had had the AAUP get on the ballot also because it only took another 10% of the vote, of the membership, to sign the cards to get on the ballot. But I think we foresaw what actually happened later and that was that if AAUP got on the ballot they would bully out NEA because most of the people on this campus saw NEA as too much of a public school teacher's union and they saw AAUP as more of a professional organization. That was a big part of our split.

(JW): Was that mainly because of the K12 issue?

(GH): It's partly K12 it's partly because the NEA isn't really a union, and because most of these faculty saw themselves as something better than and above a union.

(JW): Right, okay I see what you're saying. Yeah because there a couple of letters for instance that we have in the archives – one from Dick Odell for instance who seemed to feel very strongly that union tactics were below the faculty....

(GH): And Dick Odell is a man of great integrity, and he never fought us except out in the open and very honestly. There were some other people – we learned a lot about politics because our real enemies were never identified until that whole thing was over and there were some folks now, I believe Gene Rutherford, and a few others, some of those really strong, older faculty who had a telephone network that we had no idea of until too late. They would get on the phone and they would convince colleagues who were sitting on the fence that it was in their best interests to vote the union down. Many of them of course were senior faculty, most of them, they were making good salaries – a lot better than the rest of us because there was no real salary schedule – and they were making good money, they were comfortable, they got the kind of schedules they wanted, and they really didn't have the same problems that we had because they were old guard. And many of them were senate members, and they were strong people, they were good people, it was not a – I NEAn there were some things going on that we didn't know about – but it wasn't intended to be subterfuges it simply was their way of politicking. And Dick Odell certainly was a man I think all of us respected and we understood that position – that's the position that was always presented to the national meetings of AAUP – that we are above this. We can sit down like colleagues with an administration and solve our problems and of course that whole academic senate did carry a lot of weight. I think it did with Harden, and I think it did probably with Jamrich in the early years. But they were very respected people – respected by the faculty, respected by the administration. But as time went on it became obvious there were certain things that they were not going to be able to get. So that whole strategy on that one I think backfired on us, and we paid the price for it.

(JW): Well so, you say there was never really any NEA organization on campus?

(GH): I'm trying to think if that second time around some of us didn't join the NEA but I don't think so. I don't think there was. See that's one of the things the NEA was very willing to help us form a NEA group, and we could sign the card without being NEA members, we were simply asking for it to be recognized as our bargaining agent, but I don't recall whether I joined or not. I don't think so. I think most of us knew that we were going to have to join once we got the organization because we had to form officers and so forth. But to the best of my recollection was that we did not at that time.

(JW): So how about by the '75 election though? Were there any members of the NEA by then?

(GH): That one was done – that's the one where it got the election right? Those years kind of run together for me...

(JW): Yeah.

(GH): I did it mostly alone. That probably didn't help me much, the only other faculty normally that really, I NEAn I'm the one who carried all the things around and stuffed the mailboxes and got the cards signed, I kept the cards in my desk drawer, swore I'd never tell anybody who signed, that kind of thing. I think most people trusted me. But I was putting out some kind of flier about every week and the other person who really helped was a man named Musto, who is now Hawaii Education Association AAUP director for Hawaii, so he's still very active in the union, but he then came in actually physically got involved with me on it. But it was a one-man campaign for quite a long time, now there were a lot of

people who supported me, who helped me in one way or another but I was doing the leg-work and doing most of the printing. As I say, I had a lot of sympathy from people and a lot of people who helped me in any way they could but by that time I think there was a lot of fear about retribution. I really think I was punished for it. I don't have any doubt at all in my mind that I was punished – it was the reason I was never promoted. That we were the only department on campus, Mr. Farley and I, our department was the only one where we were not promoted. Bill has since been promoted while I was gone to an associate, but I never was. I think if I had stayed maybe I would have gotten it with him, I don't know. But I feel certain that the dean, the department head, and the president really always kept that in mind – because I even sued, you know. To the grandfather clause in the union contract said that I couldn't be held from it of course, but it didn't matter much. Then Musto and I had to, and I'm trying to think, we had a hearing...I'm trying to think, why we had that thing.

(JW): The merc hearings, is that it? About the form of ballot that would be used?

(GH): I believe so, yes, and so we represented – now what happened of course is that we got the 30%, we called for the union, and then AAUP got their 10% so they got on the ballot that time. AAUP got on the ballot.

(JW): Right.

(GH): We had a hearing, and that was a hearing in which – what's his name in English represented the AAUP – Les Foster. Then Norm and I represented the NEA, and then the university had its crime lawyer from Lansing up here, I forget his name, but he was a fine fellow. He complimented us on our handling of the case – on our side of the case – that we had done very well on it. So, the next thing that happened was that of course we had the election and we got knocked off the ballot first, and of course we then, for good or ill, we decided to throw our weight behind the AAUP. Better the AAUP than no union. And still, I never felt that it was what it ought to be because those people who were in AAUP really were not looking for a union so much as they were looking not to get the NEA in, and so they pushed us out rather than put in a good, strong union. Now that's my own personal view of it and what happened after the union got in here was never really very impressive as a union. It simply was a group that kept the other union out. I have nothing personal against any of the people who were involved in it but it seems to me still, that although now I understand from hearsay that two years ago when this president first came that September, that the raw folks out picketing two years before had fought us tooth-and-nail, they opposed the union entirely, and union tactics, but they were out there carrying signs – it had finally gotten through to them that this is the only way were going to get it done. All I really know now about the AAUP is more hearsay than anything else, although I must say, we do have benefits that we didn't have when I was here before. Whether that's because of the AAUP, I don't know. But I haven't been involved, I joined this year, but I would do that out of – I belong to the California Education Association - _____ last year because I was a public school teacher – I do that out of principle. So I joined the AAUP, but I think if I had my brothers I'd still rather have a union than have AAUP because I still can't see them as a union.

(JW): Mhm, so it still isn't really a union or...

(GH): Only in my mind, it's not. I suppose they see themselves as a union but I see them being much more, still, that mentality of wanting to sit down and talk – which I'm for too – but limiting to that rather than going, pushing hard for things. Still that image that NEA is a public school K-12 kind of organization, and we're better than that. I don't believe that the national AAUP has ever given the support – the

financial support and the other kind of support – to AAUP units that NEA would have, not NEA because NEA is very much like AAUP nationally, it will get involved as a last resort in strikes or something, a last resort, but, as a matter of fact on that last one I was even interviewed on channel 6 about the...I believe they had had Dr. Jamrich on to talk about his position so they offered me the same opportunity. So I was on, I believe Brian Yaro was then the person who interviewed me. I think I got about a five minute spot on channel 6 – both in the six o'clock and the ten o'clock news. It was seen rather widely so we had a chance for publicity. A lot of questions were asked there that I didn't know they were going to ask. You rehearse those things and then they throw you a ringer or two, like "Would you strike?"

(JW): Right.

(GH): I did not know it was coming, and I had to pause a bit. That was a major concern among people at that time, was they assumed that as a NEA group that we would willing to strike at the drop of a hat and that really was not the case. But neither were we going to say "No we won't."

(JW): Hm. I guess I had a question about – you were here before the McClellan affair...

(GH): I came that year – '67. He was giving his notice July 1, I believe, of '67 and I came on board right around September 1, so that had been brewing but I think nothing had really been done until we got on campus and began through the AAUP meetings.

(JW): I guess I was kind of curious or interested to know what those who had been here before anyway, what their impression had been of the relations between the faculty and the administration before that?

(GH): Well that's what that newspaper, that full page ad in the newspaper, was about. That we support Northern Michigan University and its administration that has always been as I recall the wording has always defended academic freedom. It was words to that effect.

(JW): Yes, it was something like that.

(GH): So that whole issue as far as they were concerned of academic freedom was not a legitimate one. Of course we had a lot of meetings in those days. The AAUP met quite frequently and then we had full faculty meetings. A couple where there was almost a brawl and folks taking off jackets ready to fight. [laughs]

(JW): Well I know, because I remember reading Dick Ledel's letter, and he had been very concerned and he was saying, "If we get a union we're going to have more and more of an adversarial relationship between faculty and the administration," and some of the letters and so on that I had read, some of the faculty members were saying for instance, at the time of the McClellan affair, they were saying, "This is the first time that we've really lost trust in the administration. This is the first time that we've felt any reason to believe that the administration isn't being honest with us." And so all of this kind of lead me to believe that at least before then there had been some good relationship between the faculty and the administration but I'm not sure.

(GH): Well I think you have understand that probably the greatest growth of this faculty in any one year was '67 the year we came because there was about six new people in our department, there were four or five new ones in industrial arts. Farley had come the year before. But I think '66 and '67 probably

were the two major years, maybe three or '66, '67, and '68, were tremendous growth years. So I think getting a lot of new faculty was part of it. A lot of new faculty were sympathetic to the ideas of a union. Kind of juxtaposed against the older faculty who really did in many ways have their own way, I NEAn it was that kind of thing. That whole issue of McClellan was really the spark that set it all off, without question. It really brought the faculty together to focus on a lot of things.

(JW): Right. Well McClellan had just been hired in, was it '66 or...He hadn't been around.

(GH): I think he must have come in '65 because in '67 he had to have been notified by June 30 that the following year would be his last year, and they didn't notified until July 1 – the little technicality in there.

(JW): Oh, I see, okay.

(GH): But also the real reasons were his political activities in the community. So I think he was on his third year. He was on his second year – they had to notify him before June 30 of his second year that his next year would be his last year, so it was a full year's notice really.

(JW): Right.

(GH): And of course the AAUP, we all agreed, we sat down and we agreed each to pay \$100 the following year – 70 of us, to get the \$7,000 together to pay McClellan to stay because he said he had to have \$7,000 to live off of. At that time our salary, or my salary, was about \$10,000 or \$11,000 so it was just a cost of living kind of thing for him. Without him we had no case and there were enough of us who wanted that case – many of us who didn't know McClellan at all – didn't know him until the issue. But he's an outspoken man who probably rubbed a lot of people the wrong way – like some of us were also. But yeah, that was the real catalyst, and then of course a lot of other...Then I think another thing that really was that opposition of the faculty where you had almost equal power in the opposing forces. But the anti-union side was stronger in the sense that they were older, they were more politically astute than we. We were kind of a lot young turks trying to get the job done without really understanding how politics works and these folks knew there's a way of doing it. Not behind closed doors but over the telephone, and conversations, where we didn't even know what was going on. We were very cocky then.

(JW): Right. Yeah, that's interesting.

(GH): I should say the second time. Bill Farley and I knew we didn't have enough to really do any good with, but we felt that in the long run it probably didn't help to get Jamrich to do some things in ways favorable to the faculty at least to start with.

(JW): Hm, okay, when I talked to Bill Farley on the phone he mentioned something about disbanding the NEA in 19- I'm not exactly sure maybe he was going to talk to me a little more about that – or what was he...talked about disbanding.

(GH): You talking about the early one? The first time through?

(JW): Maybe I'll have to get more from him on that.

(GH): And there's some things that he'll probably remember that aren't clear to me. I know that we went – he and I and Switzgale – went to talk to the president with understanding that we didn't have the real power but he wouldn't know that we didn't have. We didn't say if we did or didn't, we just said we were organizing a union and we're collecting cards. And we had really milked every card out of the faculty that we were going to get and it just wasn't enough. You have to understand at that time, people – it was their first time up here and they were very frightened by the idea of putting their signature on a card and handing it to a stranger – which I was. Bill was here a year longer, but hand that card because I had in my hands the power to do a lot of them in, they thought.

(JW): Yeah. Well I know I remember reading letters that, I believe there's one letter in there that McClellan had in his files from you and one from Les Foster I think, too. More or less to the effect of trying to reassure faculty that this would be kept confidential, that their careers would not be endangered, and so on by handing them cards.

(GH): Well that was the thing, see a lot of people were willing to sign the card but they didn't want to be known. So there were some people that probably would have given the impression on the surface that they were not pro-union or that they were even anti-union. But that was in a sense to keep – because there were some departments here where it was very obvious that if they knew you were union they would try to do something about it. But see I had no tenure, matter of fact most of us didn't have tenure, and I was held for tenure for the next five or seven years from tenure. Nobody could convince me that it wasn't directly related to this. The fact that he and I were not promoted – directly related. That's my view anyway. Well I took the case, AAUP defended me – not well I think – but the grandfather thing said I could not be held from promotion because I was here, I was grandfathered, I could not be held for that reason, just because I didn't have the ____ and that's the only thing that ever happened.

(JW): Let's see, I was going to ask you, so how did Jamrich then react once collective bargaining had been elected or voted in by the faculty in '75?

(GH): Well you have to understand I was not involved in it much. You know I've been a NEA man and I'm strong for the NEA and I think the best you could say was that I cooperated, I never fought for it, but I was not really part of it either. I was never on the faculty senate – I had served on several committees of the senate – but I was never part of it to be able to say exactly how...

(JW): So you weren't involved in, well you had said earlier that you were an officer in the AAUP though...

(GH): Prior to that, oh yes, yes. Because I had come here having been on the AAUP where I taught before, and came here willing and able to jump in the middle of the fray. Especially with the McClellan thing we were such a, we were a hot faculty then we were really close, that group of us, who were in the AAUP and fighting to save McClellan, very close group. I was very pleased with the faculty, I thought we had really found some dynamite here, and it's true, but we had some folks on the other side with a different point of view who saw it differently, and actually won the initial battle I guess you could say – except that McClellan was able to win his case through those depositions. And of course, we had all signed that suit with him as you're well aware, and let's see, my friend and I were students and making our depositions I think on a Tuesday, and the previous Saturday our depositions were enough to cause _____.

(JW): In an out of court settlement. Well that answers most of my questions. Did you have anything that you wanted to...

(Third Party): No I don't think so. I think you laid it out pretty well _____.

(GH): Well you were here through all that stuff.

(Third Party): I was, I was a young captain in '68 and I was for the union all the time but I was never in the forefront of the fighting or anything like that. I was involved in the liberal studies program and I was pushing the courses that I had never even taken in college, so I was a struggling young faculty member and _____. But I always supported the idea of getting a union.

(GH): See Switzgale, he was one of the esteemed old faculty members too, the Dick Odell variety and so forth, and he did work with us on them and he did go see the president. My best recollection there was twice that we saw the president – once Bill and I went and once I had class and couldn't go so Bill and Dr. Switzgale went. Switz might be somebody you'd want to talk to too, you ever think about that?

(Third Party): Yeah, well I talked to him one time, and he indicated he'd be willing, he didn't sound real enthusiastic but when we talked to Bill he might be willing to be present there and they could reinforce each other and then I don't know there might be some point of us getting together with you some time later.

(GH): Oh, you know maybe you and I, or Bill and I and Switz...

(JW): That would be a good idea.

(Third Party): He's trying to get that done now because he wants to write a paper on this.

(GH): Before the end of the semester.

(JW): Yeah. I did talk to Dr. Farley – when I talked to him he implied he could remember some of the things that had been said in these meetings with Jamrich for instance. So that might be a good thing for you to get together with him because then he would certainly refresh your memory. You know, be able to kind of spark your memory of that too.

(Third Party): Might have a little more to add after you listen to his tape or something.

(GH): Yes. Fine. I'm willing to do anything to help you out.

(Third Party): I know you played a very important role in that part and I think that it's important that your part comes out, you did lay yourself on the line – I think the reason we have a union today is because some of you guys were willing to establish the idea and start the beginning the educative process that was necessary.

(GH): But actually you see, I think what really impressed me when I came back this fall, actually I just came up to play golf last summer, Dr. Hedges told me there was an opening in the department why didn't I apply for it and I did, and they interviewed other people – I wasn't just a shoe-in because I had been here before. It was based on my ability and my experience and so forth. But when I came back, that first month I was back here there were so many people who made it a point to stop me and say, "I'm really glad to see you back." People that I would have thought never even knew I was gone, I NEAn,

that kind of people. But they were all people who saw me stuffing the mailboxes and knew I was, and I have to think that was part of their feeling about me was that...

(Third Party): I think when you're around people tend to take you for granted or don't make a point to say anything about it, but after you're gone or when you come back they do recall. It's a catalyst to make them recall what your role was and they remember the role you played there and it helps explain why they might say something to you.

(GH): Well I did appreciate that and it was kind of a surprise to me because some of those people I would never have even thought, because I know some or many of them were anti-union. Some are good friends who are anti-union, too. _____ oh on principle, yes. They were mostly principled people, you're right, no question about it. The education department was kind of a logical place because we are tied to the public schools and most of us came out of a public school environment, though I'd never gone through the union public schools until last year, and they were still involved in trying to get unions organized. So we kind of – our close ties to public school make us a prime place for that sort of thing.

(JW): Well, thank you very much.

(GH): You're welcome. Glad I could help.

END OF INTERVIEW