

Bruce Laurie Talks Union with Jules Chametzky: An Interview

BRUCE: What drew you to the union in the first place?

JULES: Well, everything is always, as they say, over-determined. The Seventies were a bad time: the OPEC crisis, no raises—dismal. A period of reaction to the Sixties. I felt disillusioned with the academy and disconnected from my department. I went to Europe: I taught at the Kennedy Institute in Berlin in 1970-71 where the atmosphere was radical. I got interested in continental theory and would have liked to focus *The Massachusetts Review* on that—but it wasn't possible. I taught in Berlin again in '75, and then in '76-77 I went to Freiburg. One set of impulses came from restlessness and dissatisfactions—maybe what Jimmy Carter called a “general malaise” in American society.

More personally—I'd given up *MR*, which I knew needed woman editors at that feminist moment. I was ready for something new. I was up in the Campus Center with Mike Thelwell and Craig Edwards when Jack Polidori came by, I think with you—and you introduced us. You were then Assistant Professor. And Jack looked at me with a hungry look. You'd explained that I was a Full Professor and I think you needed one up front. So that was the beginning.

Anyway, I'd always been in the union movement. I was a member of the UE when I was younger. I helped support a strike in Wausau, Wisconsin, in 1950. A group of us—The North Star Singers—went out and sang on the picket line with banjos as if we were a Pete Seeger group. I'd been marching with the UE in the 40's .

And my experience with the way university governance worked in those days was demoralizing: old-boy networks,

favoritism, and unfairness in distributing merit raises—already in 1968–69 I helped to start a committee system in my department: David Clark and I did a lot to establish the constitution under which the English department, with a few modifications, still functions.

BRUCE: Do you recall how that old system worked?

JULES: It was just the chair and a few full professors making all the decisions about promotions and who'd get hired or who got raises.

BRUCE: And you saw the union as a way out?

JULES: As a way of firming up and giving teeth to various things. We started with a personnel committee, a recruiting and a grievance committee. In the late Sixties all of that had no teeth. I thought to really make it work you needed a stronger contractual basis.

BRUCE: Could decisions made in the department stick higher up?

JULES: From time to time—but then again you'd have collusion, a buddy system. You know, Jerry Allen and Joe Frank would play golf with someone and drink together. And Howard Brogan who became a member of the union board when he was deposed as chairman—he was a rigorous bureaucrat, and he sat on me for seven years because I edited the *Review*. I couldn't let him appoint people to the editorial board. I told him it was a sovereign body that voted people in—he and I never, never got along till much later. Anyway, we established a structure that ultimately allowed lower rank—even untenured—people on key committees. That was a great advance.

I'd be on the personnel committee; usually I was chair. I learned a lot that we later enshrined in the union. One of the things in the first contract was the primacy of personnel committee decisions,

so that decentralized power would go to elected committees which rotated every two years. Your term was two years; so you could throw the rascals out and then get your turn at the trough, if there was one.

BRUCE: You joined the bargaining team for the first contract toward the end, when we were trying to wrap up talks with Gary Wulf and his team. What do you recall of those sessions?

JULES: The painfulness of the last negotiations. I was on the final team. Four members of our university team—Larry Roberts from Botany, Leo Richards from History, me—and wonderful John Kendall representing the librarians. Four members from the Boston campus and that was the problem! We fought away. We were at an impasse with the administration, so we had a mediator whom I came to respect. The administration team was a wily lot. We met in the State Street, Boston, offices of the University and the teams sat in two separate rooms on the same corridor about fifty yards apart. I remember Zina Tallona and Jerry Allen of the administration team; Randolph Bromery was Chancellor then.

But the Boston group was the problem for our ranks—they brought along a kind of splinter group of ninety to one-hundred people, led by a couple of anarchists (really!). The leader would be caucusing downstairs while we were bargaining upstairs with their elected team members. They'd come to one kind of agreement with us and then go down to the caucus below—in the name of participatory democracy—and say, "We gotta have our ninety people agree on this." Some would always disagree, and they'd have to back-off whatever position we'd reached. This went on in-fucking-terminably and we got very impatient.

It was a terrible moment. Most of their elected team were pretty much like us, but they may have been afraid to counter this movement. We negotiated for forty hours straight one week-end and forty hours straight the next. They kept going back and forth like the negotiators in Ireland or the Middle East—I mean every time you think you've reached an agreement, someone

says, "No it's not good enough." That wouldn't be an elected member but someone outside. Finally we'd passed some resolution and the four Boston people got up to leave because they were against it, and I said to one of them, "Are you really against this? I thought you were for it?" He started turning like a dervish: he didn't know whether to stay in the room or to go. He was like Jimmy Durante, "Didja ever have the feeling that you wanted to go but you wanted to stay..." He was clearly on our side, but felt obliged to go. So they moved out. But then we passed our resolution about two or three in the morning. The librarians hadn't gotten all they wanted but Kendall was an old comrade and a friend from graduate school, and I asked him, "Could you and the librarians live with this? You know we could make it up next year or the next contract without fail." He said, "Yes."

We felt now that the administration had to give on something—to compromise on one position. The mediator didn't think they'd agree. So we went down the hall—the most dramatic moment yet—and we confronted them. I think Leo and I went in and started yelling at Zina and Jerry that they had to give us this. And lo and behold, they voted for it and we had the contract.

That was an amazing moment. At four or five in the morning, the four of us looking at a contract after three years of bargaining and these two weekends of forty-hour sessions when you sit at the table all night and all day. We got in the car—I forget who was driving—and the sun was coming up. Dawn and we were so happy—it was one of the highest point of my life and I think it's the same for everybody who was connected with it. When I went to the department about 8:00 AM, I said, "We've got a contract" and John Clayton said, "Really?" Nobody believed it till we had it.

A personally sort of amusing footnote. I got painful tennis elbow—tendinitis. The doctor asked me if I drank, and I was mystified. Apparently people get it from leaning their elbows on bars. I got it from leaning on the negotiating table for two weeks.

BRUCE: Your correspondence shows that one of your first acts

in summer 1979 was to welcome incoming Chancellor Henry Koffler to campus and suggest a meeting to clear the air and develop a new relationship with the union. What about that?

JULES: Yeah, I was trying to get to see Henry Koffler. My impression when I did was that he was clueless about what unions were and opposed to them in universities or colleges. It was out of his tent—he'd come from a Midwest science background. We used to kid around and call him a Prussian Major General: someone who'd stay behind the lines and plan how the university would run seamlessly and effortlessly, given the machinery. But he had no idea what was going on. I'm not sure it was very successful but we tried to talk to him. Later, when Loren Baritz became his provost, things eased up because Baritz was sophisticated and had dealt with unions at Empire State and was kind of left-wing. I think it was through Baritz, if anyone, that it happened.

BRUCE: What do you think brought Koffler around?

JULES: We were kind of terrified of each other: I of him because he always went walking with two big dogs. What brought Henry around—as it did many leaders thereafter—was realizing that we had the infrastructure for lobbying in Boston. Anybody at a state university realizes that you need a political dimension to work with the legislature, and here, in this most political of states, it's essential to have a political voice. Through our membership in the MTA we had that—even though we were relatively small in that large organization. We were the tail that couldn't wag the dog, but we had 85,000 members in the larger group that spoke on Beacon Hill with a loud voice. Any smart administrator could see that.

BRUCE: You have been known as a key force working for better race relations on campus, an issue that was complicated by the strife over Provost Paul Puryear, who was terribly antiunion. A lot of the black faculty, some of whom were among your closest

friends, supported him. Puryear and President Wood both had to resign in the crisis of 1977. Race relations were strained but then gradually improved. Some people think that you were key in that?

JULES: Wouldn't it be pretty to think so? Fortunately I was away in Freiburg from '76 through '77. When I got back all this had hit the fan. I was sitting up in the bar with Thelwell who had been my student; Esther Terry had been my student—I was her doctoral director—I had good relations with many African-American students and faculty members. As union president, I hadn't been tainted by the struggle with Puryear. I'd been away. Besides we had terrific people on the board: John Bracey, a sophisticated old fighter and Johnnetta Cole, professor of Anthropology then, Ernie Allen, Bracey's colleague in the Afro-Am department, and Chet Davis, who'd been in the "black and white together, we shall overcome," movement in the 40's and 50's. Mike Thelwell was a sympathizer—his father had been in the first labor government in Jamaica. You could always talk with Chet and Mike and Esther. We had a nucleus of people. And about Provost Puryear—every provost who ever came to campus wanted to reorganize departments. It's the role of a provost, so the problem wasn't just race. By the time I got in, the waters were a little smoothed over and maybe my listening to various people helped too. Bromery lost support when he took the side of the big corporations in South Africa—he cut the branch out from under himself, then, I believe, with the Afro-American community.

BRUCE: What about race relations inside the union?

JULES: Well, some progressive people thought that in the name of unionism blacks should just agree to be "one big happy family." I remember, though, during one debate when Johnnetta Cole said to me, "It's out there, Jules, and it's in here." She meant racism, and she was right. The board was representative of the larger community and racism is almost always there.

BRUCE: What about our unique relationship to the librarians? You were part of the team that negotiated the first contract to recognize them.

JULES: I mentioned that John Kendall and I were on that first bargaining team and that John took a long sophisticated view of what we could get. We were comrades from graduate school where we'd gone through *Beowulf*—one of the last ritual obstacles to the doctorate then—together. I made him a firm promise about the next contract, and it's a cause of great pride to me that the librarians were with us from the beginning—hey, are an integral part of university and college life and have to be part of everything.

BRUCE: Would you say that in union politics the librarians were to this campus what the part-time faculty was to Boston?

JULES: If you mean that they were undervalued and underpaid—but they were a more stable unit, not a changing, kind of floating group like the part-time Boston faculty. Ultimately, we could help people with grievances. I remember not just that John was great in the leadership, but Katherine Emerson and others were glad to be in the union, part of the show; there were always librarians on the board.

BRUCE: Do you think the Boston leadership had special difficulties because they were committed to defend their largest constituency, the part-time teachers?

JULES: If I achieved anything while I was president, it was getting the Boston and UMass Amherst groups to agree on operating procedures—that used to be the most painful, when we'd meet in Worcester once a month to try to hammer out differences between us. We were the Joint Coordination Committee (JCC). Bracey, me, Dan Martin, and a few other people, and the Boston group's president and others. Bracey would be pacing up and down repeating "One man, one vote." The problem was that

we had 1100 members and they only 400, so if numbers ruled we'd overwhelm them every time. They knew that, of course, so I'd say "Majority rules, minority rights!" and we had to figure out a way to have minority rights without an absolute veto and then we'd have to negotiate it.

After over a year of gut-wrenching, hard arguing we finally worked something out. Worse than any negotiations with the administration—and these were comrades! Then my task was to sell the agreement. We had a big meeting—a couple of hundred people—and we agreed and voted and that created a good atmosphere for cooperation, which I think pretty much endured.

BRUCE: What about the faculty group led by Joe Larson and the AAUP that first was our enemy—excuse me, our opponent in the election—and then worked for decertification. And some people think the administration tried to drag out the negotiations in hopes of giving them some importance and influence they wouldn't have had otherwise.

They refused to pay agency fees or dues and claimed to have 300 signatures towards the 600 needed for decertification. Were they a challenge?

JULES: Yeah, it was a constant struggle. We always had to fight on two fronts: to resist these people consistently, forcefully, but not tyrannically or oppressively. We created a bipartisan committee, pacifists and people from their side, plus our own people, for evaluating claims to non-payment.

Then you could petition the union to not pay dues, and give your grounds. If the committee found that the grounds were antiunion—"forget about it!" as they say in Brooklyn. But if the grounds were religious or otherwise morally based and there was some evidence, we said OK. So we weren't seen as crazy fanatics or zealots.

But I've just thought about something else that was really important. I went around to various committees outside the union and made the union a presence. Jack Tager was on a faculty senate committee—the rules committee—I went to it and

to others. The union had a certain weight and clout. I'd speak softly and explain why we were in favor of something or not, and people listened. So then we got the right to speak at the faculty senate. The administrators spoke, the senate president spoke, and then the union had a voice. I remember one of Koffler's first talks, his inaugural address. He said to the faculty, "I want to assure you that you're better than you think you are." And I was so pissed at that, I got up and said, "Chancellor Koffler, I want you to know that I'm sick and tired of hearing that from chancellors and others. I want to tell you, we're better than you think we are." I think that won some people. And then week after week just coming up and not being fearful. Never disrespectful but not afraid to lay out the union position and oppose or contradict certain things. That was a useful tool for bringing the message to wider faculty. And then we tried to organize rigorously and vitally over that year and did increase the membership.

And we whittled down the non-payers one by one. That was important.

BRUCE: One of the raps—as it were—against the union is that it's affiliated at the state level and nationally with MTA and NEA—that is with unions of school teachers, not professors.

JULES: Some of the deepest lows came when I had to deal with intransigent administrators, but they also came with intransigent MTA people. I mean, they could count and they knew we were just a small element of the total MTA—we had to struggle to get adequate support and legal help. When most of the membership was K-12 and here were the community colleges and the state colleges besides, we had to cajole and threaten to go, and meanwhile be threatened and cajoled. The weapon was dues payment: how much do you pay? One didn't speak of that openly, though, because you don't undermine loyalty to the union.

The positive side outweighed all that. You were part of a larger movement. I mean, come on, it's democracy, and you have to know it's a political state and a political country, and with the union we had a voice, an organized presence. Unorganized we'd

be chewed up and spit out. We all knew that. And certainly with contracts we got the full support and backing of the MTA: data, information, and invaluable service people like Jack Polidori and Priscilla Lyons.

At the national level, the NEA conventions were a real exercise in democracy. Delegations from Texas that made George W. look like a liberal and New York and New Jersey and Massachusetts leading the charge for liberal proposals. The conventions passed resolutions for good causes every year; we picketed the South African Embassy in Washington and we marched with nurses on strike in Minneapolis when the convention was held there. That was invigorating, even thrilling. We went on demonstrations in Washington where Bracey and Sylvia Forman and Sara Lennox and others marched together. We developed the kind of solidarity that supports you in the dark days that inevitably come.

Another good experience was helping to edit *Thought and Action*, the NEA journal for higher education, out of the Washington office. I worked with Sam Pizzicatti, the head of publications for the NEA whom I admired a lot. He fought to get us editorial independence. The journal's board was broadly representative of the membership by sex, race, and region: that was the positive thing—the great people you met from all around the country. You got a sense of the national strength of the union movement and a respect for people who might be very different from your own academic colleagues. I worked two terms—seven or eight years all together—on the editorial board that would meet in Washington and on various campuses around the country for intense work sessions.

Let me back up, here, and go back to the MTA, the state level. One good thing the faculty union did was to support the ESP, the staff people from the university; we always sat together at state and national meetings. I had good relations with the secretarial and service staff at the university, and I was thrilled by the way people came out and rose to positions of responsibility and leadership. People with a lot less education than our PhDs—undervalued and frequently badly underpaid—grew exponentially

when they worked in the organization, and I was thrilled to see this enabling, ennobling, empowering process. I'm glad we were part of that.

BRUCE: You invested an enormous amount of time and energy and commitment to help establish this organization. Do you think it made a difference?

JULES: Well look, I loved the university and I loved my work. In the 1970's it looked as if it were going to go over the falls without even a barrel. It was going to be destroyed. It was important to muster whatever forces we could to help save it. Ours was a way of organizing the faculty into a coherent, united body to fight against the destruction with some dignity. I think we helped save the university then, and we continue to be the most articulate and coordinated, important functioning group in the university. Lenin said that trade unions are just a defensive arm lifted up to ward off a blow—that they're not a transmission belt to revolution. That's true. But you need that arm to defend and extend the rights of the faculty. If the administration could act with impunity they'd be cutting salaries, firing people left and right, and not honoring tenure. You need the union's voice so that you won't just barely survive, but live with dignity. But I think the union hasn't only been bread and butter issues, the traditional Gompersism. We've always had contingents within the union pushing for a larger social vision. Talk about race and ethnicity and how people are treated, and about students who need more teaching and better teaching and more service and support—we're out for the whole human struggle. So I was all for it. I'm still all for it.