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INTERVIEW WITH JAMES THOMPSON:

Winner of the 2000 Service to the Profession Award

Katherine V. Wills

KW: The nominating letter from Robert H. Zieger, Distinguished Professor of History at University of Florida, credited you with not only maintaining an outstanding academic record and being a fine classroom teacher, but also with launching campaigns against sweatshops and in support of custodial workers, among other achievements. Tell me about your activism with the graduate student union Graduate Assistants United (GAU).

JT: My primary channel of activism is the Graduate Assistants Union. That's how I came involved in the politics and activism. Really, I had no involvement whatsoever with any group before I came to Florida. I got interested in the American activism through my contact with Marcus Harvey, a Canadian and a historian also.

KW: Canada leads the way in academic activism. Many of the *Workplace* Breaking News postings come from Canada.

JT: Yes, we are lucky to have a Canadian come all the way down here to Florida. We're in a right-to-work state and a southern state and Bush state; sometimes it takes a little help from outside to get us going. I was raised in south Texas. People aren't paid enough for the work that they do. When I put that history--my history together with Marcus's--it seemed natural to become involved in graduate activism.

Granted, we're not farm workers and we don't have to sweat away in the fields, but we are exploited to a certain degree, and there are many other groups on campus, including the custodians and physical plant workers and clerks, secretaries and so forth, who are in fundamentally in the same position. I recognized that the things that had excited me about history were some of the things in the history of my region that had gotten me in the academy in the first place.

KW: The nominating letter mentioned that under your leadership the chapter increased its membership over 200 percent.

JT: Yes, we're still we're still rather small as a percentage of the entire pool of employees. Union membership is chronically low in Florida, but it is better than it was several years ago. I think that we're in a special position so that our membership percentage, which is about 1/5th of the possible members, is pretty good considering Florida workers make less than almost all their counterparts in the rest of the nation. And we don't have agency fee here, so there are no mandatory dues. If you don't join the union,

you don't pay anything, but you still get all of the benefits, so that prevents people from joining the union. (LAUGHS) They still get all the benefits, and they don't . . .

KW: They don't have to pay and they still get the benefits?

JT: Right.

KW: Ahh.

JT: That's another reason our membership is low.

KW: So I would think for one percent they would join up--but you are saying if they can get the benefits, why even give the one percent?

JT: Exactly.

KW: This "no mandatory dues" problem probably cuts across all disciplines. Are there any differences in activism in different disciplines?

JT: Well, I tell you, this is an interesting topic. My first impression was that my colleagues in the humanities, and I consider history as part of the humanities, were not as serious about organizing their colleagues in the sciences. I assumed that there had to be a special effort to organize the sciences because they are culturally disinclined to become union members because they typically work for corporations and they are not as interested in public service as educators and humanities people are. However, I was wrong about that. My good friend and fellow co-president Erica Gubrium is a botanist. She's been working on a history of GAU and discovered that the founding members of our organization were scientists and engineers. The assumption that the sciences are not organizable or that they don't want to join the union is patently false at UF. In fact, they were the people who founded our chapter.

There's a simple explanation for why sciences are our fastest growing union membership. Workers in the sciences are without a doubt the most exploited workers. They spend more time in the labs performing unremunerated labor; they spend more time working on projects that are unrelated to their dissertations than any other group of graduate students without a doubt. So they are in the best position to realize that they need to work collectively.

KW: Do you require any special organizing activities for the different disciplines?

JT: We've never used any special tactics to organize different disciplines. In fact it's been just the opposite. We've always been a union in which you are going to meet people from other departments on this campus. What is attractive about our organization is that you get to meet people from other disciplines. And it's the only way to make the university a real university in the sort of interdisciplinary sense. Almost every member would agree that his/her research and teaching and sense of what the university is has been expanded by being a part of GAU because of the interdisciplinarity. I get to meet people from chemistry, English, and botany. These are people that I would never come across if I were just to remain a history graduate and if I were not a union member.

KW: Across all disciplines, what problems do graduate student employee activism face?

JT: Well, the fundamental problem is that our colleagues, the faculty, are not supportive of unionism in general or of activism. And the tendency of faculty, especially supervisors, is to focus on your career and professionalism and where you are headed in your research. Teaching is under-emphasized; teaching is not rewarded. Becoming involved in politics to improve your workplace is not rewarded. It's only very

recently that some faculty have begun to recognize the work that the union does. And I commend them for that, but it took a long time to get to that point, and I think that's true in every department, in every discipline. The graduate coordinators, the graduate supervisors, the single question that they ask you constantly is not "How goes the union?" The question is "How goes your dissertation?" or "How goes your career?" That's the only real concern that many of them have. So, since you're not rewarded it's difficult to do so.

KW: How about relations to the graduate student activism to larger community activism?

JT: That's a great question. In the last two or three years in Gainesville, especially, we've seen crossover activism that is unlike anything I've ever seen or read about before. I like to say that Seattle is simply a popular manifestation of something that is really going on at a lot of places and has been going on for awhile. You know, we have people in our own organization that are very active with Campus NOW, the National Organization for Women. In fact, the president of Campus NOW is one of the most active union members. She is involved in feminist activities throughout the county, and in fact they're up in Washington right now at the Women's Rights March, the Reproductive Rights March.

We spend a lot of time working and coordinating with other unions like AFME and AFL-CIO. We try to show up at each other's activities and marches. The best activism, the best links we've made, have come through our local civic media center. It's a non-profit press, or a non-profit organization that has become a meeting point, an intersection, for unions and environmentalists and student peace actions, anti-sledge shot activists. When you go to events now, you look around and it's not clear that there's one organization that is dominant. There are GAU people, there are NOW people, there are GREENS, there are older activists from the community who have been here 10, 20, 30 years sometimes. There are academic activists, there are working people, there are mothers and fathers and families at these things. These people come from all different walks of life. The activism here in town is not so clearly labor activism or radical activism or marching or protesting; it's just kind of a mix of everything because of the crossover.

KW: This is exciting. (LAUGHS). You're part of something much larger.

JT: Right, and at first there was some criticism in our own organization about the resources and time we were spending with other groups, with the labor party, or with the healthcare campaign that we just participated in. However, we've been very active in helping people get elected to municipal and county offices. But I think what it has done for us has really energized us and it's come back to us hundred-fold. We owe something to those other activists groups that we can never repay. They have been able to pull us away from the ivory tower and see that our issues really are universal and global.

We don't have any business sticking to ourselves and fighting just for ourselves. What we really need to do is help each other out. The best manifestation of that has been the social interaction. When you go, when you go out for fun in the evenings, you see people from all these different groups; no matter where you go or what cafe you're in, you can always talk to or always ask someone how their project is going, how their protest went. It's very energizing to know that you can always live and breathe this activism when you're out on the town or in the library or at the civic media center. It's quite a bit of fun.

KW: My undergraduate activism experiences were similar. We want to meet people like ourselves, and we want to date people like ourselves and . . .

JT: Exactly. And, that can't be emphasized enough. Activism really can't be just institutional or political. Without the social component, and without making friends for life, it's not going to last at all.

KW: Yeah, I wholeheartedly agree. Let me get a little more abstract here. This is one of my editor's questions. What do you see as the general problems of coming to consciousness?

JT: Well, there are two main problems for graduate assistants or for people in the academy. One is overcoming the tendency for professionalism and careerism. It's odd because so many of our disciplines are devoted to social interaction or globalism; political science, for example, now takes these global perspectives, so does history. And yet as individuals, I think most teaching and research assistants at UF largely are looking out for themselves. And until someone has an experience with the union or with their bosses and the administration that can kind of twist them out of that mode of thinking, it is very difficult to get through to people. I, in fact, think that almost all of the people that join our union have done so after having some kind of experience like that. Until someone experiences the physical and financial pain of being a graduate worker, there isn't going to be any kind of discussion or pamphlet or flier that you can give them what will convince them to come over.

And the other problem too, if I can speak abstractly, is the myth of progress. Right? People in the academy always think that they're, even if they are not making a lot of money right now, they think that they are part of an upwardly mobile cadre. They think they're moving into better and better positions as they get themselves further and further into debt, and they're eventually going to break out into this job, and they're going to have this really nice salary and tenure and so forth, but everything we know tells us that that's not true. More and more people are realizing that. More and more people see their friends and their fellow workers not making it or making it in jobs with heavy, heavy teaching loads with low pay and public schools and so forth, in public higher education schools. More people are realizing that the academy doesn't provide the last best job in America; it provides cheap labor for the degree mill. So they are experiencing that pain that I am talking about that they need, and they are experiencing that through others, too, and that is helping us out a lot. That's helping us raise consciousness. I don't know if that answers your questions or not.

KW: Yes, it does. Ouch. Very much, in many ways that I didn't necessarily expect. Students look forward to their careers so much; they really don't expect the disappointment in the job market or competition from adjunct labor, especially in the field of composition where I'm at.

JT: Yeah, and you know, UF brags about having avoided the adjunct model all the time. That's its big selling point. We don't have adjuncts here.

KW: Really?

JT: We don't have that many. But the way they've done that is with cheap graduate labor.

KW: Oh.

JT: We have 3000 graduate assistants right now, and 1700 faculty. And since we are a research institution, the faculty don't teach as much as they do at other schools. So the 1700 faculty are sometimes teaching one or two classes a semester, if that. But really in some departments, especially in English, I would say well over half, sometimes three-quarters, of the teaching is done by GAs. So here the faculty--the junior faculty is not even competing with adjuncts, they are competing with graduate assistants. They may not see that or it's not so obvious because they're still the students to them. There would certainly be a lot more junior track jobs here if we had half the number of GAs.

KW: That's a slippery situation because on the one hand you can say don't have adjuncts, but you have the graduate students. Students need to see how the inequities are set up in different institutions.

JT: Right. Right. A lot of us teach at the local community college. We have one of the largest community colleges in the United States here, Santa Fe Community College. And a lot of us teach at our alma maters after we achieve a certain degree status, so we're really, and we do, a lot of graduate assistants have their

own courses even though they are still called GAs, but you're right. This is a very unique workplace here. UF is unlike any other.

KW: So in some ways you really, even more than other places, need activism to point out how things are just slippery or a little misguided in some ways. You really do need an alternative voice.

JT: Yes, because Florida is the kind of state that it is--we have some really serious public relations problems that I think maybe some other people don't have in other states. The anti-union culture here is pretty bad. I'm told it's bad elsewhere, but I just don't think I've heard any examples that compare to ours. We have a bill that's making its way through the house and senate, the state house and senate right now, that would prohibit the use of voluntary dues deductions to support union chapters. They are saying that it would be illegal to voluntarily pay dues into a union from your paycheck. It's part of the "paycheck protection" movement that is taking place across the United States, but no one's seen anything like this; Florida legislators have gone out of their way to make it difficult for unions to be here.

KW: Can you tell me a little about the "Paycheck Protection" Movement?

JT: In many states, business and conservative groups would like to kill unions once and for all. One way to do that is to break the bank. Since unions rely entirely on union dues for their organization and their staffing and oftentimes for their lobbying efforts, if you make it so that people can't pay union out of their paychecks--so that they actually have to write a check or give cash to their unions--well, you can see how it's going to be very difficult to keep people in the unions. Most people live month to month, and they need the option of the voluntary deduction on their paychecks to pay their union dues.

KW: Well, the government and business like direct deposit and direct withdrawal, so why are they trying to prevent it for the unions? (LAUGHS)

JT: (LAUGHS) Well, that's my point. And this would be a pretty effective way to kill it. We don't make that many dues. If we had to go collect checks individually from people, or if we had to rely on our members to mail in their checks or to take money out that they've already been given in the bank, I just don't think that we'd be able to do that.

And the other thing that they are trying to do to "protect the paycheck" is they're saying that if you do pay dues, those dues cannot be used for lobbying for organizing for public action or anything that doesn't have to do with contract enforcement or bargaining. So, for example, I just made a trip to Tallahassee to try to convince our legislature not to pass some of these laws, and that would be forbidden; I would be unable to do that. I would be unable to collectively represent a group of workers at my campus or in my physical plant, if I were a physical plant worker. I would be unable to do that if this legislation passes.

KW: You have some people that are after you.

JT: Yes. Yes, Florida is under attack, and I should explain this, it's related the recent presidential election, and this may interest you.

KW: Yeah.

JT: What happened was that the unions here, is that the Florida Educational Association--the umbrella union for all educators in Florida--recently merged. We're the largest union in Florida right now. I would say that we are the largest voting block except probably for the retired persons. The Florida Educational Association is an umbrella organization that has all K-12, higher ed, library, staff, everyone like that. It's an AFL-CIO union. But it's a coalition, a coalition of AFP, AFL-CIO, and NEA--all sorts of unions. Very, very big, and it's coming into its own as a voting block. And that organization along with the AFL-CIO really got out the vote in Florida for the presidential election, so in some ways unions and activists are

responsible for the illegitimacy of our current president because we made the vote so close, even with all of their cheating. (LAUGHS).

So, what happened was when Florida Republicans got the Supreme Court in Bush vs. Gore, which basically gave the presidency to George Bush, when they saw that they had a partisan Supreme Court, they started going ahead with attacks on public and state employees, paycheck protection, anti-union laws, and the reason that they needed the Bush vs. Gore decision was because all of the things they are doing right now will be fought out in the high court.

Does the state have the right to control their workers? To deny them the rights of federal workers? And right now, the Republicans know that they have a Supreme Court that will say yes. They have a Supreme Court that will grant state's rights over worker's rights. We're--I'm a state worker. I work for Florida, and so do most educators in the state, so you need a state's-rights Supreme Court in place to be able to pass the kinds of laws that they are passing right now. This is all tied up with the presidential election and with the Supreme Court decision. That--those things gave Republicans here the green light to go ahead try and crush our union. Most all of the unions here are state workers or public worker unions.

KW: Where do you see your work going in the future? Sounds like it's cut out for you.

JT: I am torn between staying in the academy as an instructor and researcher and going into organized labor or some other kind of organized activism. Because I'm trying to finish my dissertation right now, I'm at a crossroads I guess. I've seen three or four GAU activists from across the state move on to very, very promising organizing careers. I would love to do that. But, I'm interested in the academy as a workplace that needs to be reformed and to be able to stay in that academy and reform it, I'm convinced that I need to finish my Ph.D. and to work in the academy. So it's a catch-22 because in order to be in the academy you have to discipline yourself and take the time to be an academic and in so doing you always must deny yourself the time that it takes to be an activist. I've been lucky to be able to manage the two so far, but I'm coming to a point where one or the other is going to give. I'm not sure exactly how to handle that right now. But I just hope that events and my comrades will help guide me toward the decision because I am rather unsure about it right now.

KW: Is there anything you'd like our readers at *Workplace* to know?

JT: Yes. I think that it's for people in other places like Florida or at other oppressive institutions like UF to know that as bad as it looks, and as little progress as one makes, it's still very important for us to continue to build our communities and to continue coalition with local activists even if it costs us our careers, even if it costs us time that we spend with our students in the lab. It's so much more important to keep the academy alive and the teaching workplace functioning for us as for students. It's so much more important to do that than to finish something up for our careers or our individual lives. Because pretty soon it may be that there is no academy, that there is no public school, and if we don't have those places, then there'll be no point in doing research and teaching. Radical teaching and radical research is fine, but if there's no workplace there to do it in, if there's no workplace that belongs to us to do it in, then that will all be a moot point. So I would just encourage people to know that no matter how bad it is, you have to keep going, and you have to build those social ties that will allow you to stay involved in politics and give you energy.

Katherine Wills, The University of Louisville

Profile of James Thompson:

James Thompson, a native South Texan, is currently a PhD candidate and Teaching Associate in the Department of History at the University of Florida. Thompson became interested in teaching at the university level while studying at Texas A & M--Kingsville (TAMUK) for his undergraduate degree. After earning his M. A. in History from the University of Akron, Thompson left for UF to pursue the Ph.D., but he jumped at an offer to teach one summer at his alma mater in South Texas. The experience was eye-opening for Thompson; talk about intransigent remedial students and 'cultural barriers' seemed to be a cover for avoiding real issues--poorly remunerated instructors and staff, a pedagogy uninformed by local contexts, and a virtual absence of activism, organizing, and alternative media in a university town with 6,000 students.

While teaching at TAMUK, UF, and at Santa Fe Community College (Gainesville) Thompson has tried to integrate his academic research interests with teaching and organizing. His dissertation, "Making Coffee: American Empire and Consumption Before the Cold War," takes new approaches to the history of commodities, consumer culture, and empire. In it he asserts that a transnational regime of entrepreneurs, diplomats, and statesmen organized cultural production and commodity exchange to foment modernist state-building and imperial expansion in the Americas. Thompson says that familiarity with basic theory and the ability to write analytical essays are the fundamental goals of his pedagogy. As a teacher, he much prefers that students leave the classroom asking questions and a little confused, rather than sensing they have achieved closure on a topic or issue.

His most active experience has been in various union officer positions. Thompson joined Graduate Assistants United (UFF-FEA/AFL-CIO) in 1997 and was immediately convinced of the critical role that organized labor would have to play in winning his state back from the anti-labor, anti-academic, and anti-activist Bush regime. From 1999 to 2001 Thompson served as co-president for GAU. During 2000-2001 negotiations with the Board of Regents, James served as Chief Negotiator for the GAU chapters at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, University of South Florida, and University of Florida. With little leverage and an ultimately meaningless arbitration system for public employees, Thompson says that GAU bargaining teams have nonetheless managed to extract significant gains from management. Although lobbying efforts have been difficult during Florida's recent political evisceration, Thompson has recently traveled to the Statehouse to try to improve funding for the graduate sector.

As co-president of GAU (along with Erika Gubrium), James has served as a link between the academic labor community and local organizers. Under his leadership, and with the help of an expanded union activist cadre, GAU established multiple liaison and volunteer projects with organizations working through Gainesville's Civic Media Center (CMC). The "Seattle" phenomenon is not localized to historically progressive cities, nor is it a recent phenomenon. According to Thompson, the local membership and activist lists for NOW, AFSCME, GAU, the CMC, the Labor Party, the Just Health Care Campaign, and a host of other organizations overlap so much that it would not make sense to speak of anything less than "a movement culture" in the Gainesville community. Especially rewarding for Thompson is the recent political activism by some of his students. Reform candidates have been challenging anti-youth laws and completed a record voting drive in 2000 that saw 4,500 young people register for the first time. A reform party has also challenged the status quo in the richly endowed student government on campus, adding tenants rights, anti-sweatshop proposals, and open-government proposals to its initiatives.