

## Friends and unions don't mix

### I know the misery that ending secret ballots will cause

By RONALD L. TROWBRIDGE Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle

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If the U.S. Congress succeeds in its push next year to end secret ballots in union elections — paying back Big Labor for its truckloads of financial contributions and personnel during the last presidential campaign — countless workers' lives will become nightmares, pitting friends against friends. I know the hard way.

Some years ago, I crossed a faculty picket line at a large university — the only faculty member out of several hundred professors to cross. Every fiber in my body opposed the strike, and I was pathologically unable to not cross. The nightmare that followed was the most stressful experience in my life, save for the cancer and death of my wife.

On my first crossing, I was met and surrounded by my colleagues of 14 years. But they were now transformed into characters whose behavior I did not recognize. These were my friends with whom I had conversed about Shakespeare, had invited into my home and had drunk wine with. I had known them as Ph.D., pipe-smoking listeners of Mozart and readers of Jane Austen.

Right before the strike I encountered two arguments. One, if I couldn't out of principled disagreement honor the strike on the picket line, would I simply stay home? No, I said, because that would be de facto support of the strike.

Two, since I would be a recipient of any gains achieved by union-management negotiations, I was morally obliged to join the union. I countered this by pointing out that since their faculty salaries had been significantly raised by Michigan's Republican governor and Republican legislature, weren't they therefore morally obliged to become Republicans?

As for my professorial friends, Frank screamed to me down the pathway filled with students, "You a\*\*\*\*\*!" Walter said he was going to take a picture of my crossing the line and show it to people, hoping that I would get hurt.

Donald said to me in the crowded faculty lunchroom, "There's Trowbridge. No, he's not a scab; he's an oozing, running sore." Laughter erupted. Sheila called me a "scab," with a scowling, mean face. She really meant it.

Jay, my telephone mate and one I had taken in as a guest at my summer cottage, was so red-faced with anger at me that he yelled, "That's it, Trowbridge, I am never again going to answer your telephone!"

The striking professors would sometimes latch on to students going to my classes, directing them to pass on certain epithets to me, such as "Up yours," "Scab," "Give him the finger." My students did so, with laughter and anger aimed

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at the strikers. Students had paid tuition, but were getting nothing for it.

Strikers were seeking an agency shop, which would require non-union members to pay a fee commensurate with dues. When Gene, a white-haired Southern gentleman with proper etiquette and precise diction always, learned of this agency shop provision, he exclaimed to me in the crowded lunchroom, "Goody, goody, goody, goody."

I had trouble eating and sleeping because I knew that everyday my strident friends would be waiting for me outside the classroom door. All this anger for one lone picket crosser.

Shortly after the illegal strike ended (because of a student's lawsuit), I was offered a vice presidency at Hillsdale College and took it. Though having been at this university for 14 years, there were no formal farewells, no goodbye parties, no nothing — not a single person came by my office to say goodbye.

If Congress passes the "card check" proposal, millions of non-union members will be stunned when even some of their friends turn on them. The pressure on employees to sign the cards will be intense, personal and traumatic.

In all states, including Texas, elimination of secret voting will bring about two deleterious changes: internecine battles among warring employee camps and increased economic demands on employers. Imagine the proliferation of United Auto Workers-like unions throughout Texas.

*Trowbridge is a visiting research fellow at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a nonprofit, free-market research institute based in Austin.*

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