



Representing Wayne State Faculty and Academic Staff

NEWSBRIEFS

Office: 577-1750 Fax: 313-577-8159
aaupaft@wayne.edu
<http://www.aaup-aft.org>

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Jan Thompson Retires

Thanks from us All!

The AAUP-AFT Office will not be the same with the retirement last month of Jan Thompson. As the union's Executive Director for the past 33 years, Jan has served us well as the day-to-day fixer and institutional memory of the organization. For many members, she was the "voice" of the union, the one you called with questions about the contract or obscure matters of university policy.

Jan was uniformly respected by those who dealt with her for her willingness to address how the Collective Bargaining Agreement might apply to a bargaining unit member's particular situation. She was an endless source of knowledge and expertise in this area, and she gave a sympathetic ear to every caller to the office. Many members have benefited from her wisdom and advice.

She had special knowledge because she was a member of every negotiating team over the last 20 years. Our Academic Staff Grievance Officer, Lothar Spang, a long-time union activist and a member of a number of negotiating teams, put it well: "Jan was at

the heart of every negotiation, and, therefore, was our collective memory. She kept us all focused and, even when we got into arguments within a committee, I knew that the positions she espoused were always based on her commitment to the interests of the members."

Our Faculty Grievance Officer, Anca Vlasopolos, also an experienced union negotiator, added that Jan always made an enormous contribution to the bargaining process: "Jan's prodigious memory and notes of all the discussions at the negotiating

table were invaluable. When we ended up with contract language, which is by definition a process of compromise that may later be subject to interpretation, having Jan's notes and her instant recall of precisely what was agreed upon saved us enormous effort and some embarrassment. Her historical memory will be much missed. ... Her accurate and clear notes have been invaluable in grievances when we needed to argue before an arbitrator about the meaning of particular language and the arguments on both sides that produced it."

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Steve Babson, editor of *Newsbriefs* and past coordinator for membership recruitment, worked closely with Jan during the Fair Share campaign. “I was always struck by Jan’s capacity to recall the details of ancient grievances and the people involved. Especially during the Fair Share recruitment effort, I could call her and ask for background on the non-members and members in almost any department or college and Jan would usually know something about them, sometimes going back several decades.”

In Jan’s role as Executive Director, she was the hands-on administrator who managed the expansion of membership and the complex organizational changes the union experienced as a result of the Fair Share agreement. Together with Teresa Austin, our office secretary, she kept the legal and contractual process on track through four stages of recruitment that more than doubled our membership. It would have been very much more difficult to manage without her.

Jan was active in the First Unitarian-Universalist Church, in campus organizations, and was a founder of the Gay and Lesbian Caucus.

“Jan was a foundation stone of this union,” as President Charles Parrish sums it up. “She experienced the good times and the bad and she lent unflinching support to the AAUP-AFT throughout. She was hard-working, modest and self-effacing. When we wanted to give her a retirement reception, she refused to hear of it. However, we want her, and Cindy, to know that she was much appreciated by all of us and that we wish them every good fortune in their new retirement life in New Mexico.”

Jan is replaced by Michelle Fecteau, a member of the AAUP-AFT Executive Board and a member of the teaching staff of Wayne State’s Labor Studies Center for over ten years.

A Letter in Response to the Article on the Financial Aid Office

[*Newsbriefs* welcomes feedback in response to articles. Letters that address matters of policy will be reprinted by mutual agreement.]

After reading the “Quadruple Jeopardy” article in the November issue of the AAUP/AFT *Newsbriefs* I feel compelled to throw my two cents into the mix.

The article rightly, I believe, criticizes the university for trying to run the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid (OSFA) “on the cheap.” OSFA provides a critical service to students. Their efforts often make the difference in a student’s decision to attend the university. To try and “make do” with as few staff as possible only serves to assure that students will receive marginally acceptable service at best. The resultant service complaints, coupled with (or due to) the lack of Financial Aid Officers in the office, certainly is a potent recipe for low morale.

That being said, it seems to me that Cathy Kay, the interim director of OSFA, was unfairly blamed for

many of the problems that beset the office. Cathy took on the interim assignment as the director and watched as the director’s job was downgraded from a Director IV to a Director III position. Despite the position being downgraded, Ms. Kay applied for the permanent position when it was posted. She did not get the position. She was told that the search failed to produce an acceptable candidate and that the position would be reposted. She was asked to continue in the interim position until a new director could be brought on board. Despite the personal and professional disappointment this must have caused her, Ms. Kay agreed to soldier on until her replacement could be identified.

It is rarely reported that the financial aid director has, for the last couple of years, reported to an Executive Director of Financial Aid. If there is a financial aid position that oversees the director of the office, why isn’t that person held accountable for at least some of the problems identified in your article?

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Congress Acts on Student Loan Rates, Minimum Wage, and Drug Costs

Steve Babson, Information Officer

The newly installed Democratic majority in the U.S. House of Representatives took action in January to lower student loan rates, raise the minimum wage, and negotiate lower drug costs for Medicare patients. Republicans in the House split their vote on several of these bills, while Republican opposition in the Senate has delayed final action on measures addressing drug costs and the minimum wage.

Student Loans

Dozens of Republicans joined with the new Democratic majority in the U.S. House of Representatives on Jan. 17 to pass the "College Student Relief Act" by a margin of 376-71. The bill cuts the current interest rate on subsidized undergraduate student loans in half, from 6.8 percent to 3.4 percent. Implemented in stages over the next five years, the lower interest rates will help an estimated 5.5 million needs-based students attend college. Three-out-of-four of these students come from families making less than the median income.

Senate hearings on the measure are scheduled for this month. Senator Ted Kennedy has promoted a similar measure in a broader proposal, "The Student Debt Relief Act," that would also raise the maximum Pell grant from \$4,050 to \$5,100 and reduce loan rates that parents pay for their children's college tuition to 4.25%. House Democratic leaders support similar measures.

According to Senator Kennedy's web site, the cost of a college education has tripled in the last twenty years, raising a substantial barrier to higher education for many qualified students.

The AFT lobbied heavily on behalf of the House measure. "Instead of giving tax breaks to the rich, Congress is rightly supporting the needs of working families," AFT president Edward J. McElroy said of the student loan vote. The lower rates "will open countless educational opportunities for those who need our support most, and it will promote a healthier future for our country."

It will cost roughly \$6 billion to subsidize lower interest rates on student loans over the next five years. To cover this cost, the House bill raises fees for participating loan institutions and reduces the guaranteed return that banks get when students default. By way of comparison, the cost of the war in Iraq currently averages between \$8 and \$10 billion *a month*.

Minimum Wage

The House has also taken the lead in passing a bill to raise the federal minimum wage over the next two years from \$5.15 an hour to \$7.25. The current minimum wage has not been increased for ten years and only generates \$10,700 a year for full-time workers—\$6,000 below the official poverty line for a family of three. If signed into law, the new minimum would increase the wages for an estimated 5.6 million workers, generating an annual income of \$15,000 (still below the poverty line).

The Senate also voted February 1 to increase the minimum wage to \$7.25, but Republicans refused to support the measure without adding business tax breaks totaling \$8 billion. A threatened Republican filibuster to block a bill without the tax breaks finally forced Democrats to accept this trade off. Leaders from the House and Senate will now have to find a way to reconcile the two bills.

During the Senate impasse, 28 Republicans voted to actually abolish the minimum wage. They might have first considered the words of Martin Luther King, who frequently spoke in favor of raising the federal benchmark: "Dignity demands a job, and a paycheck that lasts through the week."

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**“Congress Acts on ...”
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Drug Costs

As part of its ambitious early agenda, the House also passed a bill that requires Medicare to negotiate with drug companies for lower prescription drug prices. The measure attracted substantial Republican support, and hundreds of AFT “e-Activists” contacted their members of Congress and urged them to back the measure.

A bill that would require the secretary of Health and Human Services to negotiate lower prescription drug prices for Medicare beneficiaries is expected to come to the Senate floor this month. The Bush Administration and leading Republicans oppose the measure.

Sources: Associated Press, Economic Policy Institute, AFT On-Line, New York Times, AFL-CIO Legislative Alerts, Office of Senator Kennedy

**"A Letter from Mike Wood"
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I have known Ms. Kay for a number of years and always have found her to be an informed, approachable, and extremely competent representative of the financial aid office. Your article, it seems to me, fails to provide an accurate depiction of the management structure of OSFA. As a consequence, Ms. Kay is unfairly saddled with the responsibility for all of the ills that currently beset the office. If there is in fact a “management crisis” in OSFA then the entire management structure, and not just Cathy Kay, ought to be evaluated.

Mike Wood, Ed.D.
University Counselor
Graduate Admissions

Wayne State University Chapter

AAUP-AFT

5057 Woodward Ave., Ste. 3001
Detroit, MI 48202-4050

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