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Morehouse and the Academic Labor Movement

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BY ANDREW J. DOUGLAS

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Once upon a time a Morehouse professor tried to unionize the faculty. Walter Chivers, the current namesake of the school's cafeteria, was a professor of sociology at Morehouse College from 1925 until his retirement in 1968. He was also a labor organizer. And by 1947, he was the president of Local 746P of the influential United Public Workers of America. The UPWA, an affiliate of the



Congress of Industrial Organizations, was a militant “red” union and the most racially integrated in the CIO. Its leadership was outspoken against US imperialism. Paul Robeson was a key ally.

The UPWA—as well as its predecessor, the United Federal Workers of America (UFWA)—was active at several Black colleges and universities. In 1946, the UPWA organized the faculty at Hampton. A year later, building on the UFWA’s earlier success in organizing librarians in the nation’s capital, members of the Howard University faculty voted 130-1 in favor of representation by the UPWA. Other unions were active at Black colleges in the 1930s and 1940s, as well. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT)—a broader teachers’ union that, under the leadership of Mary Church Terrell and others, began its first organizing efforts in higher education at Howard in 1918—sought to organize faculty at West Virginia State, Wilberforce, Lincoln, Fisk.

We forget just how pro-labor the Morehouse faculty was in those days. Economist Brailsford Brazeal was “the leading scholarly authority on the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and a proponent of global labor solidarity,” writes historian [Matthew Nichter](#). Brazeal also served on the executive board of the legendary Highlander Folk School, which forged key alliances between the labor and civil rights movements. Morehouse president Benjamin Mays, philosophy professor Samuel Williams, and religion professor Lucius Tobin, Nichter notes, were deeply involved with the National Religion and Labor Foundation. George Kelsey, one of Martin Luther King Jr.’s most influential religion professors, argued at one point that the “C.I.O. is doing more toward the creation of democratic, intergroup living than any branch or perhaps all branches of organized religion in America.”

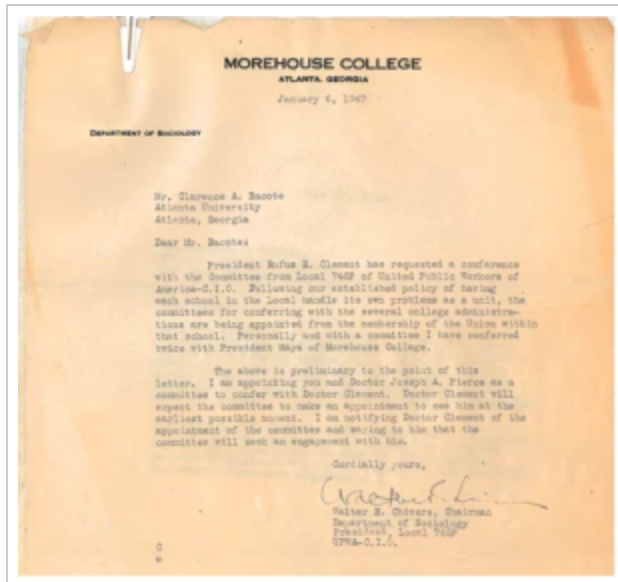
Still, the history of the academic labor movement at Morehouse or any of the Black colleges in Atlanta remains buried in the archives. One needs time and a far more generous travel and research budget to uncover the whole story. But given labor’s striking resurgence in [higher education](#) over the past several years, including successful and ongoing [union drives](#) at several private universities in the South, we ought to consider what the labor movement is and can be at Morehouse and other HBCUs. In 2017, Morehouse launched its International Comparative Labor Studies [program](#), the first and only labor studies program at an HBCU, with an explicit aim of strengthening ties between the campus community and organized labor. And now that the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has [affiliated with the AFT](#), members of our Morehouse AAUP advocacy chapter, established in 2018, are officially union members. There are now AAUP-AFT chapters at 19 [HBCUs](#).

The [AAUP](#), for its part, has an interesting if similarly unsung history at the Atlanta University Center. At Spelman College in the early 1960s, the AAUP [defended](#) a young Howard Zinn, then chair of the history department, after he was unceremoniously fired for his progressive politics. Before that, in 1937, W. E. B. Du Bois played a key role in establishing the first AAUP chapter at Atlanta University. Professors Ira de Augustine Reid, Samuel Nabrit, Mercer Cook, and Rayford Logan, among others, were all [charter members](#). Records indicate that the Atlanta University chapter sought to address the faculty’s role in [shared governance](#). But throughout its early decades, the AAUP, as a national organization, was concerned with establishing professional standards and promoting academic freedom. The organization was not tethered to the labor movement in any significant way and certainly did not engage in collective bargaining, as it does on many university campuses today (including four HBCUs). It is worth noting also that Du Bois, for his part, [famously resigned](#) from the AAUP in 1945 in protest of the organization’s practice of holding national meetings in segregated hotels.

While those days are behind us, there is still some question about how the most pressing issues facing HBCUs fit into the thrust of the broader organization. At the AAUP’s summer meeting in July, hundreds of faculty delegates from all over the country met to discuss the state of the profession, brush up on organizing skills, and strategize about next steps. Many were rightly focused on conservative attacks on affirmative action and diversity initiatives, the “CRT” and “anti-woke” culture wars, the fight to protect tenure, academic freedom, and free speech on campus. Delegates from HBCUs, myself included, participated in a panel discussion where the focus was trained more squarely on shared governance—how to promote our institutions’ investment in academic programming, how to resist an encroaching corporate business model that relies increasingly on the exploitation of adjunct labor, how to ensure meaningful faculty participation in decisions about budgetary priorities and long-term institutional strategy. The resource-constrained environments at HBCUs have always led to certain kinds of shared governance challenges. It is

perhaps no surprise that while HBCUs make up only three percent of all four-year non-profit institutions of higher education in the US, they account for 19 percent of the schools that have landed on the AAUP [censures and sanctions list](#) over the years.

What emerged from that conference panel on HBCUs was a fairly straightforward conclusion: we cannot expect to improve shared governance at Black colleges and universities, or indeed anywhere in higher education, without a revived and robust academic labor movement.



Walter Chivers discussing union meetings at Morehouse College and Atlanta University. Credit: Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library

Today, established unions such as the AAUP, the AFT, and the National Education Association (NEA) collectively bargain on behalf of faculty members at several public and private HBCUs. The United Campus Workers, an affiliate of the Communications Workers of America (CWA), has announced [a campaign to organize](#) Black colleges and universities. In 2022, part-time and nontenure-track faculty members at Howard, represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), won significant gains following a [credible strike threat](#)—touted at the time as a “historic achievement for improving the lives of teaching faculty and strengthening the Howard community as a whole.”

Still, relatively few HBCUs have recognized unions or even AAUP

advocacy chapters. Florida A&M professor Elizabeth Davenport [reports](#) that while faculty unions are active at more than a third of all nonprofit public and private universities in the US, “less than one-tenth of HBCUs have faculty unions.” Ties between local organizing efforts and national campaigns remain underdeveloped. There is no HBCU representation, for example, among endorsees of the platform of Higher Education Labor United, [the progressive labor coalition](#) launched in 2021 with the aim of building the movement [wall-to-wall](#) and coast-to-coast. Most HBCUs, moreover, are located in Southern “right-to-work” states with [racist labor laws](#) that make unionization very difficult. Many, like Morehouse, are small undergraduate colleges that do not employ graduate student workers and postdoctoral researchers who have led academic labor’s resurgence. And despite their avowed social justice legacies, HBCUs are not immune from union busting. In 2022, the administration at Edward Waters University de-recognized its longtime [faculty union](#), citing the school’s religious affiliation and a Supreme Court ruling that gave the administration legal cover to do so. That action prompted a letter of condemnation from the AAUP’s Committee on Historically Black Institutions and Scholars of Color.

We are, perhaps, at an inflection point in the history of US higher education. All indications point toward the continued ascendancy of the academic labor movement in the coming years. The factors driving this surge are many and complicated and well beyond the scope of this little blog piece. But as struggles over the nature and future of higher education intensify, we might do well to recall what then Atlanta University professor W. E. B. Du Bois said at a speech at Fisk in 1933:

“Two things and only two things are necessary: teachers and students.” The bottom line is that an organized faculty is a stronger faculty, and a stronger faculty makes for stronger students and better schools. In so many ways, our rich institutional histories affirm this fundamental principle. HBCUs, we might say, are well positioned to lean on our past for inspiration and insight on how we build a better future together—a kind of Sankofa energy for a resurgent academic labor movement.

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September 28, 2023 in Collective Bargaining, Faculty. Tags: Andrew Douglas, HBCUs, Morehouse College, organizing

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One thought on “Morehouse and the Academic Labor Movement”



Jennifer Ruth

September 28, 2023 at 3:39 pm

Thank you for this repost. It's a wonderful discussion of where we should look when we need history to teach us how to move forward (Sankofa energy, indeed). A lot of commentators (including myself) have been calling the state legislation against DEI and racial and social justice work in the academy 'the new red scare.' Just a little bit of digging shows how intertwined anticommunism (and anti-labor) and anti-Black racism was during that period (Paul Robeson's testimony to HUAC explains the connections brilliantly). Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick revived an old playbook when he declared his intention to abolish tenure

at a press conference denouncing the UT-Austin faculty senate as “looney Marxists” for passing a resolution defending critical race theory. Tenure is a kind of carve-out from state and market logic, a re-appropriation of the commons. AAUP did a fantastic job building the infrastructure and rationale for tenure/academic freedom during the 20th c and (or but?) collective bargaining and organizing are necessary to fight for the dignity of academic labor moving forward. The labor and civil rights solidarity emblematic of unions in the south in the 30s and 40s provide a model or north star.

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