



## The Rights to Read and Write and to Organize

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Discourse about the organized resistance to today's unprecedented campaigns for unconstitutional book banning and suppression of free speech, on the one hand, and locally-rooted unionization drives, on the other hand, does not acknowledge fundamental common elements of participants in these movements. Resistance to book bans and censorship of curriculum and reading materials in classrooms and libraries, like recent efforts to unionize, are most often locally-based among groups and individuals whose interests align on levels they may not see. These two movements and their disconnect is perhaps nowhere more evident than at America's college and university campuses and their connected environs which may be linked to public employees and support industries from Amazon to Starbucks, where warriors for workplace rights and fighters for free speech and academic freedom are, in fact, often fighting for the same thing but on different fronts.

When examined closely, compelling matters of constitutional rights inseparably intertwine individuals and groups who oppose book bans and restricted curricula and instruction; with graduate and undergraduate students, faculty, staff; and also shift workers in government and private employment. Actual and potential activity simmers and sometimes boils over at the local level. The reasons for the disconnections range from the hierarchical to the historical. Chief among them are poor communications including lack of media coverage; disinterest and sometimes resistance from national professional organizations and larger unions themselves; faculty groups on a number of campuses uninterested in working jointly with students or staff; and administrative resistance.

### Campus Organizing

Despite the continuing lack of communication and coordination, local movement-building is atomized but robust. The terrain of a single institution may include campaigns to organize graduate students, undergraduate student workers, faculty, staff, and librarians, and also local bookstore employees. Connections on multiple levels are seldom recognized, even though they strikingly overlap from the perspective of a social historian who has studied labor and free speech movements. They cry for connections and commonality: genuine coalitions crossing between institutions, but also within institutions to breach lines of class or occupation. Where this collaboration and boundary-breaking are already occurring, popular media does not always accurately reflect it; some isolated reporting and my own conversation with local and state activists tell me about much more inter-union and intra-institutional cooperation than is generally reported.

For one dramatic unintended illustration of my points, see the selective, limited actions of the American Library Association's "'Unite Against Book Bans' Campaign." The greatest number of signatories in this "coalition" is for-profit book publishers. Teachers, professors, civil rights, and free speech groups are underrepresented. The ALA does not support librarians' organizing, not even the brave Texas A&M University librarians' current efforts.

Despite a still tiny number of exceptions at both public and private universities, not only do professors and PhDs more generally resist organization and unionization as inappropriate and beneath their stature. They have been loathe to recognize shared interest and link arms with staff or students. The recent rhetorical bond between the American Association of University Professors and American Federation of Teachers (but not National Education Association) symbolizes both the past and a small crack in the dam. The former's historical contradictory position on faculty organizing and faculty collective action jointly with students or staff shows in its new relationship with one of the two major organizations of school and community college teachers.

Despite basic issues *and* needs in common, and grounds for sympathy *and* support, the national organization education-related groups and the locals organizing are unconnected both rhetorically and in actions on the

ground. Not surprisingly but unnecessarily, they are even more separate from organizing efforts of local Starbucks, Amazon, and civic workers.

## Gaps between Local and Larger

Constitutional, educational, humanitarian, and economic issues link on-campus workers like faculty, students, and staff most directly but they are shared more widely. Unfortunately, these commonalities appear more often in adjacent reports in print columns or online air than in the advocacy or actions of national institutions and organizations. They range from education and library associations to the largest national unions. Consider the American Association of University Professors and American Federation of Teachers (despite their joint advocacy), National Educational Association, American Library Association, Freedom to Read Foundation, PEN America, and the American Civil Liberties Union.

This often jarring gap between the local and the larger is a sign of our difficult times, for better and for worse. It underscores the disjunctions of democracy under attack in its defensive modes. Local autonomy, with the danger of anarchism that would disband institutions and flatten hierarchies that are often necessary for coordinated movement, exemplifies the contradictory promise and limits of localism vs. national organization and movements for widespread equality.

It is also a fascinating (if inexact) repetition of historical battles for free speech over centuries but especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and to a lesser extent in 1940s United States. At that time, union drives and unprecedented strikes from mill to mill rocked the nation. At the same time, the American Association of University Professors was fighting for recognition. Within limits, both triumphed. But both have struggled for survival and power. The two have almost never come together.

What will the 2020s bring? Can we learn from the past? Can we communicate, cooperate, and collaborate to unprecedented degrees? Will the national organizations step up? Will state and federal governments? The Democratic Party? The stakes are greater than ever before. Today's threats and opportunities are both unprecedented.

**Research for this brief are drawn from sources including Jonah Furman's "Who Gets the Bird" newsletter; Katie Barrows and Ethan Miller, "The New Labor Movement is Young, Worker-Led and Winning," In These Times, May 9, 2022; Harvey J. Graff, "Book Banning Past and Present," Against the Current 218 (May-June, 2022): 6-7; Joan W Scott, *Knowledge, Power, and Academic Freedom* (Columbia University Press, 2019); Hank Reichman, *Understanding Academic Freedom* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), and *The Future of Academic Freedom* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019); Jennifer Ruth and Michael Berube, *The Humanities, Higher Education, and Academic Freedom: Three Necessary Arguments* (Palgrave, 2015), and *It's Not Free Speech: Race, Democracy, and the Future of Academic Freedom* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022); and Paul Mattingly, *American Academic Cultures* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).**