The Strike: Post-Mortems

Politics

By Dan Swanson,

WHY DID the graduate student strike fail so abjectly?

Now that the Graduate Student and Teaching Fellow Union appears to have failed to have forced action on any of its demands despite a four-day strike, the post-mortems will be debated over coffee in Lehman Hall and tea in University Hall, and comparisons will be made with last year's healthier version of the Union.

An immediate difference was in Union tactics. Last year's Union work stoppages were preceded by weeks of intensive organizing and proselytizing. This Spring's incarnation of the organization roared in from out of nowhere and called an open-ended strike, leaving its doubtful graduate student colleagues and most undergraduates in the lurch.

The confrontation tactic itself, in addition to the dearth of organizing to implement it, also undermined the Union's position. Last year's actions were one-shot affairs: undergraduates found it much easier to stay away from class for one day instead of joining in a boycott which conceivably could have lasted for weeks. As a consequence, many probably declined to commit themselves to this year's action in any way.

But tactics alone cannot explain why hordes of undergraduates crossed Union picket lines. Events beyond the Union's power also helped sap the organization's effort. Even if the organization had waged an exemplary educational campaign geared to a limited work stoppage, last Spring's success could not have been matched.

The 1972 Union drive was conducted in a politically charged atmosphere in which several highly charged issues were vying for prominence. The Gulf Oil stock dispute and opposition to the bombing escalation in Indochina sparked a mood of general unrest which nicely complemented the Union's efforts--especially because the Union leadership aligned itself with the other efforts.

Activist students had a joyous time cramming all the Spring's demands on placards and posters. Students initially attracted to one of the issues naturally were sympathetic to the others, and a new popular front coalesced briefly which heightened interest in all of its elements.

ON A MORE MUNDANE level, a shift in the Administration's batting order also sapped Union strength. R. Victor Jones, former lead-off man as dean of the GSAS, had helped fuel the initial burst of Union activity last year after an inept performance before a crowd of graduate students.

Jones has since been replaced by Edward T. Wilcox, who is almost his exact opposite. Wilcox, for example, appeared at the Union's first meeting this year, skillfully fielded questions from a hostile audience, and then calmly retired to the rear. By not permitting himself to become an issue in the dispute, Wilcox deprived the Union of one of last year's drawing cards.
John T. Dunlop, the Administration's clean-up batter last year, has been sent up to the big leagues. His pinch-hitter, Franklin L. Ford, denied the Union even minimal gains. Dunlop, a master at the art of unseeming accommodation, this year probably would have made at least minor concessions to the Union. But the intransigent Ford, with his senseless references to 'spring rituals,' has refused to toss even the smallest bone to the Union. Although the strike hardly made such concessions necessary, they would seemingly have cost him nothing and helped to defuse the possibility that the Union may make desperate moves in the future, such as withholding grades.

These factors, however, significant as they are, probably cannot totally account for the markedly different response this time around to the activist quest for support. Students crossing picket lines in droves this year displayed an exasperation with politics probably not seen in large scale around here since the middle sixties. There was a certain impatience, an irritation with activism of any persuasion, a dogged determination to submerge the larger issues to the imperative minutiae of Chem 20 or Ec 10.

We are told Harvard is becoming professionalized, and the law and medical school candidates seemed to prove it last week. No doubt this new attitude of overpowering seriousness can be traced to a still tight job market and the smothering, sluggish prospect of four more years of Nixon politics, but it is frightening nonetheless. One hopes it is a temporary aberration.