

While We Were Sleeping...

The Barbarians Inside The Walls

By Kurt Staudter

Cambridge, MA

Last week contained one of the most memorable moments of my life: A young lady handed me a student ID for Harvard University, and it had my name on it. As I sit here looking at it I'm still amused. Who would have ever thought that I'd be studying at Harvard? Certainly not my teachers in high school where I was a mediocre student at best, and probably not my coworkers at the electric company, but last summer I was invited to take part in the Harvard Trade Union Program which is run through the law school - That's Harvard Law School. There's a lot of pretentious name dropping around here in the halls of the elite. For the next six weeks I will be reporting from inside one of our nation's most prestigious universities as I try to gain an insight into the upcoming fights for working people from a different perspective.

First let me tell you a little about the program, and then I'll go into what I learned this week. Each year since 1947 the HTUP brings together around 40 trade unionists from all over the world and exposes them to the greatest minds in the academic community on subjects important to union leaders and the workforce. My fellow students come from a number of trades and five different countries. Some are here because they were sent by their leaders, others won scholarships from their union, and while most are leaders and executives in their unions, some of the participants are like me and just bring a rank and file perspective to the program. The director, Elaine Bernard, has also brought a unique perspective to the proceedings by not only being one of the most respected labor educators in the country and a PhD, but because her career also included a long stint as a machinist and a union member.

On the first day we registered, got our IDs, settled into our apartments, and then there was a dinner to

meet the faculty and alumni of the program. From that point on the gloves were off and we've been subjected to a grueling schedule of classes and extensive readings at night. Now as much as I wasted my first college experience drinking and carrying on after the dark, and given this is all of my vacation time for half of last year and all of this year, the temptation is there to have some fun in a very exciting town, but I think I'll just confine those activities to the weekend. I'm here to squeeze as much out of this once in a lifetime experience. Oh, one other thing, we're here to, as they say, "Give as good as we get." Part of the magic of this program is that we are to bring our perspective to the largely sheltered academic community. So, here is the condensed version of what I was taught this week:

The first day of classes was on Tuesday, and we were treated to a lecture by Elaine on the history of the program and what the expectations would be for us during our stay. Next we had presentations by the faculty co-chairmen of the program, Richard Freeman one of the leading voices on workplace economics, and Paul Weiler, the Friendly Professor of Harvard Law School and an expert on labor law.

Now I've got to tell you what a thrill it was for me to meet Richard Freeman. I've been seeing references to his work for years, and to see him give a lecture that urged us to scrutinize the information of economists was priceless. In fact, he told us to be very skeptical of economists bearing groundbreaking data. His point was that most sides on any economic debate aren't "straight forward or honorable" about the data they present. Each special interest has their own a"apriori" assumptions they bring to the analysis, and this will always taint the results.

Next up was Paul Weiler, and due to a nerve disorder, he is wheelchair bound and can only speak with the aid of a computer. This took some getting used

to, but his lectures are just laced with the most wonderful humor. His message to us was that the labor laws in the country are our biggest obstacle to improving the lives of working people. He has an eight point plan to improve our labor laws that include among other things making it easier to form unions and larger penalties for employers that misbehave.

David Weil next came to our attention, and as a Boston University economic professor he has been one of the promoters of strategic planning for unions. He has been invited to talk about this subject to unions all around the country. His point was that the business community and government have been doing strategic planning for years and now it's our turn. We were led through an exercise that examined in-depth the PATCO air traffic controllers strike.

Another speaker was the Regional Director of the National Labor Relations Board, Rosemary Pye, and she gave tips on how to file successful complaints with the board. Finally, our day ended with Linda Kaboolian from the Kennedy School of Government and a talk on the public sector challenges to the work we expect our government to do for us, and who does it.

There is just no way that I'll be able to talk about everything we are being exposed to here, but I will tell you that I'm having the time of my life. I can only hope that I come back to Vermont with the key to worker prosperity, and an understanding of the plight of those businesses that will be our partners.

