

Workers, students teach Duke a lesson

By Tim Tyson

DURHAM N.C.

The high school seniors who, along with their parents, toured the grounds of Duke University here this past May saw an archetypal image of the scholarly community: wide lawns, gothic stonework, students with books slung casually from their arms, tweed-jacketed professors. But campus employees at Duke—those working on the loading docks and in the boiler rooms, laundries and bathrooms—were all but invisible.

The students who enroll or come back this fall, however, will learn that, invisible or not, Duke University can no longer overlook the vital role played by such workers. But the Duke workers, members of American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 77—virtually all of them black and most of them women—were not generously granted respect and acknowledgment from corporate boardrooms on high. They won it for themselves through a vigorous and spirited struggle.

Last spring, housekeeping workers at Duke, with take-home salaries running below \$200 a week, challenged and defeated ServiceMaster, an enormous corporation whose annual income exceeds \$1.5 billion.

The Duke fight is not only a good lesson about how determined workers can win even in a period when Southern labor is taking its lumps; it also demonstrates how a university workers' movement led by black women, with strong support from student activists, can emerge victorious.

ServiceMaster is the nation's leading institutional cleaning company, specializing in hospitals, office buildings and schools. It has been convicted twice for firing employees in a racially discriminatory manner and brags in its own promotional literature of its capabilities as a union buster. ServiceMaster's name is derived from the phrase "in service to the Master," which alludes to the putatively Christian philosophy of this monolith. After Duke's contract with ServiceMaster was canceled, one university administrator remarked, "They come off like 'Janitorial Services by Jerry Falwell'—I have no idea why we hired them."

Other administrators might not have such fuzzy memories. Duke signed a contract with ServiceMaster in December 1988 for the management of the school's housekeeping staff. There were several reasons for the move, including a national trend by institutional management to farm out cleaning work to service conglomerates. Although Duke's buildings were immaculate, there was a feeling within the administration that the job could be done more cheaply. Duke's new Capital Campaign, an arguably overambitious endowment effort with a stated goal of \$400 million, put a premium on thrift. ServiceMaster's sales rep had promised to bring down costs. The company is renowned for "low-balling"—offering low initial bids and then raising the price once the institution becomes dependent on its services.

ServiceMaster's opening act at Duke was to call a meeting on a half hour's notice at which employees were notified of their new overseer. Racism and condescension set the tone. "He [the ServiceMaster executive] said the first thing we need to do is to go to the chapel and pray," said one housekeeper. "because, he said, things were going to get rough on us."

"He kept telling us how his sister was a doctor and how much his suits cost, and how we need to better ourselves, shine our shoes and all," one worker reported. "It was 'boys' this and 'girls' that, and we didn't appreciate it one bit.

The barber of servile: The ServiceMaster man, employees noticed, was particularly obsessed with their hair. "He said, 'if you come in here with that hair all fried, dyed and laid to the side in those jeri-curls, you are wearing a hair net.'" This decree was expanded to include a strict prohibition against hats. Hats and hair nets perform the same function, of course, but hair nets are a traditional mark of servitude. How hats might interfere with mopping floors and scrubbing toilets was never explained.

Hair, however, was not the most outrageous expression of racism in the new dress code. Each of the workers I interviewed repeated ServiceMaster's contention that "beige and brown don't look good on black people" and that new blue uniforms would be in order. "The way I see it," one woman said bluntly, "they're trying to take us back to slavery, this ServiceMaster."

Submission and discipline were also on the agenda. ServiceMaster told its new workers that their performance would be monitored by company observers dressed as students and faculty. "We don't know who they are," said one employee with 14 years service. "Are we that bad of people that they have to spy on us?" The evident purpose of the anonymous spying was intimidation since, as one worker noted, "with this type of work, all they have to do is check our areas and see if they are clean."

The most troublesome rumor for many workers was ServiceMaster's intention to create a work shift starting at 2 a.m., an effort to keep cleaning people invisible as well as silent.

"It does something to you—it ages you, working that graveyard shift," said one experienced janitor. For workers with children, a 2 a.m. shift presents obvious problems. In a workforce that is 85 percent women, there is also danger in having to work in isolated areas of a university plagued by rape and assault. "They don't care about that," said one woman. "What do they care about us? Nothing."

Workers began to talk about changing their situation. They first notified their union business manager, who was strangely unresponsive. Then workers began to recruit students to their cause, and an awkward but dynamic coalition was formed.

The workers soon discovered that students enjoy special freedoms that make them excellent allies. As everyone who has ever had a job knows, freedom of

speech has a way of stopping at the time clock. Students, however, have a special, temporary leeway to freely express themselves, a fact the workers used to great advantage.

Because several of the most able and energetic activist student leaders were African-Americans, it was difficult for the Duke administration to split the worker-student alliance along obvious class lines. It was also plain that Duke was sensitive to the negative image it had in Durham's black community and did not want to add fuel to that particular fire. There was fear in some quarters that retaining ServiceMaster would induce black students to carry out their explicit threat to "tell it like it is" at minority recruitment time.

The alliance between workers and students was mutually beneficial; students who participated learned much about the real world in the struggle against ServiceMaster, and friendships were forged among people who had not always seen each other as full human beings.

The infernal paternal: The student-worker alliance faced unavoidable difficulties. There was no way for students to speak out for workers without seeming paternalistic. This was especially true because the students were mostly white and the workers were virtually all black. At Duke, the biggest reason for the success of the coalition was that student activists stayed in constant touch with their worker allies and listened attentively each step of the way. Political skills and savvy were important, but the bottom line was remembering whose



fight this was.

Publicity and protest from the ranks forced the union leadership to take a tougher stand. This pressure made it clear that the union was more than just one or two leaders. Shop stewards and the rank and file initiated and led the fight. In the end, Local 77 officials came around and behaved responsibly and capably.

After two weeks of public outcry by workers and students, direct communication between the Duke administration and the workers came at last. Students arranged a meeting with President H. Keith H. Brodie in late March. They convinced him to come to a nearby seminar room where several of the workers waited. The workers then said their piece, recounting for Brodie the abuse that ServiceMaster had heaped on them. They showed Dr. Brodie the whisk brooms the corporation had issued them in place of long-handled brooms, a punishment for talking to the press. And they offered several reasonable alternative management structures.

A few days later, Brodie announced the university's decision to abandon the contract with ServiceMaster. That weekend, workers and students held a celebration picnic. It was a glorious occasion that none would have predicted given the cultural and political obstacles to such a triumph.

The victory over ServiceMaster energized Local 77. The union recently negotiated a pay increase more than double the usual 1 percent to 3 percent raise, mainly because it was able to negotiate from a position of strength. With strong rank-and-file leadership and renewed morale, the union can now, with its proven achievements, actively recruit more members. Student activism at Duke, in turn, received a tremendous boost, accelerating a two-year upswing and giving rise to previously undreamed-of possibilities for mobilizations with campus workers.

More broadly, it is encouraging that 180 service workers can shake themselves free from domination by a giant multinational corporation. The Duke University housekeepers' victory confirms that democracy can be a daily reality when people learn to cooperate across social barriers.

As one cleaning woman told President Brodie, "We do all the dirty work, and we should have some say-so."
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By John B. Judis

WASHINGTON

IN 1985 MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (MIT) President Paul E. Gray explained to a congressional committee why American tax dollars should be used to foster closer relations between American corporations and universities. "If the Japanese have been eating our lunch," Gray said, it is "because they have been much more assiduous and effective ... at the process that takes an idea and translates it into something which affects the market."

Gray recommended MIT's Industrial Liaison

BUSINESS

son Program (ILP) as a model for making American firms more competitive. In the program, they pay for privileged access to university research and thus "gain a window through which to view the developments of technological research which assist them in leapfrogging over the technical achievements of our foreign competitors," he said.

Gray's point might have been correct in the abstract, but investigations by the House Subcommittee on Human Resources and Intergovernmental Relations, chaired by Rep. Ted Weiss (D-NY), have revealed that many of the firms MIT's program serves are Japanese and Western European. Instead of making American firms more competitive, MIT's program, partly financed through federal research grants, is aiding American competitors.

MIT's program is hardly the exception. Many elite American universities, including Stanford and the University of California at Berkeley, have set up liaison programs in which researchers, backed by taxpayer funding, give foreign businesses privileged access to scientific and engineering studies and even advice about marketing strategies. But MIT appears to be the grossest offender.

Selling research: MIT's Industrial Liaison Program was begun in 1948. According to the subcommittee's findings, MIT in 1975 established a sales office in Tokyo where it recruits new firms and where MIT professors can meet with representatives of Japanese firms. To belong to ILP, 300 corporations pay from \$5,000 to \$60,000 a year, depending on their size. Unions need not apply.

For their fee, corporations get to discuss research projects with MIT professors and see the professors' research before it is published. (It often takes as long as two years for scientific articles to be published.) ILP's catalogue states that the program places "at the disposal of industry the expertise and resources of all the schools, departments, centers and laboratories of MIT. It can assist its member organizations in making strategic business and technical decisions and help them identify business opportunities."

MIT uses a point system to encourage professors to cooperate with the program, with each point worth approximately \$35. Providing an article is worth one point; a phone call to a member firm is worth two; an on-campus visit with a firm's representative is worth two or more, and a visit to the firm is worth at least twelve. Some faculty members amass more than 100 points a year, which they can use for professional travel and office expenses, including computers.

Weiss and his staff got interested in MIT's program because the university's research



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U.S.-funded research becomes foreign affair

is so heavily funded by the government. The federal government provides about 86 percent of MIT's half-billion-dollar annual research budget. MIT acknowledged that 337 faculty members who worked with ILP from 1984 to 1988 received at least \$100,000 each in grants from the National Science Foundation (NSF) or the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

Weiss's staff contacted the 10 professors in the MIT program who received the largest federal grants—between \$3.1 million and \$9.3 million from NSF or NIH. Eight of the 10 said that they dealt more with foreign than domestic corporations. Looked at in terms of points, they spent 34 percent of their time with American corporations, 30 percent with Japanese companies, and 36 percent with other foreign companies. The faculty also acknowledged that they discussed primarily their federally funded research.

Japanese corporations have praised MIT for providing them with important break-

throughs. According to *Business Week*, "NEC chairman Koji Kobayashi credits access to MIT's research for much of NEC's success in computers."

Many elite American universities, such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology, offer programs that give foreign businesses privileged access to tax-funded studies.

MIT stonewalls: Last June 13 Weiss' subcommittee held hearings on the MIT program. The hearings produced some amusing exchanges between the congressman and

Gray. The transcript reads as follows:

Weiss: "Are you at all concerned that American taxpayers are paying for research whose results are being sold to private industries that will not necessarily benefit the American public?"

Gray: "No sir, I'm not. I take exception to the statement in that it infers that we are selling these results to the Japanese or to other foreign citizens."

Weiss: "One MIT faculty member that we contacted does research pertaining to superconductors and liquid crystals. Through the Industrial Liaison Program, he met with scientists from several Japanese companies. Isn't it likely that such meetings could help a Japanese company compete more successfully against American companies?"

Gray: "I suppose it is possible, but I don't think it is necessarily likely and I think you might inquire of those faculty."

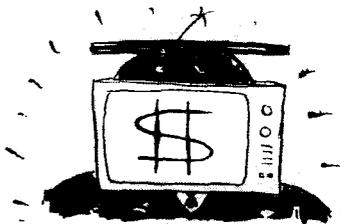
Since the hearings, MIT has stonewalled attempts by Weiss' staff to get more documents about the ILP. Weiss' staff is also seeking information on some 40 other industrial liaison programs.

Weiss' hearings created considerable controversy among educators. But rather than change their ways, college presidents appear determined to follow MIT's example. Richard M. Cyert, president of Carnegie-Mellon University, announced in July that his university will now solicit Japanese business support for its research. Cyert blamed the decision on American businesses' reluctance to support the university's programs. "I do not feel that American firms are responsive enough, and I don't believe we can get the kind of support we want—and need—strictly from American firms," Cyert told the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Leonard Minsky, the director of Ralph Nader's Coalition for Universities in the Public Interest, thinks that this attitude reflects a new conception of the university's role. "Since the end of the '70s, universities have begun to change from public institutions that serve the public interest to profit-making corporations," Minsky says. "What they have to sell is mainly science and technology, and it doesn't matter to them who they sell it to." □

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Stanford, corporations form integrated circuit



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Stanford is close behind MIT in giving foreign firms privileged access to government-funded research. It now has 37 different industrial liaison programs on campus. One of these is the Solid State Industrial Affiliates, established in 1958.

To become a member of the affiliates, a corporation pays an annual fee of \$10,000, part of which goes to the faculty member who will serve as the corporation's "liaison

officer." For this fee, corporations gain access to Stanford's electrical engineering department, one of the best in the country, and its Integrated Circuits, Ginzton and Solid-State laboratories.

Like the MIT program, the Stanford program allows member corporations to become intimately acquainted with faculty and student research well before it is made public. Every September, the faculty and students give the affiliates a special two-day presentation of research in progress.

There are currently 45 companies in the Stanford program, of which 18 are foreign-based. These include Hitachi, Toshiba, Sony, Matsushita, Mitsubishi and Thomson.

J.B.J.