

To: Brooklyn Friends School Board of Trustees and Crissy Cáceres, Head of School  
Date: September 23, 2020

The former clerks of the Brooklyn Friends School Board have suggested we write to offer our perspective on the current dispute between the Brooklyn Friends School and the BFS employees represented by UAW Local 2110. As university faculty members with expertise in union-management relations and with close ties to the Religious Society of Friends (Paul is a long-standing member of the Pittsburgh and State College Friends Meetings and Becky is an occasional attender of Brooklyn Monthly Meeting, the daughter of a Brooklyn Friends School alumna, and the granddaughter of stalwart members of Brooklyn Monthly Meeting), we believe we are in a unique position to understand the challenges of engaging in a union-management relationship in the context of a Quaker-related institution.

We were both saddened to learn of the troubled relationship between BFS employees and the School's administration that has resulted in the BFS's efforts to remove the union. We believe that the current situation is at least partly a result of a mistaken assumption that the relationship between a School and a union representing its employees must, by law and practice, be adversarial. While they often are, this is because the goals and objectives of employers and unions/union members are commonly in direct conflict with one another (i.e. a business whose goal is to maximize profits vs. a union and its members who seek the highest salary possible).

There is, however, an alternative to the adversarial approach to union-management relations. This approach, referred to as labor-management collaboration or partnership, is effective where the parties see themselves as equal partners working together toward a common goal, rather than as adversaries. For this reason it has been most effective in settings like education and healthcare. While the traditional adversarial approach can be fundamentally in conflict with Quaker values and practices, the collaborative approach is consistent with those values and practices. And, in our view, the collaborative/partnership approach is very well suited to a Friends school where all employees—staff, faculty, and administrators—share the common goal of providing a transformational learning experience rooted in Quaker values.

Given the availability of this option for improving the relationship between the BFS employees and the School, we strongly urge BFS not to pursue the removal of the union through the NLRB. In our view, this action will irreparably damage the relationship between the School and its employees, as well as the broader Quaker community in Brooklyn and beyond. To expect that unilaterally doing away with a union democratically chosen by the School's employees will restore harmony to the relationship is highly unrealistic. We can tell you from decades of observation and experience that the hurt and bitterness this action will cause will be part of your School for a generation. It is also worth noting that the UAW has continued to represent employees at workplaces such as New York University and the Foxwoods Casino, without any authorization or mandate from the NLRB. In other words, should BFS' petition succeed, BFS employees are likely to keep acting collectively, demanding recognition and collective bargaining, and contemplating a strike in order to support these demands. In sum, removal of the union will not magically resolve the dysfunctional relationship that exists between employees and the School's administration. It will, in fact, make things much worse.

The attempt to remove the union is also inconsistent with the Quaker tradition of advocating for social and economic justice. Unions have long been at the forefront of the fight for economic and social justice in this country. To support unions in principle, while opposing them in your own workplace, does not suggest a strong commitment to the School's stated values. Advocating a position dependent on the notional freedom of "religious" employers to deny their employees' rights, such as access to reproductive healthcare and protection from discrimination, also suggests support for unjust and anti-egalitarian policies that many Friends find deeply troubling and antithetical to our shared values and testimonies.

Lastly, the legal issues the School has cited to justify its action against the union are very narrowly construed and are only relevant in the most adversarial of relationships. It seems clear that BFS has arrived at this unfortunate situation based on traditional, adversarial "win at all costs" legal advice that uses Quaker values as a rationale for an unQuakerly action.

The School does not appear to have been informed that unions and employers have a great deal of freedom to shape the kind of relationship and interaction they want to have. The School has argued that it wants a decision-making process that "requires us to share our voice and perspective, acknowledge where we have differences, and work through those issues to reach unity." The school will not get there by unilaterally taking away the union their employees voted to create. They can, however, achieve this by committing to a relationship in which BFS and the BFS colleagues and their union see each other as partners working toward a common goal.

In such a relationship, the parties would be free to communicate and work together on issues that would improve all aspects of the School, without violating the prohibition on "direct dealing." By including the employees in efforts to address problems and issues, the School would be recognizing the value of each employee and benefitting from their expertise and experience. Employees, in turn, feel valued, appreciated, and included in the process of improving the school, which gives them a vested interest in making sure the ideas and solutions they contribute are successfully implemented. This approach is much more consistent with Quaker values of equality, community, and integrity than the adversarial approach the School has been advised to pursue. Like Quaker process, partnership can be challenging to implement, but by affirming the value of each colleague and recognizing their needs for recognition and engagement at work, this approach can build a strong cohesive community.

The first step in building a union-management partnership is for the BFS colleagues and their union, and the School, to commit to working to create a collaborative relationship. The parties would then need the help of an experienced, neutral facilitator to guide them as they build a new relationship. If we can be of help in moving towards this kind of relationship, please call on us.



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