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UNIONIZING AGAINST CUTBACKS

When I first prepared this paper, "downsizing" was the watchword of the day. Today, it is clearer that downsizing is but one reasonably familiar tactic of capitalism in a continuing struggle over resources and power. Downsizing, layoffs, retrenchment, rifs, outsourcing, Naftaizing, privatizing— whatever euphemism one chooses to use—are mechanisms in a general strategy having to do with minimizing costs, controlling the workforce, and finally sustaining the upward shift in income and wealth that has marked the last quarter century. In the academic world, outfits like Yale, Minnesota, Bennington, Boston University, Arizona International—to name a few of the more egregious—employ many of the tactics familiar from earlier and now current industrial conflict. Among these are insuring the existence of a reserve army of the un- or under-employed—here called "adjuncts"; including outside hired guns to control the workforce—here called "educational consultants"; dividing people in hopes to conquer—here called "academic planning"; and good old speed-up—here marked by larger classes, less academic staff, fewer books, and the like. We need to think of these tactics not as independent phenomena but in the broader context of the corporatization of the university.

The flexibility and variety of corporate academic tactics suggest that a variety of approaches to entering such a struggle must be employed. Here I want to concentrate on just one, unionization. I don't want to pretend that unions offer a one- size-fits-all solution to the multiple problems college and university employees face. In fact, as we all know, unions have often, historically, been part of the problem rather than part of the solution. In the U.S. particularly, they have acted as mechanisms to discipline and control the workforce, to deflect working-class militance, and to shift attention from fundamental issues like who bakes the economic pie and what's in it to the question of how large a slice the boss will cut you. Teachers' unions have, unfortunately, too often shrunk themselves to fit this narrow view of organizing labor.

In the beginning—the 1950s and before—the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) represented in many respects a progressive force. It insisted, on one hand, that public employees had the right to organize, an idea not widely accepted in the U.S. of A. Moreover, it opposed the collaborationist strategy of the National Education Association (NEA), which included in its membership not only rank and file teachers but the very managers who tried to control their work lives. To be sure, some AFT locals, as we all know, suffered from endemic and organizationally crippling anti-communism, not to speak of the kind of racism which set them against the very communities teachers were supposed to be serving. But on the whole, one had good reason to be proud of one's union card—I've kept mine, in fact, ever since 195

Over time, however, two problems developed. In the first place, teachers' unions—like some others—came in practice increasingly to represent only a narrow, and usually privileged, fraction of the workforce: the tenured faculty. My own union in SUNY, for example, once in a burst of democratic enthusiasm

negotiated a salary increase in the form of a flat sum rather than a percentage. The full professors—especially the doctors—were outraged, as you can imagine, and that was the last time such an arrangement was even seriously considered. Percentage increases obviously benefit most those at the top of the scale and, more to my point, increasingly divide those at the top from those at the bottom. But that was no new thing, for few teachers' unions really tried to organize, or do much to serve, those on the bottom: not just the untenured faculty but the adjuncts, the other part-timers, the TAs, the lab assistants, in short, the increasing army of those mostly being exploited by colleges and universities, including, sadly, by their unionized bosses. In virtually every case in which part-timers were seriously organized, the efforts were made not by existing unions of full-timers but by newly-developed organizations. And even when that was not the case, the unions were dominated by full-timers whose interests—in terms of compensation, loads, and even course content—differed substantially from those of part-timers or the untenured, much less TAs or other employees.

The second problem, widespread in the labor movement generally, had to do with a basically defensive outlook of American labor. A kind of social settlement, advantageous to some groups—particularly white, ethnic, northern, and originally urban—had been consolidated during the Cold War. Union members could then count on decent pension plans, reasonable security, meaningful health plans, secure and economical suburban housing, educational opportunities for their children, and the like. The price, of course, apart from the infectious spread of Cold War ideology, was the increasing impoverishment of the cities and most of those, largely unorganized, stuck in them. But that was not of major concern to most unions, which saw their job as servicing the members, not organizing the unorganized, forget caring for the clients. There were, to be sure, honorable exceptions to such generalizations, like the Farm Workers and Local 119. But teachers' unions were, for all their social democratic rhetoric, not generally to be counted among the militants, much less the progressives.

In saying that, I do not mean to denigrate the real efforts of unions to hold the line against attacks on tenure, retrenchment provisions, and arbitrary layoffs. Nor do I want to forget the significant efforts of the NEA and some AFT locals to implement affirmative action plans, often against administrative intransigence and manipulation. But unions proved to be weak reeds when push came to shove, and shove to assault, as was often the case in the last decade. Most particularly, unions were seldom able to act forcefully in the interests of the least privileged members of the academic community—if we can seriously use a term like "community" in today's academy.

But that has, I think, been changing, and unions now—or so it seems to me—are going to be increasingly important not just in the struggle against academic downsizing and other abuses but in the wider contests over power and direction in the academy. Why? First of all, the logic of downsizing has led many institutions to offer desirable retirement incentives—bronze parachutes—to large numbers of senior faculty. In many places, therefore, the ranks of the privileged have been significantly thinned, since in most public institutions no more than a third of the positions vacated are filled through regular appointment. Meanwhile, as we know, the ranks of the unprivileged swell daily. The balance of power within unions has thus been shifting in significant ways, and it is no longer visionary to imagine many of them being taken over by younger, more militant, and also more socially progressive groups and caucuses.

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them being taken over by younger, more militant, and also more socially progressive groups and caucuses.

Furthermore, in situations where that seems unlikely, those struggling to organize have—like the Wisconsin TAs of the 1960s—turned away from teachers' organizations to other workers' associations which, in some cases, can bring greater pressure to bear on recalcitrant institutions. It is no longer a presumption of those organizing TAs, adjuncts or other part-timers that teachers' organizations are their first resort.

Another key factor may be arising in the recent NLRB decision to charge Yale with unfair labor practices for its treatment of TAs attempting to organize. You will recall that the 1970s Yeshiva decision found that faculty in private institutions were effectively managers and thus not covered by provisions of the NLRA. We unionists then bridled at the idea that faculty were managers, but, ironically, the Yale situation has in some measure borne out that contention. No one would—Yale's union-busting lawyers and their vassals aside—imagine TAs or adjuncts or part-timers as anything but workers. So if the NLRB ruling holds up in court, the way will be further opened—as it has already been by TA organizers in California, Iowa, and elsewhere—for unionization, precisely of those most exploited by today's education factories. In fact, Yale's effort to evade the NLRB's unfair labor practice charge by acknowledging that TAs are, indeed, "workers" may have the same impact as a finding of guilt.

I view that possibility as a very positive development for a number of reasons. First, it connects the struggles within higher education with those now being engaged by a somewhat revived labor movement. I believe that's important for tactical as well as historical reasons. In this era, the strike—always the weapon of last resorts—has increasingly proved a paper tiger. But strikes cannot be won if other workers casually ignore picket lines or other mechanisms designed to shut it down. Union solidarity is no guarantee of victory, of course, but its lack will insure defeat. Moreover, while the refreshed labor movement has yet to establish its power in relation to corporate America, it has shown in this last election an ability to deploy resources and to organize its troops toward political and social goals. The "other" Yale strikes have been settled, but without the active support of the wider labor movement, they would I'm sure have been lost.

Furthermore, while one might be willing to accept the argument that capitalism has been the primary instrument for satisfying our desires as consumers—a proposition I would not devote much energy to maintaining—historically, it has been organizations of working people, usually unions, which have brought about most improvements in our work lives. Still, many faculty remain suspicious of the labor movement and of union bureaucrats, preferring to understand themselves as independent entrepreneurs, which, historically, some have been and others have aspired toward. Suspicion has been mutual. Such views, so inimical not only to unionization but to solidarity of any sort, can, I think, be combated in some degree by fostering the developing connections, sought now by unions, between the academy and labor. The cultural barriers that had often placed labor leaders and professors into hostile camps are, in my experience, lower today than in recent memory—in many cases it's our students or our comrades from earlier struggles for civil rights and against wars who are today's organizing directors. Moreover, working together, in the political worlds in which budgets are being decided and in the media world in which attitudes toward education and teachers are being shaped, is I think critical to regaining any substantial authority over higher education. After all, the men and women with whom we engage as unionists are, in the political arena, the voters we need at least to blunt the attacks of the right.

The bottom line of unionization, however, is this — while collegiality, like junket, is nice, and has its place, it tends to evaporate when things get nasty. No surprise. For while most middle-aged faculty share a great deal, culturally, with most middle-aged managers, this period (and, I suspect, Republican policy) has increasingly hammered wedges between differently situated parts of the Professional-Managerial Class, or PMC. I've watched that process down the road from where I teach at Yale, and I suspect others have

observed it elsewhere. Those who manage become managers, drawn to the perquisites, the lines of defense, the social and economic outlooks of those who increasingly become their peers. Likewise, they draw to them others who aspire to managerial mantles. On the other side, those who begin to see their positions destabilizing, or even themselves at risk, increasingly come to identify, and occasionally to make common cause with, those at the bottom end of the pyramid. To be sure, generating solidarity among part-time and temporary faculty, much less between faculty and other campus workers, is easier said than accomplished. People undertake part-time employment for a variety of reasons and gain from it a variety of rewards, and the local lawyer who offers a course in labor-management relations may not see precisely eye-to-eye with the adjunct working six \$2000/ course jobs to eat. Those working with today's academic underclass need a more precise analysis of its areas of division and of common concerns for any chance of organizational success.

But even given such problems and the lingering disrepute of unions on campuses, I have to say that particularly in a period of instability, I would much prefer to entrust my fate to a contract. And this has little to do with ideology, but with the internal logic of capitalism. The sanctity of contractual relationships is central to that logic. And while individual capitalists, like individual managers, are forever violating contractual relationships, every one of them would insist on the truism that national polity is based upon "the rule of law, not of men." Contracts are rules of law; collegiality is the rule of men—and generally, still, "men" in the generic sense, too. Whatever else they are, unions are mechanisms for enforcing, or at least pursuing, rules of law.

To me, then, a major tool in the struggle with downsizing, educational corporatization, and managerial control has to do with finding ways to build in to enforceable contracts enforceable goals. We have been too bound in by the economist precepts of business unionism. We do not, in fact, begin to know what it would be possible to negotiate, even within the accepted rubrics of wages, working conditions, and job security. For example, can a contract provide for "goals and timetables"—terrible words!—for instituting equitable pay, benefits, and other rights for part-timers? Can the struggle to institute such contractual provisions, as in the recent UPS strike, be used to organize workers and communities behind them? Can such struggles become the means for teaching students about "class"—another scorned in America word? Without, I hope, being altogether a pollyanna, I would argue that in the coming time, unionization will offer a critical tool, as well as a challenge both to our organizing skills and to our organizational imaginations. If we cannot match the managers there, we might—the goddess help us—be forced to rely on MLA resolutions!

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