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**THIS OLD HOUSE:
RENOVATING THE HOUSE OF LABOR AT THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF
NEW YORK**

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.

—Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

Is it a dream to think that intellectual workers can invent a new form of unionism? That's one version of the question we're trying to answer, as an insurgent caucus within an academic union, two years into the project of remaking the house of labor at the City University of New York.¹ We didn't enter the labor movement, at least I didn't, with the goal of challenging the business unionism that has dominated American labor since World War II; in any case it would be hubristic to think that a band of underfunded academics could accomplish what other union insurgencies, such as Teamsters for a Democratic Union and New Directions in the Transit Workers Union, have been trying in a more conscious way to do for years. But the question beckons, increasingly, as the work of an oppositional caucus unfolds: what is the radical potential of scholars and teachers organized as labor in the current historical moment? Could we, *because* of our work as researchers, our powerful daily contact with students, be a source of transformation in organized labor in something like the way AIDS activists were a source of transformation of American social movements in the 1980s? The struggles that have defined academic labor so far have largely been those to organize new categories of workers—teaching assistants, clerical workers, full-time faculty—but in the coming decade as these struggles succeed and academic workers form relationships with organized labor, we may find that reorganizing the organized becomes as important as organizing the unorganized. Clearly it would be laughable at this stage to compare ourselves to the revolutionary movements Marx had in mind in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, but his sense of the temptation to reach backward has something to say about our confrontation with the current form of American unionism. Easily seduced, as academics, by dead generations, at home in borrowed languages, we are laboring to speak our own.

The New Caucus is an insurgency of about 300 members within the Professional Staff Congress (AFT local 2334), the 9,000-member union of faculty and staff at the City University of New York.² Last year, when we made the first attempt in two decades to unseat the incumbent union president, we attracted over a third of the total vote. Most important for the question I am seeking to answer here is our origin in a form of social movement: our initial energy came from the effort to defend the principle of mass access to

higher education; only later did we emerge as a union caucus. In fact the New Caucus was formed just at the moment we had achieved what Jane Gallop recently described as "the dream of the street."³ Whether the move into the union represents a retreat from or an extension of social movement politics is still, I think, unproven. On March 23, 1995, fifteen thousand protesters demonstrated against proposed cuts in the CUNY budget at New York's City Hall—the largest student demonstration in the city in two decades. Although students took the lead in organizing the demonstration and ultimately broke with many faculty participants over the issue of marching without a permit, members of what became the New Caucus were instrumental in making the demonstration happen. In addition to struggling with students over strategy and plans to meet what we rightly predicted would be a fierce police response, faculty activists organized a march over the Brooklyn Bridge of a thousand faculty in full academic regalia, chanting and shouting their outrage against a cut that would have meant the firing of 25% of the full-time instructional staff. Soon after the demonstration, however, activist faculty and staff decided to disband the organization through which we had been fighting for the survival of the University, and turn instead to the union as the vehicle of struggle. In this we were prompted by a group of activists at various campuses in the City University system who had already challenged the local union leadership and won chapter elections. Our argument was that the faculty/staff union at the nation's largest public urban university *should* be a leading force in the defense of CUNY. The plan was to harness the resources of the union for the fight to preserve access to higher education for what had been called at the 1847 founding of City College "the children of the whole people." For me, and I suspect for many others, the labor struggle came only later.

It seems odd now that I didn't automatically make the connection between the conditions of labor at the City University of New York and the assault on our students at the hands of the governor and State Legislature. My own history included years of work as a labor organizer, first with farmworkers in the Connecticut Valley, then with clerical workers in a farmworker service organization, and later, in graduate school, as a volunteer organizer in the union drive of clerical and technical workers at Yale. As recently at 1995 it was still not widely visible that there was a precise economic connection between the withdrawal of resources from our students and the new tensions we felt in the workplace: increasing reliance on part-timers, failure to replace colleagues who had retired or left, ballooning class size. (Berube and Nelson's book *Higher Education Under Fire* was crucial in making this connection, even though many in our caucus rejected as conservative its position that a solution to the crisis lay in slowing down the production of new Ph.D.s.)

Perhaps the failure at first to see the crisis in academic labor was a measure of the compartmentalism in my own thinking, a sign of the success of the ideology of the privatized academic. But it was also a result of the compelling nature of the City University itself as a political cause. The real potential of CUNY is not, as its publicity machine and our union leadership would have it, that it provides access to "a better life," or mobility into the middle class, but rather that its working-class and immigrant population could tap into a subjugated knowledge with the power to remake everything we know. "CUNY should be the imagination of the city," as one New Caucus member puts it.⁴ Thus unlike traditional unionized workers, who are not fighting to preserve the institution in which they work, the New Caucus began in the complex posture of defending our students and our vision of the university against both the university administration and the state government. Here we are different too from other groups within academic labor, and perhaps also somewhat different from workers in other service industries where there is a stronger tradition of organized labor. We weren't forced to articulate a comprehensive position on labor issues before embarking on the work of an oppositional caucus, and full-time tenured faculty like myself had the luxury of not experiencing the kind of labor crisis that would have forced us to put workplace issues first. Our founding statement, while it attributes the failure of the union to defend the university to its lack of democracy and debate, retains an emphasis on the defense of the university itself.⁵

Though a passion about the university took us into labor activism, we would have been in a stronger political position if we had acknowledged from the outset our relation to the ongoing struggle to reverse the direction of American labor. While faulting only myself and the conservative tradition of the labor

movement for my not knowing more, I feel that we would have had a better chance at the start of developing the new union culture of which we dreamed if our opponent had been more visible. It's still difficult, two years into our work within the union, to remember that what we experience as a succession of shocks—our union's political quietism, top-down decision-making, elite-pacting with management, contempt for rank-and-file mobilization—is in fact a textbook example of the business unionism that characterizes much of American labor. The labor historian Kim Moody offers this definition:

Business unionism . . . leaves unquestioned capital's dominance, both on the job and in society as a whole. Instead, it seeks only to negotiate the price of this domination. This it does through the businesslike negotiation of a contractual relationship with a limited sector of capital. . . . While the political coloration of American business unionism may range from conservative to liberal, it is the bread-and-butter tradeoff—wages and benefits defined in contractual language—that concerns the business unionist.⁶

A full history of business unionism is beyond the scope of this discussion, but one useful version is given by Peter Rachleff in his account of the strike at Hormel that began in 1981. Like other Left labor historians, Rachleff attributes the massive decline of American trade unionism in the 1980s, a decade he calls "arguably the bleakest . . . in the entire history of the U.S. labor movement,"⁷ to a combination of factors including deindustrialization, globalization, corporate and government resistance to labor, but also to labor's own turn toward business unionism. Business unionism, he argues, can be traced to the deterioration of the political and economic climate in the late 1930s that prompted unions to seek security in industry-wide contracts negotiated at the national level and in alliance with the Democratic Party. Even before World War II, the pattern had set in: union leaders "were already showing a willingness to sacrifice direct action, sit-down strikes, defiance of judges and legal authorities, third party politics, inter-union solidarity, and organizing the unorganized on the altar of 'the contract'" (19). With the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, unions' scope was further narrowed: they were granted protection under the law in exchange for complying with the regulation to bargain only on behalf of their members—in effect to become "interest groups" rather than agents in a movement. As such, they were ill prepared to meet the end of economic expansion in the 1970s and the "zap labor" strategies of the globalizing 80s. Business unionism, then, is indicted by its own failure to comprehend a shift in social forces, focused as it is on "votes taken by 'friends' and enemies in legislatures, or the dollars and cents of influence peddling."⁸ In our own case the facts are startling: as a university system *with* a union—and a union that included part-time as well as full-time faculty and instructional staff—CUNY lost over 50% of its full-time faculty lines in the years 1975-1996, shrinking from over 11,000 to just over 5,000. To say this is not to underestimate the forces operating nationally to downsize higher education, but to chronicle how ineffective the methods of organized labor were in resistance.

As a new oppositional caucus in the current labor climate our dilemma is how to resist being subdued, like the dyer's hand, to what we work in. From my perspective the history of the New Caucus so far is the record of a struggle between the desire to make something new and the urge to become our opponents, both at times irresistible. In the second half of this essay, I want to explore why business unionism is especially attractive to academics and how the New Caucus has begun to escape its magnetic pull. Other academic workers, who have been able to form new union locals, will not experience the encounter with business unionism in the same way, but they may recognize parts of their story in ours.

Perhaps it's easy to see why academics, especially full-time faculty, would be comfortable with the shadow-management style of business unionism. There is no automatic left politics in the academy; in fact the class interests of full-time faculty bring us closer to university administrators, trustees and legislators than to opponents of capital or union insurgents. But beyond that, I would speculate that full-time faculty, and many others in the academy, simply find unions embarrassing. There's some justification for that feeling, given the history of racism and sexism in American labor, and the tendency of mainstream labor to distance itself from radical thought. Business unionism has driven radical thought away from the union

movement, so that in the US at least, with no other movement to which to be answerable, cultural critique floats free, as "theory": imagine how different the academic labor scene would be if Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick and Cornel West routinely directed their writing toward its problematics. Without intellectual glamour, trade unionism embarrasses high-profile progressive scholars (with a few obvious exceptions); without radical politics, it embarrasses the few who remain on the Left. Until the recent surge of labor activism, academic unions, narrowed to bread-and-butter contractual issues, had been gratefully relinquished by the majority of unionized faculty to the few who had a taste for the work: some finding in the union a possibility of influence they did not find in scholarship, others drawn by deep histories in unionism or commitments to service. For those like myself, who fled at the first sight of what academic unionism seemed to be, the alternative was radical work in the classroom, oppositional scholarship, and for us at CUNY, the always-present lure of trying to give shape to the university that could be. As several commentators have pointed out, many academics chose (and choose) academia precisely because it presents itself as exempt from the dirty world of the market; the I'll-take-care-of-you premise of business unionism suited us just fine.

What Marx called "the spirits of the past" were hard at work among the members of the New Caucus even as we took the dramatic step forward to name ourselves a public opposition in a union that had been a one-party system for twenty-five years. Not surprisingly, we haven't immediately sprung toward a new form of unionism organically derived from our position as intellectuals. For one thing, we had little ammunition against the fifty-year history of business unionism; for another, we faced forms of resistance peculiar to academia. The cost of losing the fiction of collegiality and atmosphere of gentility that still pervades academic interactions has sometimes seemed too great; we have found ourselves occasionally "pre-frightened," to borrow a term from 1980s Czechoslovakia, into silence. We have sometimes been reluctant to air our political differences with each other, slow to theorize the possibility of conflicting labor interests within our group: between full-time and part-time workers, between faculty at community and senior colleges, between faculty and instructional staff, all of whom are represented by the union and *within* our caucus. We—certainly I—have been flattened (as one is meant to be flattened) by the daily encounter with what feels like a travesty of unionism: every request for information denied, every substantive resolution voted down; every opportunity for public political action rejected. And privately, I suspect, we have mourned for the time lost to research and writing, as one form of public speech is displaced by another.

But the crux of our dilemma is structural: the tension between the need to win votes in order to replace the current leadership and the temptation to imitate that leadership in the process. Although we have won election and re-election on individual campuses of the City University, we did not win the union-wide election last spring. Working against us were the usual advantages of incumbency and some flaws in our own campaign, but we lost because a constituency accustomed to the Professional Staff Congress's tepid brand of unionism (and mesmerized into accepting the PSC leadership's boasts about its success on its primary issues—salary and benefits) simply rejected our model of a mobilized, membership-based union. The election loss left us with the paradox that we could not work the transformation of the union we desired purely from a position on the outside, yet we were unwilling to change our politics sufficiently to gain positions on the inside. Without a voting majority in the delegate assembly of the union (on paper its policy-making body) we are blocked in every formal effort to change the union's direction: *a resolution to begin an organizing drive among part-timers was voted down*, a call to hold a press conference to contest the public relations campaign against CUNY was rejected, a demonstration we held against the two-year delay in our new contract was denounced. Business unionism seemed to have us in a choke-hold.

If we've begun to slip the yoke I think it is because we have moved in two directions: toward greater consciousness of our historical position as a union insurgency at the current moment in American labor, and toward an exploration of the political potential of our position as scholars, artists, teachers and writers. The New Caucus has in effect made the decision to keep challenging and exposing the union leadership from within and simultaneously to offer, on our own terms, a model of what we think academic unionism might be. The first is relatively simple to conceptualize, but we've had to find a way to minimize its

psychological cost; for me that has come with recognizing that our structural position as an insurgent caucus means that every policy negotiation with the current union leadership will be a site of conflict. Many activists in the New Caucus hold elected union positions, and in these roles we have been able to cooperate with the union leadership in order to fulfill the legal and political duties of union representatives. But every policy issue (and almost everything *is*, finally, a policy issue) exposes our ideological faultlines. As a caucus we need to ally ourselves *consciously* with other groups that are trying to revitalize organized labor. Here I would include not only the other dissident caucuses, but also the less visible groups that have waged strikes opposed by their union internationals, the rank-and-file organizations that are trying to see their way to an activist, democratic unionism. They, not our current union leadership, are our allies, at least in the project of redefining unionism. We need to send ourselves to school in their archives, but as critical, not worshipful students. Our effort to generate a new unionism arises from a particular moment in the history of trade unionism as well as the history of academic labor; we need to become critical readers of that moment, working together with other academic insurgencies to develop a politics of renewal.

The second, I think, takes more courage: it demands that we understand our work as teachers and scholars outside of the economy of privatized academic rewards. Academic unionism could become a place for the radical rethinking of our work. Teaching, for instance, remains under-theorized in a culture that prefers sentimentality to desire or analysis; we have not even begun to tap the political potential of what was recently called "the scintillating, tesla-charged rattle and hum of a college-level class thriving on the energy of its own . . . discursive field."⁹ The intimate, mysterious connection with students is a source of political transformation to which few other workers have access; at CUNY, where our 217,000 students are the working-class and immigrant members of the local community, it has a unique potential for opening labor to social movement. As academics we have access to other potential well-springs for a revitalized labor movement: we as trained researchers should be winning the national information war about the future of higher education. ACT UP taught us that research is a weapon. We imagine, too, a union without the usual allergy to the intellectual and cultural avant-garde: think of the union newspapers we could have, imagine the union as a think-tank, a source of radical critique. The essential move for us as a caucus, though, was to realize that we did not have to wait until we gained union leadership to begin reinventing the academic union. That discovery has been in some ways our most liberating turn and at least for me has reintroduced into our work some of its original pleasure.

We'd experienced the pleasure of developing, to some extent, our own version of unionism at the individual campus chapters where the New Caucus was the elected leadership, but I want to concentrate on a few initiatives that encompass the entire university. The first has to be organizing to increase full-time faculty lines; as members of a union that includes both part-time and full-time faculty we have an unusual opportunity to demonstrate how the interests of the two constituencies are linked. Vincent Tirelli, a part-time faculty member at CUNY, has outlined the political potential of making this link: the segmentation of academic labor, he writes,

not only presents problems for part-time faculty, but for full-time faculty prerogatives, for women and members of racial and ethnic minorities in the teaching workforce, and for the ability of the general public to gain a quality higher education. At the same time, this convergence of interest between the faculty, those seeking affirmative action, and the interests of the public schools holds out the possibility of alliances on behalf of higher education.¹⁰

The current leadership of our union has systematically resisted organizing adjuncts into the union, even though as an "agency shop" it represents all adjuncts in collective bargaining and has been pushed to gain some benefits for them. Our role must be to insist on the convergence of interests, and to theorize that convergence for ourselves. Although some of our toughest ideological struggles as a caucus have been over our position on part-timers, we have initiated adjunct organizing drives on our own and taken the first

steps toward an alliance with the part-timers' organization, CUNY Adjuncts Unite!. The New Caucus cannot yet offer itself as a model of academic labor for the segmented workplace, but we have begun to develop a strategy for what must be the most difficult issue we face collectively.

In two other arenas, our progress has been dramatic; we begin to see a new unionism taking shape. Tired of waiting for the union leadership to take the lead against the escalating attacks on CUNY and the drive to divide both its student population and its workforce into tiers, the New Caucus decided to attack the problem on our own. We have organized a conference, "The University in Tiers" for February 21, 1998, designed to issue in the formation of work groups and strategies to counteract the public discourse that turns CUNY into the ideological equivalent of the "welfare queen." Like the rhetoric that preceded—and enabled—the dismantling of welfare, the discourse on CUNY hits the notes of abjection, racism and misogyny as it attacks our students for needing public education and ourselves for providing it. We see a connection between the attempt to further stratify the City University and the nationwide stratification of academic labor; the February 21 conference is our response. It represents one attempt to mobilize the forms of *intellectual* work, such as the conference, toward the end of locating social struggle in the union. The second conference we have organized in two years as a caucus, it will offer, while not something that "has never yet existed," a significant alliance of the forms of academia and labor.

Such an alliance has unmistakably emerged in the collaboration between CUNY and the progressive arts community in New York. Artists in Defense of CUNY/CUNY in Defense of the Arts is the initiative that has developed out of a New Caucus fundraiser this winter. What started as a donation to the New Caucus by the *Angels in America* playwright Tony Kushner, who has for five years been a supporter of progressive forces at CUNY, became a benefit performance of a new Kushner play, with parts played by prominent writers and music performed by a postmodern Klezmer group. As a true work-in-progress, one which the performers hoped to develop further, the performance of Kushner's *"It's An Undoing World"* was a glimpse for both artists and audience of a new form: neither commodified art nor disinterested altruism, it came close to being Brecht's "third thing." That the performers were as gripped by the experience as we were was the real discovery of the evening, at some level the reason for doing it. We have extended the work of that night by drafting a dialectical alliance with the arts community: artists turning their work and their presence toward a public defense of a progressive vision of the university, the New Caucus working with the arts community to turn CUNY into a home for experimental art, a site of new audiences for and producers of culture.

In this last venture I think we find a hint of one further possibility for academic unionism. At the same MLA panel that saw Jane Gallop warning feminists against a "fantasmatic version of the world outside the university, the dream of the street," Hortense Spillers called on us to contest not just the "business culture" of the current American university, but the "business civilization" of the late-capitalist global world. Feminism, it was suggested, should offer one epistemological place from which to launch that resistance. Might unionism be another? At the far end of the project of reinventing organized labor is the possibility of an epistemology that provides a real alternative to business civilization. To hope for this is not to imply that unionism can substitute for social transformation, but rather to suggest that it represents not just a form of struggle but an oppositional epistemology, one that might allow us to resist borrowing old names when we are most in need of new ones.

NOTES

1. The views I express here are entirely my own; I do not speak for the New Caucus of the PSC/CUNY or for the PSC/CUNY itself. My title expresses a debt to David Montgomery's *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1987).
2. The leadership of the Professional Staff Congress has since 1973 been in the hands of a single caucus, the City University Union Caucus (renamed during our electoral challenge the City University Unity Caucus); the union president since 1976 has been Irwin Polishook.

3. Jane Gallop, remarks at panel: "Restoring Feminist Politics to Poststructuralist Critique: A Roundtable." Modern Language Association Convention, 30 December 1996, Toronto.
4. I thank Tony O'Brien for allowing me to quote him.
5. For one example of the emphasis on defending the university, see my colleague Bart Meyers in an article on the history of defenses of CUNY; he concludes with the hope that if the New Caucus wins union-wide leadership "it will have established an institutionalized base for writing a new chapter in the defense of CUNY" ("The CUNY Wars," *Social Text* 51 1997: 128). The founding document of the New Caucus, adopted by the membership on 2 December 1995, calls for "organization and resources to defend our livelihoods and profession, to protect the education of our students, and the dreams of hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers for a better future." It also criticizes the current union leadership as a "closed elite that monopolizes virtually all decision-making, that removes the membership from policy debates . . . , and that equates loyalty to itself with loyalty to the union."
6. Kim Moody, *An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism* (London:Verso, 1988), quoted in Peter Rachleff, *Hard-Pressed in the Heartland: The Hormel Strike and the Future of the Labor Movement* (Boston: South End, 1993), 24.
7. Peter Rachleff, *Hard-Pressed in the Heartland*, 3.
8. Kim Moody, *An Injury to All*, quoted in Rachleff, 25.
9. James C. McKelly, "The Naked and the Dead: Dispatches from the Tenure Wars" in *Profession* 1997 (New York, Modern Language Association, 1997), 213.
10. Vincent Tirelli, "Adjuncts and More Adjuncts: Labor Segmentation and the Transformation of Higher Education" (*Social Text* 51: 79).

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