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ACADEMIA AND THE AMERICAN WORKER: RIGHT TO WORK IN AN ERA OF DISASTER CAPITALISM?

Mixing a paean to American farmers, the text of a speech given by radio personality Paul Harvey at a 1978 Future Farmers of America (FFA) convention (Seidi, 2013), with compelling black-and-white film, Dodge combined poetic tribute with the crass commercialism of selling trucks during the 2013 Super Bowl, where ads in 2013 cost \$4 million for thirty seconds. Originally a 2011 YouTube sensation, a Farms.com video of the ad gained a national audience as a Super Bowl commercial for Dodge in 2013 (Haglund, 2013). Both videos offer images of farmers as Harvey expands on his opening words: “And on the eighth day, God looked down on his planned paradise and said I need a caretaker. So God made a Farmer.” The implications of the Dodge ad are the roots of a growing concern about education and America’s workforce: Why do educational degrees of any kind, especially advanced degrees, matter if there are only part-time service industry jobs waiting for graduates (Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, 2013; O’Shaughnessy, 2012; Vasquez, 2012)? The commercial appears either to ignore—or seeks to mask—the disappearing American worker personified in the farmer, a reality now being confronted by graduate students seeking their place in academia.

Below, the reduced labor market experienced by graduate students seeking tenure-track positions as professors is couched as one example within a much larger context that includes the following: contradictory political and public messages about American workers, the de-professionalized working conditions of K-12 teachers (teaching as a service industry), and the increasingly antagonistic mischaracterizations of tenure and unions expressed by politicians, the public, and the media. That larger context includes corporate America, the 1% who benefit when the American worker is reduced to part-time interchangeable widgets (whether wait staff, temp staff, or adjunct instructors)—with education serving as a sorting process.

As long as education at every level from K-12 to undergraduate and graduate is justified by whether or not those academic attainments produce students-as-workers so that both service and products are monetized for the market, academic pursuits will be locked in a no-win paradoxical situation since a contracting labor market renders advanced degrees both necessary and unnecessary simultaneously for the vast majority of people who will not find the work the degrees were designed to accomplish. First, then, let’s return to the farmer to examine the myth and reality of the American worker.

***Click, Clack, Moo: Why the One Percent Always Wins*¹**

I grew up in the rural South when graduating college remained an unusual accomplishment for my family. I became an English teacher for 18 years at the high school I had attended, and then moved to teacher education at the university level several years after receiving my doctorate. My education and life as a worker were both deeply tied to academics, all shaded by also living and working in a right-to-work state,

South Carolina. As a lifelong educator, I watched the Dodge-Paul Harvey-Farmers commercial, reminding me of one of the foundational activities I use in my course on young adult literature. The students in the course were undergraduate certification candidates or current teachers and graduate students, where teachers unions have no power and very few members. The text for this activity was *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows that Type*, by Doreen Cronin with art by Betsy Lewin (2000). This children's book presents a humorous narrative about Farmer Brown and his suddenly recalcitrant cows who, having acquired a rickety typewriter, establish a strike that inspires the chickens to join, ending with the neutral ducks intervening to resolve the revolt.

Inviting students to examine the layers of this children's book helps expose several key assumptions as they reflect American cultural norms about power and authority, gender, the *place* of the worker, and collective solidarity versus the rugged individual. One example of collective solidarity is the labor union. In the fall of 2011 during the rise of Occupy Wall Street, while doing the activity, I came against yet a new reading of this children's book because it reveals why the 1% always wins.

As my students discussed *Click, Clack, Moo*, they noted that they *liked* Farmer Brown, with one student characterizing the striking farm animals as “mean.” In the story Farmer Brown is a boss, not the idealized worker of the Dodge ad, with the animals as the workers, but students invariably leaned toward honoring the hierarchy of power represented by Farmer Brown. This is where I felt the need to consider how this children's book helps confront the Occupy Wall Street movement as well as why the 1% continue to control the 99%. The attitudes of educators are reflections of larger social attitudes about workers and power, exposing the discord between calling for all people to acquire more education while the job market contracts.

One important element of the story is that the cows and chickens are *female workers* under the authority of the *male* Farmer Brown. My students, who are overwhelmingly female, often fail to notice this representation of hegemonic gender roles. The female workers produce for the farmer and remain compliant until the cows acquire the typewriter—both a powerful tool of literacy (the cows and chickens cannot effectively strike until they gain access to language) and a representation of access to technology (the cows and chickens produce typewritten notes that show they find an older manual typewriter unlike the cleaner type produced by Farmer Brown's electric typewriter). Notably, the female workers in this story are captive and literally provide parts of themselves as the commodities from which the farmer profits—milk and eggs (see the discussion of wage-slaves below).

With access to language, then, the cows and chickens, in effect, unionize and strike, thus gaining power. Students also failed to notice the unionization (again, most were SC natives where unionization is essentially absent), but continued to side with Farmer Brown as boss even when we acknowledged the protest as unionizing—particularly bristling at the duck, as a neutral party, using its access to negotiate for a diving board in the duck pond. Since the narrative identifies the duck as neutral, the gender elements of the story may suggest privilege rests in a negation: the duck is not female. The emotional responses to the characters and their actions combined with what students recognized as well as didn't recognize revealed a blind faith in traditional structures of power that honor those with power above workers, who are often discredited for not knowing their places. It is revealing that the students exposed to the book failed to recognize the reification of hegemonic masculinizing despite that most of them are female and the workers in the story are female.

Workers, including teachers as workers, have adopted the corporate model of their *place* and have in effect become their own oppressors (see the use of women to control women in the paternalistic dystopia of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*). Teachers, it appears, transfer onto themselves authoritarian structures of control that parallel their own wielding of control over students. This imbalance of power and the worker's willingness to endorse that imbalance are exposed in teachers' responses to the children's story *Click, Clack, Moo* (2000).

Just as the 1% were offended by Occupy Wall Street, Farmer Brown is incensed that the cows and chickens demand a creature comfort, electric blankets, but he eventually secures a compromise, agreeing

to give the barn animals the electric blankets in exchange for the return of the typewriter. What tends to be missed by uncritical readers of this story, including my students, is that Farmer Brown ultimately *wins*; in fact, the barn animals appear to be eager to abandon their one access to power, the typewriter, for the one-time acquisition of mere material items—the electric blankets as comfort many would see as a basic right and the diving board as frivolous entertainment.

Teachers and future teachers in the class, however, almost uniformly see the story as a positive tribute to the power of compromise, and rarely note that the female workers lose their brief moment of equity by relinquishing their voices in the form of the typewriter. Teachers as American workers, then, simultaneously embody the passive workers who benefit the 1% and thus help create passive students as future passive workers—all built on a model of knowing ones place. The 1% have the 99% right where Farmer Brown has the barn animals—mesmerized by the pursuit of materialism and entertainment driving consumerism. The American worker’s message is often similar to the acquiescence of the cows and the chickens: just give us our iPhones and we’ll be quiet; we’ll work longer and harder for the opportunity to buy what the 1% tells us we want.

Examining *Click, Clack, Moo* with educators and college students helps capture the corrosive dynamic embedded in American capitalism that uses the allure of material wealth and elite power along with the constant threat of the possibility of poverty to idealize the 1% so the 99% will remain compliant. The mythical farmer-as-worker in the Dodge commercial is disappearing in reality and may not have ever existed in the way the myth suggests. But, as teachers-as-workers revealed when examining *Click, Clack, Moo*, Farmer Brown as boss garners respect while workers are rejected for protesting and unionizing. Running throughout this misleading pairing of images of farmers is another message about voice and gender that certainly highlights the lingering power of paternalism.

On the rare occasion that a voice is raised against the excess of the 1% (similar to the brief revolt by the animals), the 1% and a compliant media inform America’s workers that the top 20% pay 64% of taxes, leading workers to slip back to their barns, shamed. Instead, we should be noting that the top 20% income earners pay 64% of taxes because, in 2009, they earned 59% of all income (Domhoff, 2013). Table 1 describes the incremental increase of income for the 1% from 1982 to 2009

Table 1. Distribution of income in the United States, 1982-2006

	Top 1 percent	Next 19 percent	Bottom 80 percent
1982	12.8%	39.1%	48.1%
1988	16.6%	38.9%	44.5%
1991	15.7%	40.7%	43.7%
1994	14.4%	40.8%	44.9%
1997	16.6%	39.6%	43.8%
2000	20.0%	38.7%	41.4%
2003	17.0%	40.8%	42.2%
2006	21.3%	40.1%	38.6%
2009	17.2%	41.9%	40.9%

Many workers, the 99%, tend to remain silent and compliant, waiting patiently for the next generation of technology to occupy their time. Their lives are reduced to work and amassing the ever-changing *things* that quickly become replaced by the *next-thing* luring workers further and further into lives similar to the cows and chickens of the story. If and when workers learn to treasure voice over things, the

chickens may come home to roost. Next, beneath the idealized farmer-as-worker in the Dodge commercial and the exposed paternalism of hierarchies of power captured in *Click, Clack, Moo* is the disturbing reality of assembly-line capitalism accruing wealth to the few from workers as wage-slaves.

Clones, Assembly-line Capitalism, and Wage-Slaves²

To understand the paradoxical relationship between education and the American workforce, *what worker matters* must be confronted: the informed worker with agency and not simply the worker as a wage-slave cog in assembly-line capitalism (Bessie, 2013). To consider this tension, let's move from a children's book to the science fiction (SF) work *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell (2004).

Beyond its flair for the fantastic, SF tends toward the allegorical. In *Cloud Atlas*, humankind masters cloning and produces not-quite human slaves, facilitating some sort of reconciliation between the long history of human enslaving human and the contemporary illusion that eradicating institutional slavery absolves us of culpability in the de facto wage-slavery of assembly-line capitalism. Mitchell's (2004) highly detailed and masterful novel builds through a menagerie of genres and modes of discourse (as exemplified in the text below) to a powerful ending that highlights a motif central to the novel, of human (and clone) bondage within the inevitability of the endurance of privilege:

Belief is both prize & battlefield, within the mind & in the mind's mirror, the world. If we *believe* humanity is a ladder of tribes, a colosseum of confrontation, exploitation & bestiality, such a humanity is surely brought into being, & history's Horroxes, Boerhaaves & Gooses shall prevail. You & I, the moneyed, the privileged, the fortunate, shall not fare so badly in this world, provided our luck holds. What of it if our consciences itch? Why undermine the dominance of our race, our gunship, our heritage & our legacy? Why fight the "natural" (oh, weaselly word!) order of things?

Why? Because of this:—one fine day, a purely predatory world *shall* consume itself....

If we *believe* that humanity may transcend tooth & claw, if we *believe* divers races & creeds can share this world as peaceably as the orphans share their candlenut tree, if we *believe* leaders must be just, violences muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth & its Oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass. (p. 508)

One of the most satisfying and compelling narratives in Mitchell's novel revolves around the clone Somni-451, whom the reader encounters as she nears her execution in "An Orison of Somni-451." What counts as "human" and what constitutes the ethical limits of slavery are complex questions raised in this narrative, along with the possibility of clone revolt and a clone messiah. But the allegorical value in the story of Somni-451 speaks to the recognition of universal public education reduced to a mechanism for producing compliant workers, feeding wage-slaves into assembly-line capitalism's grind.

During my nearly two decades of teaching high school English I encountered a recurring exchange that parallels in disturbing ways the human condition captured in the clone condition of *Cloud Atlas*, particularly as that speaks to the role of workers in America's assembly-line capitalism. A bright young person who had tended to be a diligent student would gradually do less and less work in my class. When I would approach the student about my concern, the student would invariably offer a circular explanation and our conversation would go something like this:

Me: Why are you missing so many assignments?

Student: I'm sorry. I gotta work til 2 or 3 in the morning and I just can't keep up.

Me: Do you have to work?

Student: Yea, I gotta make my car payments.

Me: Why do you have to make car payments?

Student: I gotta have a car to get to work.

This cycle of "gotta" (gotta work, gotta have a car, gotta make money) was powerfully engrained in my students; in fact, the need to work, earn money, and own things were all clearly essential for them to feel adult, and ultimately as essential for them to feel fully human—ironically pushing them into the dehumanizing work cycle identified above. (The impact of the 2008 economic downturn captured in *American Winter* will be discussed below, highlighting a similar dynamic in adult workers.)

In the twenty-first century, the relentless cycle of a high school student blocking products at a grocery store (making sure all items are stacked neatly with the packaging facing forward) differs little from adjunct professors' experiences. From clones in SF to the worker-norms enculturating high schools students, blogging about her experiences as an adjunct instructor in a college, Professor Beth (2012) personified the cycle of "gotta" within which she found herself as a part-time worker coaxed into compliance by the allure of full-time status:

Quickly the demands of the classroom and of the school grew. I was asked to sit on textbook selection committees, to organize guest lecturers to come to campus, and to test out new books. I was told that doing these things would build my CV and provide me with an edge when applying for a full time teaching position. Every demand was couched under the advice that this would position me better for a full time position. I was teaching three courses – sometimes four – and said, 'yes' to every demand....

I applied for a permanent full-time position four separate times and never once was even invited to interview. (n.p.)

Just as a contracting workforce makes advanced degrees both necessary (to gain the best jobs) and unnecessary (as few jobs exist), an adjunct must tolerate overworking as a part-time worker to be considered for full-time professorships—that most likely will never materialize.

The twenty-first century American worker exists many decades past institutional slavery in the U.S., but contemporary workers find themselves trapped in assembly-line capitalism as wage-slaves. And increasingly, public schools are being reformed to guarantee that corporate America will see compliant workers sprout from compliant students (who are being trained by compliant teachers). The endless cycle of accountability built on standards and high-stakes tests is an act of surveillance and control (Foucault, 1984; Thomas, 2011a), not education and liberation.

American workers are being reduced to interchangeable functions, creating for workers the very real fear that they can and will be replaced, easily. In public education, the corporate allure of Teach for America (TFA) is not that the recruits are bright or special, but that they are inherently interchangeable and appear cheaper than a full-time labor force of professionals. TFA recruits are a constant stream of entry-level workers (as are adjuncts in higher education). Fear manufactured by that rotating workforce insures compliant workers, benefitting the corporate elite.

As well, American workers are compelled to work not just for wages but for basic human necessities such as healthcare and retirement, tightening the grip that corporations have on workers even beyond wage-slavery. The systematic dismantling of unions and job security, specifically teachers unions and tenure, is not something to be ignored, or taken lightly like a speculative SF clone war. The de-professionalization of educators at the K-12 and high education levels is not just an assault on academia, but a subset of the deterioration of the American worker.

The U.S. has experienced the belittling of the status of "worker," the dehumanizing of the American worker, the rise in the working poor and 22% of children living in poverty, and the growing chasm between the privileged and all the rest of us—conditions that both the 1% and 99% create and sustain. These conditions are all what we believe to be the natural (or inevitable) order of things within assembly-line capitalism, the Social Darwinism of our self-inflicted rat race, the dog-eat-dog of being a frantic worker (Thomas, 2012), who has been selected from frantic students taught by frantic teachers.

Teachers and the Death of the American Worker³

Twenty-first century America reveals that the idealized worker of the Harvey speech in the Dodge commercial has been lost. Children and adults in poverty, the working poor, and the working class are increasing; the middle-class is eroding; and the pooling of capital among the 1% is expanding, stalling the progress of the the American Dream.

In *The State of Working America*, Mishel, Bivens, Gould, and Shierholz (2012) identified the disturbing trends that signal the death of the American worker:

America's vast middle class has suffered a 'lost decade' and faces the threat of another....Income and wage inequality have risen sharply over the last 30 years....Rising inequality is the major cause of wage stagnation for workers and of the failure of low- and middle-income families to appropriately benefit from growth....Economic policies caused increased inequality of wages and incomes....Claims that growing inequality has not hurt middle-income families are flawed....Growing income inequality has not been offset by increased mobility....Inequalities persist by race and gender. (pp. 5-9)

Increasingly, full-time employment with benefits, unionization, and job security are vanishing. Typical of the dynamic is that public school teachers have no political power or party, and with the Chicago teachers' strike in the fall of 2012, teachers more than ever represent the political and public failure to appreciate and recognize the importance of the American worker. Early and mid-twentieth century America may have been a turning point for unionization in a country that lives more by ideology than evidence (Thomas, 2011b), but even that assessment may be tinted by the rose-colored glasses of hindsight.

The truth is likely that America's embrace of rugged individualism has always been an impenetrable wall between the American character and the solidarity at the core of unions. Nonetheless, the American public school teacher has over the past decade—during the demonstrable decline of the working and middle class as well as the rise of poverty in the U.S.—gradually become the target of the popular corporate agenda to end tenure and break unions, despite the essential democratic nature of both.

Politicians, corporate advocates, and the media have fed a willing public a steady diet of false but robust narratives that characterize teachers as the sole force responsible for (misleading) claims of failed public schools. Any evidence- and experience-based rebuttal to the "bad" teacher claim or the corrupt union mantra has been met with a "no excuses" ideology that chants "poverty is not destiny." This corporate agenda has no basis in fact, but the abundant commentaries and scholarship refuting this drumbeat have failed to pierce the American public's self-defeating faith that America has already become a meritocracy, where success and accomplishment are based on merit and effort, not privilege.

The political and corporate elites know this, and they have little motivation to set aside their distortions that are effective since the 1% benefit in the end. And so the teachers strike in Chicago was mischaracterized across the U.S.—as more accusations of laziness and greediness were heaped on teachers and more evidence accumulated that, according to some critical scholars, the Democratic party is indistinguishable from the Republican party in terms of education and labor policy.

What is most disturbing about the demonizing of teachers and in effect all American workers is that most Americans are and will always be those exact workers who are being stripped of their rights, dignity, and access to the American Dream that the political and corporate elite along with the public claim to be protecting. The 2012 Chicago teachers strike was yet another referendum on the education reform agenda that is destined to deny teachers their professionalism and to further stratify the education system of the U.S. so that affluent children (mostly white) gain even more advantage in their schooling than they have in their lives over children living in working class, working poor, and impoverished homes (disproportionately people of color).

It was a political lie to claim that the 2012 Chicago teachers strike was the fault of lazy and greedy teachers supported by their corrupt unions. It was a political lie to ignore the central demand of those teachers—a stand against test-based teacher accountability. But neither the political elite nor the corporate

elite will eventually lose in this debate because a public embracing the corporate agenda and rejecting the striking teachers is a self-defeating commitment that will guarantee what appears inevitable now—the death of the American worker.

Teachers are not alone in this, but public school teachers are a great example of industrious American workers. It is hard to fathom how we have come to a day when Americans no longer value something that cannot be more American than workers in solidarity. Yet, teachers are quickly being transformed into a service industry, paralleling the Walmart-ification of the American worker whereby new and temporary part-time work is supplanting full-time employment with job security and benefits.

Teaching as a Service Industry⁴

Walt Gardner (2010a), writing in his *Education Week* blog, addressed teacher autonomy: “The latest reminder that freedom of speech for teachers in K-12 is an illusion[;] the court ruled that teachers cannot make their own curricular decisions” (n.p.). This court case, *Evans-Marshall v. Board of Education of the Tipp City Exempted Village School District*, involved an English teacher asking her students to choose among often banned books, to read the selected books, and then to examine why the books were banned. Many educators would consider this assignment a rich and engaging lesson, ideal for high school students. But this ruling came amid an unmatched season for marginalizing teachers and teaching.

In Little Rock, AK, on August 25, 2010, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan presented a speech laced with civil rights discourse, mentioning teachers over four dozen times (and poverty none). In this speech, echoing similar talks by President Obama, Duncan placed public school teachers front and center: “[T]he big game-changer for us, in terms of both formula and competitive programs, revolves around the issue of teacher quality,” adding:

Nothing is more important and nothing has a greater impact on the quality of education than the quality and skill of the person standing in the front of the class—and there is so much that needs to change in the way that America recruits, trains, supports and manages our teachers. (n.p.)

Not long after Obama and Duncan began focusing on teachers and teacher quality as the central component of school reform, the media followed with a similar theme. *Waiting for “Superman”* premiered with a great deal of fanfare and support, including an episode of *Oprah* and a week-long focus on education at NBC. The messages included that the teaching profession is crippled by bad teachers and that teachers unions stand in the way of real reform, since unions protect those bad teachers. Further, *Waiting for “Superman”* suggested that charter schools staffed by teachers from alternative programs, such as TFA (where applicants need only a college degree and a few weeks of training), could be the saviors the U.S. has been seeking for decades when faced with a failing public school system.

In August 2010, as well, the teacher assault was raised even higher when the *Los Angeles Times* published teacher quality analyses based on value-added methods (VAM) (Felch, Song, & Smith, 2010). The charges against teacher quality and teachers unions initiated several stringent rejections (Baker, et al, 2010; Di Carlo, 2010; Gardner, 2010b), but most challenges came from educators themselves—and received little media coverage. The message became clear: U.S. public schools are failures because we have too many bad teachers, and we have too many bad teachers because of teachers unions (Bessie, 2010). But it didn’t stop there.

By October 2010, the narrative added that our teaching core is weak because “[c]ountries with the best-performing school systems largely recruit teachers from the top third of high school and college graduates, while the United States has difficulty attracting its top students to the profession, a new report finds” (Heitin, 2010, n.p.). The formula was growing complex, but a pattern emerged: (a) Usurp teacher union control and fire bad teachers, and then (b) restock depleted teacher core with recruits from the top students in the U.S. Sounds compelling.

Until you consider the great contradictions of all of this and even more recent news. Let's return to teacher autonomy as professionals in the court case noted by Gardner (2010a): “‘Teachers are not everyday citizens,’ the panel wrote, adding that the school board had the right to control teachers’ curricular choices and in-class speech” (Hudson, 2010). Thus, teachers are both the primary agents of poor student outcomes and also not autonomous in what and how they teach? Teachers, according to the courts, are agents of some external authority but not autonomous, and while teachers may be deemed successful or failures at implementing their directives, the ultimate accountability appears to be better aimed at the political dynamic creating the requirements of teachers—political mandates.

Now let's step back from all of the separate but overlapping claims about teachers, teacher quality, and teachers unions. If we look at them together we discover that two powerful but contradictory messages exist simultaneously in the larger public discourse—contradictory messages that allow one message to mask the other. Political and corporate leaders seek to speak about teaching as if it is a profession while expecting those professionals to function as workers in a service industry.

The narratives offered by Obama and Duncan, *Waiting for “Superman,”* and charter schools such as Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) and TFA argue for the best and the brightest teachers to implement mandated Common Core State Standards (CCSS) so that their students can take national tests for which those teachers will be held accountable—all with those teachers having reduced first amendment rights, no right to due process (when unions are broken such as in New Orleans after Katrina or in right-to-work states), and average starting salaries (under \$40,000) that are lower than a common NFL fine (NFL players are both unionized and publicly praised, often receiving fines of \$50,000 and above).

Beneath the political and corporate veneer espousing teaching as a profession lurks a simple fact: corporate America wants teaching to be a service industry, or worse yet, teaching has already become a service industry. Yet, if public education is ever to fulfill its promise as a central element in the pursuit of free and empowered people living in a thriving democracy, we must restore teaching as an autonomous profession—a quest that flies in the face of the contradictory messages dominating public discourse today. Within these contradictory narratives about teachers are powerful message about unions and tenure that also reveal the plight of the American worker more broadly.

Why Tenure and Unions?: On Democracy and Equity in the U.S.⁵

Were he still alive, radical historian, activist, and most of all teacher, Howard Zinn would have turned 90 in 2012, witnessing the erosion of teaching as a profession and the decline of the great American worker. He would likely be troubled by America's antagonism toward unions and tenure, especially teachers unions and tenure. It is at the overlap of Zinn as historian/activist/teacher that I find his writing and activism an invaluable place to ask: Why tenure and unions in twenty-first century America?

The unique and powerful quality Zinn brought to history rests in his foundational principle, a people's history. Zinn confronted directly that the truth embedded in any history is shaped by perspective. Traditionally, the so-called objective history students have been fed in formal schooling is from the point of view of the winners, but Zinn chose to examine the rise and expansion of the U.S. from the point of view of the common person—primarily the viewpoint of the worker. A key point is the contrast between the political and public message that the U.S. has evolved beyond the oppressive corporate world of the robber barons and the horrors fictionalized in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. These idealistic beliefs are similar to Americans claiming we have achieved a meritocracy when at best this goal is a work in progress.

Contemporary Americans appear to be anti-union and anti-tenure, again notably in terms of how that impacts teachers. This sentiment is disturbing as it signals an anti-worker ethos in the U.S.—a country that claims to embrace ideals such as equity, democracy, and hard work as depicted in the Dodge farmers commercial. This contradiction is connected to the exact problem confronted by Zinn as a historian: Americans' anti-worker sentiments (expressed in anti-union and anti-tenure messages) can be traced to

who controls the public narrative—the CEO elite, the winners who believe the rules of the game are fair because they won. If the American public considered for a moment why unions and tenure exist (as well as what tenure means), most Americans would reject the corporate-skewed messages about both.

The American worker (unlike many workers in other comparable countries throughout the world) remains shackled to working in ways that dictate any worker's essential humanity; work in the U.S. is not a matter of salary, but of health insurance and retirement—essential for basic human dignity. The dramatic abuses of the meat packing industry in *The Jungle* may appear more extreme than working conditions in 2013, but bosses and management hold an increasingly powerful upper-hand over the American worker.

Unionization as a concept, then, came out of and remains an act against the inherent inequity and tyranny in the workplace when the powerful few control the working many. Unionization is an act of democracy, an act of equity. To reject unions is to reject democracy and equity. These foundational facts of *why unions* do not deny that specific union policies have failed. It is certainly legitimate to confront individual union policies and outcomes, but this discussion is about the broad anti-union sentiment in the U.S. that reveals anti-worker sentiments.

Tenure is more complicated, but certainly grows out of the same commitment to democracy and equity—especially for teachers. The tenure argument is often distorted because the term itself, "tenure," is misrepresented as "a job for life" and rarely distinguished between tenure at the K-12 level, where it is usually termed *permanent status*, and the college/university level. Tenure is an act of democracy and equity, as well, because it creates power for workers as a guarantee of due process and, for teachers, it secures a guarantee of academic freedom.

But the broad anti-union and anti-tenure agenda being promoted by the corporate elite and the media and embraced by the American public is ultimately a corrosive rejection of equity and democracy. When unions and the possibility of tenure do not fulfill the obligation to produce equity and support democracy, they must be confronted. But unions and tenure remain necessary mechanisms in America's search for equity and democracy—both of which are being eroded by the American elite indebted to and dependent on the inequity that drives American assembly-line capitalism.

“We are penned in by the arrogant idea that this country is the center of the universe, exceptionally virtuous, admirable, superior,” explains Zinn (2006). Although speaking directly about Americans' embrace of war, Zinn makes an important point for considering the American worker and academia:

If we don't know history, then we are ready meat for carnivorous politicians and the intellectuals and journalists who supply the carving knives. I am not speaking of the history we learned in school, a history subservient to our political leaders, from the much-admired Founding Fathers to the Presidents of recent years. I mean a history which is honest about the past. If we don't know that history, then any President can stand up to the battery of microphones, declare that we must go to war, and we will have no basis for challenging him. He will say that the nation is in danger, that democracy and liberty are at stake, and that we must therefore send ships and planes to destroy our new enemy, and we will have no reason to disbelieve him. (n.p.)

Without, then, the democratic and equity-based purposes for unions and tenure, the American public remains, as Zinn notes, victims of the privileged.

Zinn also personified a message of rejecting neutrality, of activism as democracy—thus against the compliant norm for workers and the objective, non-political mandate for teachers. Writing about Sacco and Vanzetti, Zinn (2007) shared questions raised by Vanzetti, questions still relevant today against the knee-jerk and self-defeating anti-union and anti-tenure sentiments rising in the U.S.. Zinn wrote that “it was their anarchism, their love for humanity, which doomed them” (n.p.). On the day of his arrest, a leaflet was found in Vancetti's pocket promoting an upcoming meeting. Zinn suggested that it the leaflet was as relevant today as it was when it was printed:

It is a leaflet that could be distributed today, all over the world, as appropriate now as it was the day of their arrest. It read:

You have fought all the wars. You have worked for all the capitalists. You have wandered over all the countries. Have you harvested the fruits of your labors, the price of your victories? Does the past comfort you? Does the present smile on you? Does the future promise you anything? Have you found a piece of land where you can live like a human being and die like a human being? On these questions, on this argument, and on this theme, the struggle for existence, Bartolomeo Vanzetti will speak. (n.p.)

Right to Work in an Era of Disaster Capitalism?

The discussion so far has weaved together several different but related threads that create a disturbing fabric of the American worker in the grips of assembly-line capitalism. Now, with the Dodge farmers commercial, *Click, Clack, Moo*, and the clone-workers of *Cloud Atlas* in mind, I want to pull the threads more tightly together by examining three final texts—a work of educational journalism, a documentary, and a TV sit-com—in order to add a final piece to the puzzle in which education is touted as essential for a vibrant American workforce while American workers are being reduced to wage-slaves in an expanding service industry. That final piece is that the American worker, including those gaining advanced degrees and finding fewer and fewer tenure-track positions in academia, now in the throes of *disaster capitalism*.

Hurricane Katrina forever changed the city of New Orleans, but the city also experienced another disaster, this time human-made with the economic downturn of 2008. Post-Katrina New Orleans was ground-zero for an assault on workers that remains essentially ignored into 2013. The Recovery School District, led by CEO-styled superintendent Paul Vallas, fired the entire teacher workforce and created a new educational landscape typified by charter schools (mostly corporate entities such as KIPP) and temporary teachers (mostly TFA). As Carr (2013) explains, “the firing of New Orleans school employees was an attack on the city’s black middle class” (p. 121). This action represents disaster capitalism, in which “disaster was being harnessed to push through a radical vision of totally unrestricted markets” (Klein qtd. in Rooney, 2007), as experienced in New Orleans.

That same human-made disaster, 2008’s economic downturn, was the context for disaster capitalism feeding on the middle class of Oregon, captured in the HBO documentary *American Winter*. Conservative political leadership continues to benefit from populist and libertarian discourse about the need to shrink government, the messages resonating most often with the middle class and the most vulnerable segments of the public:

And all of this is being done in the name of supposedly preserving the middle class, but as the documentary “American Winter” argues, the entire approach is not only wrong headed, it’s only making things worse for the people these policies are supposed to protect. (Jagernaught, 2013, n.p.)

American Winter exposes, as in the example of post-Katrina New Orleans, that disaster capitalism seeks tragedy to shift the market in the favor of corporations. Workers are first discarded in large numbers, and then as the workforce contracts, a subset of those displaced workers are rehired, but at greatly reduced wages and often part-time without benefits or job security. While assembly-line capitalism requires workers to be interchangeable widgets, disaster capitalism adds the weight of insecurity personified by one young family man being hired toward the end of the HBO documentary; although he was overqualified and accepting a deeply reduced pay, the worker was filmed thanking the employer and expressing that he would take any job, do anything, and work hard—echoing the resignation felt by Offred/June in Margaret Atwood’s (1998) dystopia, *The Handmaid’s Tale*: “The circumstances have been reduced” (p. 8). And in disaster capitalism, that reduction tilts against the worker.

Finally, in the wake of disaster capitalism in New Orleans and Oregon, pop culture, specifically *The Big Bang Theory*, is a crucible of not only the role of workers in the U.S. but also the attitudes about the worker that series highlights. Penny, the stereotypical “girl next door,” is the object of an on-going,

clichéd joke of a waitress who longs to be an actress. The larger and central jokes of the series, however, are the four academics living across the hall from Penny. It seems in this TV world, all work is funny.

What a TV sit-com never addresses, however, is that in the real world, the gap between Penny as waitress and college professors is shrinking, or better phrased, merging. The state of the American worker is beginning to share with waitressing some disturbing characteristics that cheapen all workers. As Greider (2013) details about the restaurant industry, workers of all types are becoming less often protected by unions, receiving fewer or no benefits (paid sick days, vacation days, health insurance, retirement) with their positions, being paid less than previous generations, and generally suffering under a dynamic whereby the businesses have more or all of the power in the business-worker relationship.

In the real world, Penny and one of the academics, Leonard, would not be wrestling over the education gap between them, but would be sharing the consequences of part-time work in a hostile economy toward workers regardless of those workers' qualifications since Leonard would be an adjunct (like Professor Beth) while Penny would remain a waitress—and both would be unsatisfied as workers because their situations do not live up to their ideals.

Yet, most Americans will always be workers, and to be a worker should be an honorable thing worthy of poetic speeches and artistic black-and-white film tributes. Being an American worker doesn't need to be a condition tolerated on the way to something better, and it shouldn't be twenty-first century wage-slavery that is a reality echoed in the allegory of SF: “one fine day, a purely predatory world *shall* consume itself.” As the last paragraphs of *Cloud Atlas* express, however, the wage-slavery of workers in the context of assembly-line and disaster capitalism is a condition Americans have chosen (or at least been conditioned to choose), but it is also a condition workers can change—if workers *believe* it is wrong, “such a world will come to pass.”

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NOTES

¹ Adapted from “‘Click, Clack, Moo’: Why the One Percent Always Wins,” *Truthout* (November 2, 2011), retrievable from <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/4526:%E2%80%9Cclick-clack-moo%E2%80%9D-why-the-one-percent-always-wins>

² Adapted from “Clones, Assembly-line Capitalism, and Wage-Slaves,” *Daily Kos* (December 10, 2012), retrievable from <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/12/10/1168718/-Clones-Assembly-line-Capitalism-and-Wage-Slaves>

³ Adapted from “Teachers and the Death of the American Worker,” *AlterNet* (September 12, 2012), retrievable from <http://www.alternet.org/teachers-and-death-american-worker>

⁴ Adapted from “Teaching as a Service Industry,” *Daily Censored* (November 14, 2010), retrievable from <http://www.dailycensored.com/the-teaching-profession-as-a-service-industry/>

⁵ Adapted from “Why Tenure and Unions?: On Democracy and Equity in the U.S.,” *Daily Kos* (August 26, 2012), retrievable from <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/08/26/1124337/-Why-Tenure-and-Unions-On-Democracy-and-Equity-in-the-U-S>; also at *Truthout*, <http://truth-out.org/speakout/item/11154-remembering-howard-zinn-by-meditating-on-teacher-unions-and-tenure>