



Kamper, D.S. (2004). Review of *Cogs in the Classroom Factory: The Changing Identity of Academic Labor*. *Workplace*, 11, 197-201.

DAVID SCOTT KAMPER

REVIEW OF *COGS IN THE CLASSROOM FACTORY: THE CHANGING
IDENTITY OF ACADEMIC LABOR*

edited by
Deborah M. Herman and Julie M. Schmid
Praeger, 2003

One of the only constants in history is the perception of change. It seems that no one, and no group, likes to believe they are living in times of continuity and stability. Instead, the general tendency is to magnify, rightly or wrongly, the changes occurring around us: radicals for the purposes of proclaiming a new dawn, conservatives to decry the erosion of traditional institutions and values.

2. The academic labor movement is not immune from this tendency. A series of publications in recent years, like Cary Nelson's *Will Teach for Food* and Gary Rhoades's *Managed Professionals*, have all been written with the explicit or implicit premise that the last decade or so marks a new era in academic unionism. The editors of *Cogs in the Classroom Factory: The Changing Identity of Academic Labor* agree, insisting that the current growth of academic unions constitutes a "renaissance" (8).

3. Herman and Schmid have assembled a stimulating collection of nine essays to discuss this rebirth of labor organizing in the academy, along with a foreword by labor historian David Montgomery and a remarkably good afterword by Carl Rosen. Herman and Schmid are both veterans of the Campaign to Organize Graduate Students (COGS), the graduate employee union at the University of Iowa (the only recognized grad union affiliated with the United Electrical Workers), so it is not surprising that five of the essays concern graduate organizing. Three more focus mostly on tenure-line faculty, which sadly leaves only one essay for discussing adjunct employees, an imbalance that does a disservice to the fascinating organizing efforts taking place among such workers today. Thankfully, Joe Berry's essay on adjunct life, "In a Leftover Office in Chicago," is an excellent gem of personal archaeology that manages to be both sentimental and informative. The essays also all deal with public institutions; with so much private-sector higher education organizing in recent years, that perspective is missed.

4. This collection should be essential reading for anyone interested in the academic labor movement today. It is not without its shortcomings, and some of its essays are more enlightening than others, but it is well worth a look. Rather than simply give capsule reviews of each essay, I want to examine two of the major methodological and political questions raised by the collection: the importance of discretion versus openness in writings about contemporary unions, and the question of whether academic unionism is an exceptional category not subject to the same laws of organizing that obtain among "blue-collar" workplaces.

5. Herman and Schmid did not impose tight restrictions on the content and methodology of their contributors' works, for better or for worse, and the result is an eclectic mix of personal narratives, de-personalized analyses, and thinly-disguised polemics. The different styles are worth thinking about, because they illustrate one of the real challenges facing academic unionists writing about the subject: what is the proper balance between the need to maintain discretion about an ongoing political project and the desire to offer useful criticism based on experience?

6. This volume is not neutral; everyone who contributed to it supports academic unionism. That goal surely warrants explicit candor and a critical eye, to help future organizing efforts avoid past mistakes. At the same time, supporters of academic unionism must always be aware of the lengths academic employers are willing to go to bust unions. The past two years, for example, have seen strenuous efforts by the administrations at Columbia, Tufts, Brown, and the University of Pennsylvania to prevent the votes of graduate employees from being counted, even after the National Labor Relations Board ordered representation elections. Tens of millions of dollars are spent annually to fight academic unions; surely a small portion of that money will be spent for anti-union consultants to buy this book and learn what secrets academic unionists may have to tell.

7. The nine contributors to this volume have, whether consciously or unconsciously, dealt with this conundrum in varying ways. Near one extreme is Darla Williams' study of the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties (APSCUF), a statewide union of full- and part-time faculty in the 14 Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education schools. Williams wants to look at "identity construction by a faculty union during an organizational crisis," in this case a particularly difficult and protracted round of collective bargaining by a mature union partly hamstrung by an empty strike fund, little public support, and threats from a Republican governor (171). However, Williams keeps the reader at arm's length from APSCUF's members and how they maintained solidarity through the negotiations. Williams looks only at the literature produced by APSCUF, not at the behavior of the union at membership meetings, the structure of organizing in a multi-campus union, or how literature was used in one-on-one conversations with members preparing for a possible strike. Williams certainly gives nothing away to the employers, but to analyze a contract campaign solely through the public literature it produced will be of limited help to anyone trying to model APSCUF's notable successes.

8. At the other end of the spectrum is Richard Sullivan's "Pyrrhic Victory at UC Santa Barbara: The Struggle for Labor's New Identity." The United Auto Workers' daring and brilliantly successful effort to organize graduate employees on all eight campuses of the University of California system had more than its share of drama, but from Sullivan's point of view the real story is not the UAW's amazing win, but the supposed damage UAW did to the democratic organizing culture at UC Santa Barbara. (Sullivan's half-hearted claims to disinterestedness serve only as a distraction; he clearly holds strong personal opinions, and his essay would have been better served by being open about them.) Sullivan makes many charges against the UAW—including serious allegations about vote-rigging—that he claims arose from the UAW's attempts to stifle democracy at UC Santa Barbara. Sullivan tells a detailed narrative—in which he was very much a participant observer—of undemocratic practices he claims UAW engaged in: holding secret meetings to exclude unwanted members, breaking promises at the bargaining table, and even purging dissidents from the organization. It should be noted that much of what he says is speculation, and he is very selective in what parts of the story he chooses to tell. Regardless, many will read this essay as an indictment of the UAW, and by extension all graduate employee unions.

9. Here's the dilemma. Sullivan's claims are already being used by employers and anti-union groups at other campuses, including "At What Cost?", an anti-union student group that played at least some part in the UAW's defeat at Cornell in 2002. Even if we accept that Sullivan's motives were pure, there remains the fact that much of what he wrote will be used by those trying to defeat academic unions. His story is gripping and surprising, and worth telling for the questions it raises, but because it is polemic, not academic analysis, it is out of place in this volume. One finishes the essay desperate for the UAW to be

given equal time to reply. Sullivan's essay illustrates the challenges faced by an academic labor movement that is committed to democracy, even when the free exercise of democracy gives ammunition to those who oppose it.

10. Supporters of academic unions need to think about this in greater detail. Are there ways to create fora where provocative but easily misappropriated ideas could be introduced in a friendly atmosphere, so that the real concerns of people like Sullivan could be expressed without airing them to the boss? One thinks of organizations like the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL) or the Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions (CGEU), which are places where unionists can air criticisms and discuss challenges without lots of prying eyes. Or does even the suggestion of such an idea smack of the very intolerance of criticism against which academic unionists fight?

11. Mike Burke and Joanne Naiman's "Dueling Identities and Faculty Unions: A Canadian Case Study," on the Ryerson Faculty Association (RFA), is an essay that navigates these questions with great dexterity. The authors are openly critical of the RFA's past acceptance of a two-tiered contract model that, in essence, preserved compensation and benefits for one generation of faculty by ensuring the next generation would not share them. Burke and Naiman offer a cautionary tale about shortsighted thinking by unions, and they tell it well, but it is not just a critique of the RFA. The main target of the essay is the Ryerson administration. What they describe for Canadian universities is equally applicable to the American context, and the essay ought to encourage faculty unions to look more closely at the short-term/long-term effects of administration contract proposals. Burke and Naiman neither sugarcoat their problems with the faculty union nor dwell on them to the exclusion of useful suggestions for ways to improve.

12. The intended main theme of the essays, as the subtitle of the volume suggests, is the question of academic labor and identity. Herman and Schmid are interested in the "tension between professional and worker identity in the professoriat," broadly defined (2). How does one organize unions filled with people who all too often refuse to accept the idea that they are labor?

13. The contributors to this volume offer two different answers to this question. One answer is to say the solution lies in the unique nature of academia and the unique qualities of academics, and that traditional organizing methods will not work with professors, adjuncts, and graduate students. Academic labor, according to this perspective, is exceptional. The other answer takes the opposite point of view: academic labor is organized like any other kind of labor, and while the specific issues and employment conditions vary from workplace to workplace, the methods of organizing that work for plumbers, nurses, and grocery clerks also work for academic labor.

14. The structure of the volume itself implicitly seems to endorse the first idea. This is not, in fact, a book of essays on academic labor, but on the labor of academics. Missing entirely from the collection is the reminder that the contemporary university work environment includes not only professors and grads but also academic professionals, clerical and technical support staff, campus police, physical plant employees, building and grounds workers, and bus drivers. As a result of such omissions, the volume seems to suggest that organizing academics is a process unrelated to the many others who work alongside them at universities.

15. This is clearly untrue. There are countless connections between efforts to organize academics and to maintain unions of academics, and the labor of the general campus community. The grads at the University of Pennsylvania, for example, have marched side-by-side with workers whose jobs have been de-unionized by that school's administration. The Teaching Assistants' Association at the University of Wisconsin-Madison regularly coordinates its bargaining and legislative strategies with those of other campus workers. GESO—the Graduate Employees and Students Organization—at Yale works hand-in-

hand with other campus unions. This reviewer has heard of times when campus clerical workers leaked useful, if confidential, information to organizers.

16. To this reviewer, then, the notion that academics have to be organized differently from other workers is inaccurate at best and elitist at worst. In Wesley Shumar and Jonathan Church's essay, "Above and Below: Mapping Social Positions within the Academy," dense language and shifting voices attempt to define the problems of academic labor, particularly the invisibility of an academic underclass of adjuncts and grads, as a discursive problem latent in the language and structure of academia. All well and good, to be sure, but every workforce ever created has its own internal gradations that tend to marginalize the worst off and reward those at the top. Do we really need Bourdieu and Sartre to say this? Would Shumar and Church feel it necessary to use the same philosophers to analyze a union of carpenters?

17. Similarly, the following claim by Darla Williams cannot go unchallenged. "Historically," Williams contends,

unions have represented blue-collar workers whose collective interests were perhaps easier to define. These unions emphasize collectivity, identical treatment, promotion through seniority and a leveling out of the differences among workers. Unionized intellectual workers are employees with conflicting allegiances. Their collective interests are not so easily defined, and their identification is less easily secured. (172)

Only the "perhaps" acknowledges that the author has little experience with unions outside academia, where conflicting allegiances (think of the dedication nurses have for patient care over their contract's workload policy; or the inherent loyalty of third-generation steelworkers to the company they grew up with) and collective interests that are hard to define (think of the 1997 UPS strike, where full-time workers finally realized that the treatment of part-time employees was something they needed to worry about) are also the norm, just as in the academy.

18. James Thompson's "Unfinished Chapters: Institutional Alliances and Changing Identities in a Graduate Employee Union" does not fall into the trap of suggesting that academic workers are inherently different from other employees, but the author does go to great lengths to individualize the situation of Graduate Assistants United (GAU), a part of the United Faculty of Florida (UFF) at the University of Florida. GAU has long struggled to maintain membership and gain strength, and Thompson ascribes the union's problems to external factors: a state with low union density, an anti-union climate, and the nature of the GAU's strained relationship with its state affiliate. Certainly these issues can make organizing more difficult, but we do not learn from Thompson how the union organizes. Does the difficulty of getting resolutions passed through the UFF Senate really affect the quality of one-on-one organizing conversations with potential members?

19. The most rewarding essays in this volume are the ones which recognize that, at the end of the day, organizing is organizing, regardless of the workforce; and that the peculiarities faced by academic workers are no more peculiar than those faced by other laborers across society. Eric Dirnbach and Susan Chimonas' "Shutting Down the Academic Factory: Developing Worker Identity in Graduate Employee Unions" is a study of two bargaining cycles undertaken by the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) at the University of Michigan in 1996 and 1999. While it acknowledges the characteristics of graduate employee unions that make for difficult organizing—most notably turnover and the tendency of grads to see themselves as students first—the essay argues it is possible, and indeed necessary, for academics to identify themselves as workers in order to achieve the best possible gains through collective bargaining. Dirnbach and Chimonas do not say this will be an easy task, but they are right to claim that, in an environment where administrations pay only lip service to shared governance, unions of academics will

find their greatest collective interests when they see themselves as workers, and build an organizing strategy that will make that happen.

20. William Vaughn's "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been an Employee?: Contesting Graduate Labor in the Academy" speaks to similar ideas in its account of the Graduate Employees' Organization-IFT/AFT at the University of Illinois, and its legal struggles for recognition. Vaughn rightly suggests that "those interested in organizing should devote their energy to on-the-ground campaigns, rather than legal squabbles. When you organize, *you* define the terms of the debate. When you litigate, you do not" (154). For more than five years, the GEO fought against an army of administration lawyers to prove to the courts that graduate employees were indeed employees. It is no coincidence that the Court of Appeals decision which finally ruled in the union's favor came only weeks after the GEO's first sit-in in the spring of 2000, or that a negotiated bargaining unit decision only resulted after GEO members and supporters took over an entire administration building in 2002. Academics may enjoy word games, argues Vaughn, but in order to win they need to organize, just like everyone else. (Disclosure: both Vaughn and this reviewer were once members of the GEO.)

21. Similarly, Susan Roth Breitzer's "More than Academic: Labor Consciousness and the Rise of UE Local 896-COGS" highlights the importance of worker identity in building a union for grads at the University of Iowa. COGS is the only graduate employee union in the last two decades to lose one representation election (in 1994) but rebound and win a second (in 1996). This essay tells much of the story of how that happened (though sadly, the oft-circulated rumor that the COGS Organizing Committee all got tattoos after the 1996 win is not verified here). Breitzer focuses much of the attention on COGS' decision to become the first academic union to affiliate with the United Electrical workers. Her analysis makes clear that, despite the UE's inexperience in academic labor, the union was able to adapt rapidly to the environment of the university. One can also look to the success of the Communication Workers of America and the UAW in higher education as additional proof that organizing models which work in industry can also be applied to academia.

22. Many of these essays were written right at the turn of the millennium, before state budgets crashed. Since then, Governor Jeb Bush has drastically reconfigured the state university system, forcing GAU and the rest of the UFF to re-apply for recognition, a process that, while lengthy, appears to be succeeding. The GEO at Illinois finally got its union election in December 2002, winning 1188-347, and is bargaining its first contract. The GEO at Michigan won another magnificent contract, applying the same techniques they used in 1999. APSCUF in Pennsylvania came very close to a strike in 2003, but again the crisis was averted and the union's contract is still enviable. A change in the collective bargaining law in Illinois will allow Joe Berry's adjuncts to organize far more rapidly and effectively than before. And just weeks ago, grad employees in the UC system voted overwhelmingly, albeit with a low turnout, to ratify their second contract.

23. Whither academic labor? For the foreseeable future, most public universities will face budget crunches of a magnitude not seen for more than a decade. With belts tightening, it is possible academic laborers will find themselves fighting one another for the scant resources available—professors against adjuncts, US citizens against international students and scholars, academics against clerical workers. However, an alternative future is also possible. As the essays in this volume indicate, workers in the academy are capable of rising to the challenge and beating the odds. If academic workers are able to develop their identity as professionals *and* workers, they can continue to fight for all those who are a part of today's classroom factories.