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## LOOKING FORWARD IN ANGER

Initially, I thought of this paper as an update on a talk I gave at the graduate student caucus' session at the December '96 MLA, a panel which discussed union organizing for grad employees and adjunct faculty. At the time, I was participating in a union organizing campaign on the University of Pittsburgh campus involving grad students, which I had hoped would expand to include part-time and adjunct instructors. In that paper, I spoke of the long and difficult history of attempts to organize employees on the Pitt campus. The immediate catastrophe was a plan announced by the Provost to follow the recommendations of consultants and eliminate various graduate programs, a plan all too familiar now on many campuses.

My focus quickly turned to my own immediate future in January, when it became clear that funding for the part-time budget in my department was on the chopping block. This had been foreseen for some time, but was now imminent. The Dean insisted on reducing the budget and despite the largest-EVER freshman class at Pitt, I lost my job. In April I received a letter telling me I would be offered no classes to teach. The first casualty was my health insurance, which had been crucial to a long recovery from a chronic illness.

Since then, I've been kinda depressed and wondering what to do! Should I finish my degree? Should I look for an organizing job? Why was I worried about career meltdown, since I'd never been particularly invested in the idea of an academic career (could it be the fear of having to repay tens of thousands of dollars I owe for student loans, with no concrete job prospects)? After ten years of work with very little to show for it, I have wiped out. It feels kinda like the secret shame of having an STD - we all know it's a social disease, but it's difficult to talk about in polite company, and doesn't everyone seem to want to avoid contact with the infected individual?

But I'm not prepared to be polite about this. I'm still justifiably angry at the Chancellor, Provost, Deans, Board of Directors (oops! Trustees), et al., for their management policy of reducing faculty, full- and part-time, while touting an Initiative for Undergraduate Education. Of course, they don't just pick on the faculty and staff. While they give big pay boosts to already-overpaid administrators and buy new Harleys for the campus police, they deny the police and maintenance workers' unions reasonable contracts.

What I've learned in the last few years is that, for many of us who make the university work, accessible and affordable education, once one of the dreams offered by the Great Society, has been supplanted by the nightmare of "just-in-time education" (thank you, David Noble). Trustees at institutions like Pitt have made their neoliberal goals quite clear: "world-class" is a codeword for bringing the global economy home, producing technicians for transnational industries, while the labor that runs the university is "casualized" (grotesquerie!), to make the institution more "competitive". And since the editors of *WORKPLACE* have graciously granted me the opportunity to vent my anger, I'd like to rant about what's wrong with the workplace known as the research university (and this is by no means a comprehensive or

representative list...)

**FORGET THE COMPANY UNION MENTALITY!!!!!!!!!!!!**

I am contemptuous of the way my Department Chair and Literature Director avoided eye contact with me after I was laid off. Why should they hang their heads if they did the right thing? Because they didn't do the right thing, and they know it. These are among the overwhelming majority of faculty in my department who voted to join a faculty union in the most recent organizing campaign, but who would never dream of engaging in a job action to actually save jobs.

Academic bureaucrats of America, you (collectively) have not done the right thing for about 20 years, by my count, and it's time to hold you accountable. Many of you suffer from the mentality that says put your career first and let others work as hard as you or be as talented as you or get as lucky as you and maybe they'll do ok, too. That won't wash anymore. We're experiencing a major structural crisis which now requires massive political action. Since Boards of Trustees, Chancellors, Provosts, Deans and Department Chairs have together mostly collaborated to allow the crisis of un/underemployment to worsen, cheapening the value of our work, I'm holding you accountable. Why should I be out of work when I did my job and you're making from \$60,000 to \$400,000 a year and you didn't do yours? And in case there's any confusion, let me make plain what I mean by doing your job - making sure that educational institutions continue to educate! Graduate programs are the means by which universities reproduce themselves AS educational institutions, and not simply as funnels for supplying technicians to employers or patents to industry. Doesn't that make me the equivalent of an academic partial-birth abortion?

But more to the point of the company union mentality - either you collaborate with administrators to downsize and underemploy your workforce, or you share your limited power with junior faculty, adjuncts and part-time faculty, grad students/employees and staff to assure that there be education of students, parents and citizens about the crisis, education which leads to collective political action to stop the current trend. Do parents and students want to continue to pay more for less educational value? I don't think so. Take a simple test to know whether you have the company union mentality. Do you support administrators who cut costs by cutting personnel, salaries, benefits or other employee-related expenses? OR do you support the students, adjuncts and junior faculty whose quality of life depends on the promotion of education and demotion of bottom-line thinking? If you're in neither camp, you're nowhere. And making things worse. Visit the campus union organizing campaign of grad employees/adjuncts, staff or maintenance workers nearest you for some hints on what you should do.

**ACADEMIC FREEDOM IS NOT JUST A GOOD IDEA; IT'S A NECESSITY.**

Much has been written and said about the attacks on tenure, but we need to organize to defend the practice of academic freedom, without playing into the neoliberal dissing of tenured radicals. As long as academic freedom is a concept primarily linked with tenure, it will remain a privilege, not a right. Those most in need of the protection for scholarly work are those most marginally employed - grad employees, part-timers and adjuncts. In a survey of grad students conducted at Pitt in 1996, we found that those with partial funding (less than 20 hours per week) reported the most self-censorship. Presumably, they molded their work to go along with the dominant flow of funded work, or self-censored when it seemed to help get access to the funding flow. Considering the attacks on the tenure-stream, funding cuts and intimidation of organizing drives, academic freedoms needs to be transformed from a lost hope or slogan, to a standard which represents the integrity and independence of our work. If it is not extended as a right to all, it will be lost as the privilege of the tenured few.

**EDUCATION  $\neq$  CREDENTIALING**

When I talked to my students about their college education experience, there was a striking tendency to discuss it as a credentialing exercise. My classes were filled because they met a writing requirement and fit into students' schedules. Still, students were usually happy to be engaged with topics which weren't necessarily usable for career purposes, and were especially attentive when discussing the process of

university education. Particularly among upperclassmen, I found anger about the raw deal they were getting educationally. As one Pitt undergrad said to me, "I bought my degree". While scrambling to play the credentialing game the best they could, undergrads seemed cynical about the possibilities of changing the high cost, limited options, competitiveness, and narrow dimensions of a college-education-cum-survival-of-the-fittest. But there's tremendous potential to address that anger and mobilize it, to make allies of undergrads. Rather than invoking tired refrains about the humanistic OR practical benefits of a college education, try asking your students about their expectations vs. experience, and teach them how to critique the institution. I asked one class about their plans after graduation, and nearly three-fourths hoped to go to graduate school! I was stunned by this response and felt compelled to discuss the brutal job prospects, but it led to a better understanding of the politics of the classroom. I wished I had done this early and often in my teaching practice.

That so many of us are "willing" to teach for low compensation and lousy job security is perhaps our greatest weakness and our greatest strength. I wonder how many of us wanted to work in academia because, despite the economic hardships of grad school, it appeared as a refuge from corporate-think, cube cities and life as Dilbert-clones. But we were also lured to Ph.D. programs at one point by the promise of jobs, especially the infamous MLA report which suggested an increase in the number of tenure-stream jobs in the early 90s. I remember reading a summary of it while in a Master's program at the University of Texas at Austin. It was posted on a bulletin board in the Department of English, and I'm not sure I would have pursued a Ph.D. without such a rosy picture of the future. Shame on me for wanting to believe its veracity, but what about those who wrote it, as well as those who publicized it, without looking around to analyze the corporatization of the academy and increasing exploitation of adjunct faculty? Shame on you for being bad scholars & politically naive!

But enough of my anger. We didn't make the mess we're in, but the only out of it is to organize. That's why I've joined the labor movement. And not a moment too soon. To paraphrase Rich Trumka, THE civil rights issue of the next millennium is the right to organize. Just do it.

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