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Beyond the Campus Gates: New Trends with Old Twists — The Personal is Still Political

What do California, Indiana, Iowa, New York, Pennsylvania and Texas have in common? They all are experiencing similar shifts in the nature and form of academic work, and they all have groups of academic activists who are fighting to see to it that those shifts do not result in disaster for the university and for the communities that it serves. In the six reports that appear in this issue of WORKPLACE we can find that each location has unique problems and characteristics, but also that they share a broader tendency on the part of the higher education system to increasingly rely on graduate teaching assistants and/or part-time faculty to teach their bread-and-butter courses. What I find most fascinating in these reports is that, whereas each of them explains how the local conditions are influencing their responses, everyone seems to recognize that these conditions are national (even international) in scope. The response to these conditions, thus, needs to acknowledge these levels of the conflict if we are to be successful. In this essay, I would like to point to some of the common themes that emerge from these reports, and try to provide a synthesis. Taken as a whole, it appears that these labor union activists/scholars are moving toward a new understanding of the role that organized labor must take to face the task of organizing under these changing social and economic conditions. This understanding, and the debate surrounding it will be crucial to our future successes.

These writers and activists all share Barbara White's belief that, "the only way out is to organize." Eric Marshall (New York) points to a lesson learned about organizing when he talks about the necessity for coalition-building in order to gain success. The examples he gives of coalitions that have formed at CUNY are promising and hopeful. He extends the scope of these alliances in an important way with his call to bring on board the undergraduate student body to help politically defend public higher education.

Another common thread that has emerged is the understanding of the macro-level processes — globalization, downsizing, privatization, attacks on affirmative action, corporate welfare, etc. As Ray Watkins (Texas) points out, these attacks and their damaging effects indicate that we "need to go beyond the forms of democracy that governed universities in the past." His colleague, Kirsten Christensen (Texas) follows up more specifically on this idea and points out how, in a right-to-work state such as Texas, in which state employees "have no legal right to collective bargaining," that they have implemented a strategy of 'de facto' bargaining. This entails lobbying legislators as well as making alliances with like-minded faculty and staff from across the state. This tactical adaptation could prove to be a political move that other states (without these legal limitations) would do well to copy, despite their relatively advantaged position. Collective bargaining is a right that we should strive for, but in the absence of favorable "naturally" occurring labor markets there is little leverage to bargain with unless there is political pressure put on the legislature. Texas legal limitations aside, the political mobilization may be just what is needed.

Sometimes the struggle takes us where many have gone before — that is, before an administrative law judge. In a PERB hearing in California, described by Kate Burns and Anthony M. Navarrete (UC, San Diego), the Counsel for UC makes two analogies that are worth recounting here. The first one concerned cannibals, and the lawyer abandoned it before he made his point so that s/he could make another analogy regarding Star Trek and the concept of the "prime directive" that has been frequently invoked in many episodes. Speaking as a long time observer of the series, the example given by the lawyer doesn't fly, but it is worth mentioning for the light that the analogy inadvertently sheds on the situation. According to Burns and Navarrete, the lawyer was trying to say that the state should not grant collective bargaining rights for readers and tutors because that would interfere in the internal workings of the university, just as the "prime directive" prohibits members of the Federation from interfering in the evolution of other species. What the lawyer failed to point out is that in the Star Trek series, the non-interference prohibition "prime directive" only applied to non-Federation species whom they encountered in their travels. In fact, they took the greatest care to insure the education of their own young, as well as insuring their health and general well-being. In the utopian vision of Gene Roddenberry, poverty has been abolished and basic needs are met for everyone. They do not even use money anymore as a system of exchange. The lawyer would have been far more accurate to stick with his first analogy — cannibalism. As we approach the millennium, the underlying ideology that governs the society seems to be "eat the young."

The U.C. Counsel's argument is far more insidious, however. It is more reminiscent of the approach of those who hold power as this relationship is described by E.E. Schattschneider in his classic of political science, (1960, The Dryden Press). Schattschneider notes how groups that are in power will seek to privatize conflict rather than politicize it. In this way, they can protect the status quo. Groups that are marginalized in the power game should, thus, seek to politicize the issues and widen the scope of the conflict. The U.C. Counsel seeks to keep it in the "family" — the university as a sacred sort of place. But the family is highly dysfunctional. And taking a line from the Sixties, the personal is political. Fortunately the judge in this case came down on the side of the ASE/UAW, but the case serves to bring into relief the outlines of the conflict, and that is not going to be resolved without a fight.

The personal is still political. Ed Fox (Indiana) makes reference to a crucial obstacle to success when he says, "Organization means overcoming isolation." This really is a struggle for hearts and minds. Isolation keeps the decision-making out of our hands and out of the public view. Organizations, associations, coalitions — all help to overcome that and to capture the imagination. Widening the scope of the conflict. Isolation tends to help us to keep thinking of ourselves in terms of individualistic identities instead of collectively. Perhaps the most damaging way that this happens has been pointed to by Julie Marie Schmid (Iowa) who suggests that successful defense of graduate employees rights depends on a "paradigm shift." That is, the "graduate employees ... at Iowa have had to redefine themselves as workers as well as students and colleagues." Perhaps an even more challenging paradigm shift would be for the full-time professoriate to begin to think of themselves as workers also. There is a long-time bias, that goes back at least as far as Thorstein Veblen's era, for college professors to think of themselves as professionals, and, thus, not as unionists. Can they not be both? With the increasing use of part-timers and graduate student faculty, and the accompanying loss of faculty power overall (e.g., the tenure battle), even full-time faculty are increasingly playing the role of employees. Can all academic workers be both professionals and employees: professional in our research and in the classroom; employees in our collective bargaining and activism? What do these multiple determinations of identity add up to? The word 'citizen' comes to mind. Overcoming isolation means becoming a part of the citizenry — making a private thing into a public thing, or, said another way, making the personal into something political.

Feelings of isolation tend to discourage people from seeing their own lives and their own struggles as being part of a bigger picture. These trends can only be effectively addressed by a broader social movement. This does not mean the exclusion of organized labor but on the contrary, provides a broader mandate of leadership for a reinvigorated labor movement. We need to develop a shared understanding of

the issues that we face if we are to effectively proceed. This takes time.

When we begin to overcome the isolation and communicate with each other more, as in this forum, we will begin to see that the unique circumstances that shape our own little corner are not entirely unique. We have different local configurations, we all are facing a fight for the heart and soul of higher education itself. The new problems that have emerged for academic workers have moved beyond the bounds of the campus gates (and the shop floor). The participants in organized (academic) labor need to meet these new trends (or perhaps they are old trends with new twists?) and develop a strategy that is appropriate to the problem. The changing formations and patterns in the structure of both the economy and the academy have forced to the forefront a contradiction that organized labor had forgotten for many years: do we engage in pure-and-simple economic trade unionism (business unionism) that seeks to protect the workers of each individual collective bargaining unit or, even, a particular sector of workers in the economy, or do we have a broader vision for labor that goes back to the idea of one big union that is concerned with protecting workers, their families, and their communities from the vagaries of capitalism — a social unionism that doesn't end at the factory/campus gate. This is a debate that an older generation of labor organizers had put to rest, but it appears that for a new generation of labor organizers, this conflict has re-emerged, perhaps with even greater force. History is funny like that.

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