



Editor's Note: When we interviewed Paul Lauter and asked him to suggest someone to write a brief essay celebrating his contribution to the academic labor struggle, he named Louis Kampf. After talking to Louis Kampf, we thought that you might enjoy hearing what he had to say, too. It's a profound pleasure to honor both of them in this issue of WORKPLACE.

Pannapacker, W. (1998). Arrested at the M.L.A. convention: A conversation with Louis Kampf. *Workplace*, 2, 19-25.

Arrested at the M.L.A. Convention: A Conversation with Louis Kampf

William Pannapacker

In addition to his energetic record as a progressive activist, Louis Kampf spent his teaching career at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, rising from assistant to full professor from 1961 to 1993. He served as a Senior Lecturer M.I.T. from 1993 to 1996 and is currently retired from teaching. In addition to countless articles, Professor Kampf's major works include *On Modernism* (1967) and *The Politics of Literature* (1970), a groundbreaking collection of essays on the profession co-edited with Paul Lauter, currently Smith Professor of Literature at Trinity College (Hartford). Professor Kampf was arrested at the 1968 MLA Convention in New York, and he was elected President of the Association for 1971. In this interview he offers some reflections on these years and their relevance to the present generation of activists and their struggle to change the academic job system.

William Pannapacker: Professor Kampf, I have a very broad chronicle of your career, particularly up to 1971, but what has been the focus of your scholarly and professional work since then?

Louis Kampf: The focus of my professional work has been multifarious. It's been about expanding the study of literature, the things we fought for, creating new courses. I've become heavily involved in women's studies as part of my appointment at M.I.T. I've been heavily into politics. I taught a course with Noam Chomsky for many years, from 1966-1986, courses on Marxism, and courses on women's studies. I've been head of the board of directors of the Resist Foundation, which started in 1967, and whose original board of directors included Richard Ohmann, Paul Lauter, and Chomsky. It promotes progressive social change, and I'm still very much involved with that. In 1975 we started *Radical Teacher* magazine, of which I am one of the editors. And I've been pretty heavily active in Middle-East affairs, especially in relation to the Palestinians and Israelis. I was on the board of directors of MERIP, the Middle-Eastern Research and Information Project, for a number of years. So, I've been out there working in various directions with no single focus really.

William Pannapacker: (Laughs.) It would seem that the thread that ties these multifarious activities together is the desire to make theory and practice part of a unified professional endeavor.

Louis Kampf: Yes. Whether one succeeds or not, at least the attempt is there.

William Pannapacker: Looking back to 1971, when you gave your memorable Presidential Address before the Modern Language Association . . .

Louis Kampf: Which I have not read since 1971, except in the German translation.

William Pannacker: The title was "It's Alright Ma (I'm only bleeding)': Literature and Language in the Academy."

Louis Kampf: Yeah, that's a reference to a Bob Dylan song. I remember the German translation had a rather long, pedantic footnote about it. It captured the spirit of the times.

William Pannacker: Well, fortunately I have the English version right here. You opened with the following:

Things appear to be quiet enough on the campus. Quiet enough, at the moment, for people to believe that if they only close their eyes long enough, the 1960s will be erased from the book of history . . . We shall once again pursue our affairs in the soft light of Humanism; the return to normalcy will be complete.

This year marks the 30th-anniversary of the 1968 MLA Convention at the Americana Hotel in New York City, perhaps the highwatermark of graduate student activism in the Association's 115-year history, an event many of today's graduate students look to for inspiration, even as their professors try to forget.

As one of the leaders of events at the '68 Convention, I would like to hear your opinion of the events of that year and their significance for today.

Louis Kampf: OK, but could you be more specific?

William Pannacker: I understand you were arrested at the '68 convention. How did it happen?

Louis Kampf: Yes. I and a whole bunch of other people, including Allen Grossman who is now a professor at Johns Hopkins, had put up posters. They had been made by graduate students at Columbia. One of them, made by Kate Ellis, who now teaches at Rutgers, had a quote from William Blake: "The Tygers of Wrath are Wiser than the Horses of Instruction." The MLA Director John Hurt Fisher became paranoid and asked the house dicks to harass us. They told us to "take down that poster!" So I organized a line of people to stand in front of the poster and not permit it to be ripped down. The house dicks called the regular cops. They came and arrested us, although they were embarrassed about it. They thought it was perfectly silly, and there was nothing rough about it. The only thing that came close to roughness was earlier, when one of the house dicks laid his hands on me, and Paul Lauter stepped between us and said, "You're messing with my friend." This made me laugh, not because he isn't my friend, but because the whole thing seemed ludicrous. But three of us, myself and two graduate students, spent the afternoon in jail.

William Pannacker: Were there any serious repercussions from this event?

Louis Kampf: One of my jailmates got into trouble because he was Irish. He was a graduate student at Northwestern. The F.B.I., in their usual way, started to harass him by going to his department chair, and writing a letter to him, and so on.

William Pannacker: Were activist graduate students under government surveillance in those days? Should we not be having this conversation over the phone? I know some professors who have made a point of not using e-mail for this very reason.

Louis Kampf: God know how many people are under surveillance. I got my F.B.I. file under the Freedom of Information Act. It turned out they had students in my classes spying on me. There was a vast amount of that going on. It was usually an attempt to get us into trouble with our departments. It was the two graduate students who had the most trouble--not me, except that my mother got very upset seeing the

headline in the Times.

"Language Forum Hears Protests: 3 Scholars Held in Defacing of Hotel with Posters" (NYT, 12-28-68, p.18).

William Pannacker: Looking at the notoriety you achieved, I wonder whether the potential blackening of my name as a labor activist will be compensated by an enhanced profile in the profession. As Antonio Salieri would say, it's better to be infamous than obscure.

Louis Kampf: (Laughs.) Well, that's putting a positive spin on it.

William Pannacker: The Graduate Student Caucus of the MLA has always claimed that "activists get jobs," and, so far, that has proven to be the case. Many of our best leaders--Marc Bousquet, for example--find assistant professorships. Sometimes I wonder whether the system is buying us off one by one.

Louis Kampf: One thing that was true way back when--and it's still true today--is that the left-wing students tend to be the smartest ones. (Laughs.) It's obviously not 100%, but it's generally true. They have a focus, serious intellectual concerns; whereas most other graduate students are just going through the motions.

William Pannacker: My experience has been that my work gained the most traction when I found a way to link it to my own survival. I was radicalized by my own poverty and concern for the future.

Louis Kampf: That was the case for all of us who got involved in the 60s--for Paul, Dick Ohmann, Lillian Robinson, and myself--our work really took direction when we got involved politically.

William Pannacker: In general, academics are a rather mild-manned bunch. Was '68 the most contentious MLA Convention in your recollection?

Louis Kampf: Not necessarily. The Job Seekers Caucus was very, very active at the convention in Denver in '69. And I remember some very passionate speeches by graduate students there.

William Pannacker: In '68 wasn't the activism focused on larger social concerns: the Vietnam war and representation for women and minorities rather than jobs.

Louis Kampf: Yes.

William Pannacker: Since then, for two generations now, the focus of activism in the MLA has become the appalling state of the academic job "market" and the need for an equitable workplace.

Louis Kampf: '69 was when it started, when the job market began to dry up. Remember, there was this enormous period of expansion in the colleges and university systems. A lot of jobs went begging for a time. Then the picture changed quite suddenly.

William Pannacker: How do you account for the sudden decline in the "market," if that is the right term for it?

Louis Kampf: If you take the metaphor of the market, you see that a lot of money started to leave the universities--particularly Department of Defense money. Universities had to cut back, and where better to cut back than the work force in the humanities. It happened to the support staff as well--the janitors, secretaries, and so forth, who really got cut back severely. Also the number of people going to graduate school was expanding. The reason was largely the consciousness-raising that came out of the '60s. People

were looking for something meaningful to do with their lives. What more could one want than standing in front of a class and talking about terrific books? Another thing is that women started being hired. There are many factors, but the primary factor is the general economy--the movement toward market capitalism. Mounting expenditures of the Vietnam War and continuing defense expenditures forced cutbacks in education.

William Pannacker: You would argue then, that the primary cause for the two-generation decline in the availability of academic positions is the result of a steady decline in the relative amount of government support for education?

Louis Kampf: That's a big part of it. But the decline in the government funding is a part of a larger change in the economy in general. With cutbacks all over the place, it creates an opportunity for employers in the university as elsewhere to take advantage of people's fears. In a tight economy people are scared of protesting; they can't risk losing their jobs, and employers have taken advantage of that.

William Pannacker: The scarcity economy in higher education has led to the ascendancy of social conservatism?

Louis Kampf: Yes. In terms of activism, although not intellectual conservatism. The radicalism is channeled into theory, but the true radicals are the people who go out and fight for better conditions for teaching assistants. Radical theory is comparatively safe.

William Pannacker: This is true in my experience. There is some kind of cultural divide between those who are lobbying for better conditions for academic workers and the people who do "hard-core theory," who seem disdainful of the practical concerns for which we are fighting.

Louis Kampf: On the whole that's true. Though there are occasional honorable exceptions.

William Pannacker: Just to return for a moment to your MLA Presidential Address, what struck me powerfully, most personally, was the passage in which you describe the state of the job seeker:

Unfortunately, the desperate look of some job seeker slinking past us in a hallway might remind us of just what that normalcy is. Our departments of language and literature, our institutions, have become enclaves of the comfortable, around which scurry the hopeful, looking for that opening which will allow them to creep inside the walls.

This could almost be the text of a GSC brochure for the '98 MLA Convention in San Francisco. The desire we have to shake the complacency of the tenured, to remind them of the academic have-nots who populate their walled city, seems to be part of a critical tradition that goes back some two generations now.

When you became president of the MLA--"the Monster," as you called it--were you able to use it to improve academic working conditions in any way? Or is the MLA, as it so often claims, powerless to stop the corporatizing of the university?

Louis Kampf: It's beyond the control of one person, even the MLA President. It has to come from activists throughout the Association: in the Executive Council and in the Delegate Assembly, which we didn't have in those days. The DA is an important watchdog. But the Executive Council had several really decent people who tried to do the right thing: Joseph Barber, Jean Haegstrom, and Henry Nash Smith, who was the President. But when those resolutions got voted on in the '68 Convention, the right wingers on the EC and the Director thought they could kill them by sending them out for a mail ballot. Well, they sent it out and all of them won--on the war, draft resistance, and so on. Then the Delegate Assembly was created to cool things off. It was intended as a parliament that would eliminate direct democratic action,

but that turned out not to be so because a lot of activists got themselves elected.

One example is when the Job Seekers Caucus was created I received a mailing in which the Executive Director said he wasn't giving them any kind of budget. Well, I had the power to call an emergency meeting of the Executive Council, and I had that decision reversed. So I functioned as a watchdog to see that decent people were appointed to various commissions. When Florence Howe was elected, she was able to follow through. I was also able to introduce specific subjects for discussion, such as bringing Latino and Women's Studies before the Executive Council. Eventually, that led to the MLA funding these areas, and legitimating them as scholarly and pedagogical concerns. So, the function I played was to give a voice to movements out there that were not being represented, which is what got me elected in the first place.

William Pannacker: This seems like an argument for the MLA, specifically its presidency, as a Bully Pulpit. While the MLA doesn't have the power of, say, the American Medical Association, to certify credentials, it does have the power to bring issues to the attention of the membership as a whole and to thereby effect change through collective action in the profession.

Louis Kampf: I agree fully. Every little bit counts. Paul Lauter in the American Studies Association was a perfect example of that. He was able to bring various strands of American literature into the canon by creating the Heath Anthology. His presidency enhanced his ability to attract attention to the very worthy causes he represents. The same thing happened with me.

William Pannacker: Similarly, the leaders of the GSC are finding themselves plucked from their former obscurity and raised to the prominence of national spokespersons.

Louis Kampf: I hope they use it well. . . . If I had known how active the graduate student were going to be at this year's MLA, I would have arranged to go.

William Pannacker: This year in the Delegate Assembly the Graduate Student Caucus is proposing a resolution which will require the MLA to request information from language and literature departments about their use of part-time faculty, establish optimal baseline figures, and try to use this information and these proposed figures to bring departments into competition with each other. That is, if we can make the case that it's better to have more full-timers than part-timers without undermining the professional credibility of the part-timers, who, we believe, are competent professionals who lack the institutional support needed to do their best work.

Louis Kampf: Getting that information out there is a good thing to do. On the other hand, making the basis of your argument for full-timers that it "pays off" is falling right into their bag. That's not what it ought to be about. It ought to be about the right of everyone to work, to have a job. A society should be willing to shell out the money. It has money for bombs and chemical warfare, and the cost of education is peanuts compared to that.

William Pannacker: And I've never known administrators' salaries to come down!

Louis Kampf: Exactly! They're going up. It's the same thing in high-tech. While profits are at an all-time high, middle management is being laid off while upper echelon executive salaries go through the roof. The same principle applies to education: downsize the staff, make the employees increase "efficiency," and keep them to scared to fall out of line. So, I think the resolution is a good idea, but don't fall into the trap of their value system by arguing that it's great for the bottom line, which is not the purpose of education.

William Pannacker: Well, one bottom-line argument I find useful is that it is very expensive to rely upon a discontented labor pool that may go on strike, that uses up executive hours in negotiations, that

brings negative publicity to the university. I contend that it's cost effective in the long-run to have a satisfied work force that reflects positively on the university.

Louis Kampf: That argument is worth trying. But it assumes that the public gives a damn, which I still hope it does.

William Pannacker: Well, this is another division in the ranks. Should we appeal to the parents who, it might be said, are paying for an education that students are not, in fact, receiving? The universities are, in effect, using the students to teach each other, while the full-time faculty pursue their research interests. However, this argument assumes that parents and students are not more interested in the cost of the credential than they are in the actual education.

Louis Kampf: I think it is worthwhile going to the parents and informing them. But you're right. Many parents will side with administrators in thinking that they are already paying too much and they don't want to pay more.

William Pannacker: Aren't we moving out of the economic spiral of the last 30 years into some kind of "New World Order" in which global capitalism and the absence of a need for a large military will free up resources to go back into education, at least in the U.S.? Is the current climate of unrest among graduate students, adjuncts, and part-time academic work part of a general reassertion of labor, akin to the successful U.P.S. strike for an increase in full-time positions? Rather than leave the profession, as the MLA's Committee of Professional Employment suggested we do, shouldn't we stay and fight? Isn't change just around the corner if we keep up the pressure?

Louis Kampf: Who am I to tell some person who is trying to make a life decision whether it is worth the risk of sticking with it and fighting for what people ought to be getting rather than seeking another career. I can't tell people what to do.

William Pannacker: But I take it that you would wholeheartedly support graduate student unionization.

Louis Kampf: Certainly. Of course. If I'd had the chance, I would have picketed with the graduate students at Yale.

William Pannacker: The graduate student unionization movement and organizations in the associations like the GSC have been gaining momentum since the Yale strike. The GSC legislative slate will dominate the hearings of the Delegate Assembly, and the graduate students in the University of California system will probably be on strike. This year's MLA Convention in San Francisco may well become ground zero in the showdown between those who care about the future of higher education and those who are interested in preserving their own privileges. What do you think should happen at this year's convention? And in the long run?

Louis Kampf: The activists in '68 were all involved in the Anti-War Movement and the Civil Rights Movement or both. They had been through S.D.S. or the New University Conference, which was just starting then. They all had a sense of how you organize things. We had a big meeting at Columbia with hundreds of people the night before the MLA Convention and planned things. We didn't just storm in. It's probably too late to ask for a special session, and an emergency resolution of support would probably not be of much practical value. A combined picket with the people from the California system might be effective at the convention. You could have signs, hand out leaflets. In '72 we had the San Francisco Mime Troupe doing guerilla theater concerning the Christmas bombing of Hanoi. Their marching through the hallways of the convention hotel was fairly riotous. The Presidential Address is a good place to make a stand. A leaflet on every chair. Picket signs, and so forth. Also, use sessions for graduate students to make

your platform known.

William Pannacker: You may know that the major site for the discussion of graduate student concerns at the convention, "The Welcome Session," was canceled this year in a unilateral decision by the current MLA president, who claimed that it ceased to perform any useful function. It seems that last year's session was too radical for the MLA leadership.

Louis Kampf: That's awful. I'm shocked.

William Pannacker: There's a side of our organization that feels that organizing an "Unwelcome Session" would be unprofessional and too contentious.

Louis Kampf: There are plenty of people of good will, and one should not antagonize them unintentionally. But there are plenty of people with whom one should get into a confrontation.

William Pannacker: Well, our group has moderates and extremists. We need them both, of course. The moderates keep us on an even keel, but the extremists help the moderates win concessions.

Louis Kampf: A very Machiavellian ploy, indeed. Which faction do you belong to?

William Pannacker: I want to keep them guessing. I also want to thank you for taking the time to speak with me.

Louis Kampf: My pleasure. Good luck with your thesis.

William Pannacker: It's not the thesis I need luck with.

Louis Kampf: (Laughs.) As the old rock 'n roll song goes, "Get a job!"

William Pannacker: We have different songs today, but it's the same struggle.

Louis Kampf: It is harder today, that's for sure.

William Pannacker: Thank you, Professor Kampf.

William Pannacker, Harvard University