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Lambs to the Slaughter

Michael Yates

I do not think that many faculty members would challenge the notion that the University of Pittsburgh is run by persons who are primarily managers and not academics. Certainly those on the Board of Trustees are managers and often have much experience managing large corporations. Those employed by the Board, the Chancellor and his large staff, function as managers, although a few of them (and increasingly fewer each decade) have some reputation as scholars. At Pitt-Johnstown, where I work, our administrators have never been scholars and no more so than at present when the very titles so common to academe have been changed to reflect the managerial and business-like role those who hold these titles are expected to play. We do not go to the Dean's office but to that of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, or VPAA.

As any management expert will tell you, the essence of management is control, control over every aspect of the enterprise. In most workplaces, the one element which can impede the ability of management to control its domain is the human element. That is why managerial control is essentially a matter of controlling the organization's employees, or to use a word that college teachers don't like to hear, its workers. Over the past 150 years or so, managers have devised a number of techniques for managing (controlling) their employees. These techniques have been theorized and systematized, first by Frederick Taylor, and many times since by his disciples. It is possible to learn these techniques and the theory behind them in business schools, seminars, and learned journals. We must have no doubt that our administrators have studied the theory and practice of managerial control and that they are busy applying what they have learned.

The most comprehensive system of managerial control has been pioneered by Japanese automobile manufacturers and is known to its critics as "lean production." It is based upon the twin ideas that every aspect of work must be controlled to the greatest degree possible and that the employees must be led to believe not only that this is good for them but that they have some real say in directing their enterprise. With our faculty senate and its ideology of shared governance, many of us have already absorbed the second idea (Pitt-Johnstown President, Al Etheridge, has used "focus groups" which serve the same purpose and have the advantage of being controlled by him more directly than the senate, which on rare occasion challenges administrative authority). The first idea, however, is more radical, and poorly understood by most of us and not at all by many of us.

The control over work is necessary if management is to contain costs and enlarge the organization's surplus. There are many aspects to lean production, some of which need not concern us, at least yet, because they are impossible (at least so far) to apply to teachers. For example, the job of teaching college students is not as susceptible as are most other jobs to Tayloristic time and motion studies (But see historian David Noble's fine article, "Digital Diploma Mills," *Monthly Review*, Feb. 1998, pp. 38-52, for evidence that this is being considered). Nor is the utilization of "just-in-time" inventory, an innovation in which a firm keeps no stock on hand but rather has it delivered just as needed, usually by an outside contractor (Here again, however, the use of part-time teachers called upon just as needed, i.e. without advance notice, can be considered a form of just-in-time).

Those features of lean production which are applicable to teaching are the detailed division of labor, systematic hiring, stressing the system (what the Japanese call "kaizen" or constant improvement), and mechanization. The use of the division of labor is based upon the "Babbage principle" after the mathematician and entrepreneur, Charles Babbage (inventor of the first computer). The idea is to substitute lesser-skilled (or cheaper) labor for skilled (or more expensive) labor whenever possible. This we see being done with a vengeance with the proliferation of part-time, temporary, non-tenure stream, and (in Oakland) graduate student instructors. As more expensive faculty retire or leave, they will be replaced whenever possible with cheaper and less secure people. For example, it makes no sense to managers that I teach two sections of Intro to Economics, a course which, from their point of view, can be taught by anyone minimally qualified. So when I leave Pitt, I will not likely be replaced with a full-time faculty member but with part-timers. The two other courses I teach each term can either be dropped, or if needed, taught by other part-timers or shifted to the remaining teachers on an overload basis.

Systematic hiring fits in nicely with the Babbage principle. The idea here is to hire people who can be easily controlled. Of course, most new teachers do not have to be controlled since they have already learned that they must behave themselves if they want to get tenure (this, in turn, is partly a function of the glut of new teachers brought about by the use of part-timers, temporaries, etc.). But part-timers and the like are, almost by definition, so insecure that they will not rock the boat, no matter what the administration does.

The two most important control mechanisms, in my view, are the stress now being placed upon our system and mechanization in the form of computers. On an automobile assembly line, stress is delivered by speeding up the assembly line, reducing the amount of materials available to workers, or taking a person off the line. Sooner or later, a bottleneck appears along the line, indicated by flashing lights. Then the management focuses attention on the trouble spot and the workers, usually grouped into teams, are expected to solve the problem, but without the stress being removed. When they solve the problem (by working faster, for example), management has gained a reduction in unit cost. Here at Pitt-Johnstown and no doubt throughout the University, the stress takes the form of recurring budget cuts (these are usually blamed on outside forces but are really the result of a well-thought out plan). We are then expected to continue to teach an increasing number of students with fewer resources. We are encouraged to believe that we must all pull together to get through the crisis, though a minute's reflection would tell us that the crisis is permanent and has already consumed most of our work lives and that we suffer (as do all of the school's other workers such as secretaries, maintenance and custodial, and food service employees) disproportionately to the top administrators who continue to draw the largest salaries and whose staffs continue to grow. We "alleviate" the stress by teaching more overloads, doing more class preparations, agreeing to larger class sizes, foregoing sabbaticals, never asking for release time, paying for our own conference trips, making fewer copies of articles, concurring with the hiring of more part-timers and temporary instructors, and so forth.

The electronic revolution confronts us with the most extreme assault on our traditional patterns of work. The handwriting is on the wall. The future will see more and more distance education, the cloning of lectures captured on video and sent out over the web, the forcing of faculty to put their courses online, increased electronic monitoring of faculty effort, and other such methods of substituting capital for labor. If you do not believe me, just read the Noble article cited above. Teaching as traditionally practiced is labor intensive and the labor is not especially cheap. These facts are inimical to sound business practice, so the obvious remedy is to replace us with machines, the prices of which have been falling for quite awhile. As Noble puts it:

Educom, the academic-corporate consortium, has recently established their Learning Infrastructure Initiative which includes the detailed study of what professors do, breaking the faculty job down in classic Tayloristic fashion into discrete tasks, and determining what parts can be automated or outsourced. Educom believes that course design, lectures,

and even evaluation can all be standardized, mechanized, and consigned to outside commercial vendors. "Today you're looking at a highly personal human-mediated environment," Educom president Robert Heterich observed. "The potential to remove the human mediation in some areas and replace it with automation-smart, computer-based, network-based systems-is tremendous. It's gotta happen."

It is reasonable to ask why all of this is happening. The proliferation of administrative staff, the extraordinarily high salaries paid to top administrators and research faculty, the tremendous expansion of buildings, laboratories, and computing equipment suggest that it is not a true financial crisis which is to blame. Rather, I think that the universities have become centers of accumulation, or, to put it more bluntly, places in which a lot of money can be made. Universities today are more concerned about generating patentable research, often the basis for spinoff businesses owned by researchers and administrators, and the corresponding alliance with private corporations (which supply computer software and hardware, purchase the patentable research, form partnerships with researchers and administrators, and supply employment for the higher ups in the academy when they leave academe) than with anything else.

It may seem heretical to some for me to say it, but the University, in my opinion, has no sincere commitment whatever to the education of undergraduates. If it did, it would not be employing the lean production techniques outlined above, all of which are harmful to the production of educated human beings. If it did, it would not be implementing in Oakland a system of "differential teaching" in which those who don't publish enough or bring in enough grants will be punished by being forced to teach more. If it did, it would not allow professors to "buy back" their courses by hiring part-timers to teach them (I was once hired to teach a course in Oakland by a professor who literally begged me to do it and who had never previously met me and knew nothing about my background.). Undergraduates are simply a major source of the large sums of money needed to convert the university from a school into a business. These expenses are the main reason why tuitions have risen by a much greater percentage than have prices for so many years. And now that further tuition increases are getting difficult to sustain, the university is coming after us, ruthlessly cutting the cost of instruction and pressuring us to work harder (I should note that some money has to be spent on students, mainly to entertain them. In addition, students must be led to believe that their "education" is the reason why their wages will be higher after graduation than they would have been had they not gone to college. It really makes no difference to the university and, sad to say, to most of them, whether they learn anything or not).

In the face of what is nothing less than an attack upon the craft of teaching, the reactions of the teachers are remarkably passive. Here at Pitt-Johnstown, some of us keep our heads firmly in the sand; a few of us have actually become cheerleaders for lean production. Others continue to rely upon the myth that it is Oakland which is at fault, not grasping the fact that our administrators are firmly positioned in the corporate hierarchy which is implementing all of these policies. If our administrators were really on our side, they would understand that in a war, the generals have to do more than make private pleas. They have to rouse the troops to action. If UPJ wanted more money from the University, it would try to put enough pressure on the University to get it. It would mobilize faculty, staff, and students to write letters, send emails, march and demonstrate in Pittsburgh and Harrisburg, raise a fuss in public meetings, and other such direct actions until the University capitulated. But, of course, this is unimaginable. No matter how odious our administrators might think a particular university decision is, they always go along. They know who butters their bread. The university has decided to try to break the union of maintenance and custodial workers at Pitt-Johnstown over pathetically small sums of money (to the university, though not to the financially strapped and hardworking employees), a truly rotten thing to do, but not so awful that any of our administrators would take a public stand against it.

Probably the most common faculty response is cynicism. We distance ourselves from the college and refuse to participate much in its affairs. This is an understandable response; after all, the crisis forced upon us causes a lot of pain and anguish. But even as we are cynical, we do indeed continue to solve the

pressures created by the continued stressing of our system. We do give up our sabbaticals; we do teach larger classes; we do pile on the overtime; we do not challenge our division heads when they tell us there is no money for anything; we act as if it is impossible to do anything about the shrinking of the tenure stream faculty. We are in worse shape than the lambs sent to slaughter. Unlike the lambs, we can think. We could resist but we do not.

What might we do? In the end, our only hope is to organize ourselves, both at our own workplaces and with teachers around the world. But for most faculty, this is too big of a step to take immediately. So, in the short term, perhaps we can do some things to show the administrators that we know what is going on and that we do not like it. First, we can begin to speak out, in meetings and in private conversations. When administrators say something ridiculous or simpleminded, we must challenge them. We can challenge administrative policies with speeches, with letters, with petitions, with emails, to them, to the media, to politicians, to board members, any way we can. Second, we can refuse to participate in our own demise. We can insist on our leaves and let the university turn us down (We just received a memo cancelling all sabbaticals for next year. So much for collegiality on this matter.). And we can appeal the decision and make it public. We can refuse to teach overload. We can refuse to give up our syllabi and resist any administrative prying into our classrooms. We can, at least if we are tenured, refuse to give student evaluations; if we do give them, we can refuse to show them to any administrator. These can only be used against us, as is also the case for our year-end dossiers, which, because the evaluation of them is subjective and based upon a personal weighting of numbers or entries, are totally manipulable. We can refuse to serve on committees, including those which hire new faculty members. Third, we can offer our support to any group on campus, such as students or other employees, who are resisting being sacrificial lambs.

Perhaps the cynics are right and nothing will come of any efforts we make on our own behalf. I do not believe this, and the history of resistance movements tells me that it is not true. But even if we accomplish little, at least we will stop living on our knees.

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