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Union Organizing in the Ivy League

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There's a dirty little secret here at Yale, and I suspect it's one shared throughout the Ivy League. It's the secret contradiction between the way Yale educates undergraduates and the way Yale attracts top faculty. In the public Yale, a few undergraduates gather at the feet of the world's top scholars as they train to become the best and the brightest. The real Yale, however, attracts its faculty by promising them a reduced teaching load. This Yale is one in which each professor only teaches one or two classes per semester (and gets a sabbatical every few years), rarely if ever leads a section or grades an undergraduate exam, and focuses primarily on research.

There is a clear contradiction between these two Yales, and it is mediated by graduate teaching assistants. We do most of the time-intensive teaching labor that holds these two Yales together. We meet with the undergrads to tutor them and train them and encourage them to fall in love with our academic disciplines. We lead the sections, staff the labs, and above all do the grading for the vast bulk of undergraduate courses, allowing the professors to give a lecture or two a week and be done with it. Because we work, Yale can attract the world's top faculty. Because we work, Yale undergrads receive a great education.

Unfortunately, Yale's image demands that our role be neither recognized nor respected. Their secret dependence upon graduate teachers must remain . . . a secret. That's why Yale President Richard Levin argues that graduate students do only 3% of the teaching at Yale (this number only counts courses taught *solely* by graduate students, and ignores the vast bulk of teaching done by TAs). That's why Graduate Dean Susan Hockfield insists that teaching Yale undergrads is a *privilege* that we should not sully with notions like remuneration or job description--after all, they say, teaching is its own reward. That's why they can argue, ludicrously, that graduate teachers do not fill the university's staffing needs, and that TAs exist solely for the pedagogical benefit of the graduate students.

That's why they can argue that graduate TAs have no right to negotiate, don't need a contract, should not organize, and absolutely cannot form a union.

It's also the reason why we do and should and have and must.

The problem isn't limited to Yale. It's starting to infect the entire Academy. It's called "casualization." It's the same problem that sparked the 1997 UPS strike: slowly and steadily replacing full-timers with part timers, and thereby getting a lot more work for a lot less money. In 1970, only 22% of faculty positions were part-time; by 1992, 45% of faculty positions were part-time. When you include graduate TAs, a *majority* of those teaching in the university are now employed part-time. Such an extreme of casualized labor is not seen in any other sector of the economy, and yet by pride of place it remains invisible in the university.

Yale pulls in about \$100 million/year from undergraduate tuition. It has found that it can continue to *increase* the undergraduate enrollment (and hence tuition-income) while at the same time *decreasing* the

number of ladder faculty by 6% over the past 6 years alone. How? By relying more heavily upon casuals and temps, otherwise known as TAs and adjuncts. Part-time TAs are a lot cheaper than full-time ladder faculty.

This trend is happening everywhere in the Academy, and it has a disastrous conclusion: The demand for teachers *working towards* a Ph.D. is higher than the demand for teachers *who have completed* their Ph.D. Universities recruit graduate students, but don't hire faculty. The obvious result is the current glut of unemployed Ph.D.s, but this is not a problem for the Universities; after all, unemployed Ph.D.s are willing to work as super cheap adjuncts, a form of migrant labor moving from campus to campus, teaching individual courses for as low as \$1500/semester.

Almost every major academic association laments this trend. The lamentations began in the Humanities, but are now appearing throughout the sciences as well: For example, of life scientists who received their Ph.D. 35 years ago, 61% received tenured positions within 10 years; now, only 38% of those who received their Ph.D. 10 years ago have tenure. If the faculty across the nation all recognize the problem, why can't they move to solve it?

Quite simply: They don't have the power. The ideal of "shared governance," according to which faculty govern the university, has given way to the reality of the corporate model. It is time, now, to re-establish the principle that the members of the academic community should have a say over at least the conditions of their own work. Unionization is the time honored way to democratize a workplace. Thus, we unionize.

The ideal of shared governance does not exist in today's universities. The reality of corporate governance does.

At Yale, in the dean's own words, "there are no decision-making bodies" apart from the President, Provost and Dean, who report to the aptly-named "Yale Corporation." This elite body makes all its important decisions secure from public scrutiny: the minutes of all meetings are sealed for at least 50 years. It includes no faculty, no students, and certainly no staff; instead it includes alumni such as Henry Schacht, an executive at AT&T when they laid off 40,000 workers.

It wasn't until I saw how Yale responded to the 1995-96 grade strike at Yale that I started to understand how power works in the academy, and became convinced that only a union could work to improve things. I saw Yale refuse to even acknowledge the existence of an independent election which the union won 80% to 20%. Then, when the principles of democracy failed to move Yale and we turned to collective action, I saw Yale suddenly react with vengeance: declaring that all strikers would be fired, threatening to ruin strikers' careers with negative letters of recommendation, and selecting three women strikers to threaten with expulsion and deportation, as "an example."

This past April, over 1000 graduate students at Yale (a majority) have signed a petition asking for the start of negotiations. President Levin mailed the petition right back to us. When asked why, Graduate Dean Susan Hockfield responded, "Yale is better than democracy." Here we go again. Fortunately, in the meantime the General Counsel of the NLRB has determined that TAs are employees with the right to unionize; this time we have clear legal protections that were ambiguous before. This time we know what we're up against, and we will win.

When the Dean at UC-Irvine was asked to negotiate, he responded: "If the children want better pocket money, do the parents negotiate with them? Over the issue of whether they wash dishes and mow the lawn, should the parents bargain with them formally?" But after graduate students went on strike for a week, the administrators agreed to begin talks with the union.

Here at Yale, we hear the same rhetoric. In a recent Town Meeting, unionization was criticized because it

would "upset the delicate parent-child psychology that exists between professor and student." Others charged that pro-union graduate students are "naive," presumably because it would be less naive to think that Yale will always choose to put money into the graduate teaching program, rather than only choosing to do so at those moments when the union is strong (as history demonstrates).

Naiveté, however, is the belief that union organizing is not necessary in today's ivory tower. It will take the wisdom of experience and the strength of solidarity to transform today's Academy. Fortunately, we have that in spades amongst the graduate students at Yale.

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