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Beyond Campus Boundaries: Graduate Student Labor Meets Community Activism

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When Nelson Rockefeller returned from his travels in Latin America after WWII, he knew one thing for sure: wherever college and university campuses were integrated into their surrounding communities, students and community activists would interact, organize, and cooperate on a host of generally objectionable activities. Legend has it that the State University of New York, owing much to Rockefeller benevolence and benefaction, bears the architectural imprint of such fears of campus-community connections: often located far from centers of communal activities, many SUNY campuses present the budding activist with formidable structural obstacles. Consequently, fewer and fewer members of the community attend campus events while issues of importance to the community rarely come to concern students encouraged to view their education in terms of vocational and professional training rather than the somewhat loftier vocabulary of the "liberal arts" and "civic literacy."

SUNY Binghamton, located right off the same free-way that continues to bring us gas stations, factory outlets, multi-colored strip-malls and other architectural staples of the service economy, is a case in point. Forum after forum laments the difficulty of campus-community interaction, and the administrative commitment to financial autonomy vis-[^]-vis a much-vilified system of state-wide regulation appears to include plans to cut the campus off from the community altogether. Private corporations seeking to profit from the newly-privatized "Binghamton University" chime in, sounding alarming signals of dependency. Sodexo-Marriott, the traditionally anti-union provider of dining services on many SUNY campuses, refers to local restaurants as "revenue robbers" and offers to contribute to the process of consumer-formation (which it appears to perceive as the new mission of higher learning) with on-site "mall-style dining." Rather than simply becoming economically autonomous at the expense of the community hosting and surrounding it, SUNY Binghamton combines its dissociation from local commerce and concerns with an ever-intensifying integration into networks which transfer profits into the nether-space of transnational capital. Only services that are too costly to provide are left to locals, and activists already worry about the availability of low-income housing to local families as an additional 3,000 students ready to out-buy any working family is scheduled to descend on Binghamton after the completion of major renovation and expansion projects.

The state-wide Graduate Student Employees Union will continue to respond to changes in employment patterns with traditional means of labor organization: as university administrations expand the use of labor not covered by collective bargaining agreements (fellows, adjuncts, and increasingly undergraduate teaching assistants), membership mobilization and the expansion of the bargaining unit will have to follow.

However, the Binghamton chapter, blessed with an unusually large number of active members, has also committed itself to a number of community projects. I am involved with some of them and would like to

suggest that there are significant reasons why graduate student labor should take up the challenge of reconnecting our campuses with the communities of which they will continue to be a part, whether university administrators wish to support them or not.

First, community support for state and federal funding of public education.

Each tax cut contributing to the marginalization of public (higher) education is accompanied by an assault on notions of the "public" in general to convince an unsuspecting electorate that tax revenues spent on anything other than corporate welfare and military equipment constitute a waste of money. Given that most discussion of educational issues is mediated by a corporate press (the Binghamton Press&Sun Bulletin is part of the USA-Today Gannett empire), community members depend on students and faculty to hear why they should continue to support universities bent on transferring potential profits from local businesses to (trans)national chains operating their campus branches with student labor.

Second, graduate unions are in a position to transform labor-stereotypes.

Graduate student activists cannot take for granted that people consider labor activism a viable form of political organization. Both students and community members share wide-spread and often justified suspicions regarding the role of trade unions, associating anything from bureaucratic inefficiency and nepotism to anti-communism and a historical "possessive investment in whiteness" with any labor-related organization. Graduate student unions are among the most diverse and best-educated sections within the labor movement and could assume a strategic role in addressing these suspicions, orienting labor away from its limited notion of protectionism and legislative intervention. Community involvement cannot only become an important training-ground to explore unconventional alliances but might help build an image of graduate student labor that is not reducible to better-wages-and-healthcare-for-funded-students.

Third, solidarity across different segments of the working population.

A related and yet distinct argument lies in resisting some of the implications of the treacherous stratification of labor markets. Students, displacing locals as temporary and therefore often willing members of a growing pool of "contingent labor" sustaining fragile service economies, are nonetheless slotted for higher-wage segments of an increasingly differentiated labor market once they graduate. Along with this prospect, however unrealistic, come expectations regarding the identity/difference of workers of different income groups and the (in)ability to perceive commonalities and shared concerns across sections of the working population which rarely receive encouragement to consider their respective situation in relation to that of other groups of workers. Contribution to community efforts can help (re)establish a sense of continuity and interconnectedness, the grounds of any politics of mutual support and solidarity, among these different groups of workers.

Here I want to offer an important caveat. I am not suggesting that "labor" become the core element in a new identity politics which could assuage the remnants of a New Left, itself traumatized by the spectre of a politically ineffectual academy mesmerized by the transformative potential of its own theoretical practices. On the contrary, I think that the identification of students-as-workers is highly problematic, despite the fact that it constitutes an effective organizing strategy--in fact a core argument in the ongoing struggle between graduate students and their university employers. What is more, "worker" is itself a rather exclusive and therefore limited identity, a point made over and over again by unfunded students, adjuncts without healthcare, and undergraduates required to teach without the prospect of ever receiving anything but a tuition bill for their efforts. And yet, the student-as-worker has proved to be one of the most successful strategies in exploiting the possibilities of an existing framework of collective bargaining, affirming its potential as an identity that ought to be strategically embraced. Such a strategy, however, might backfire if the student-as-worker (similar to the student-as-consumer) obliterates the de-facto role of the student-as-member-of-the-community.

With the UC strike and organizing efforts all over the country, graduate student labor activism has become one of the most visible forms of resistance to the privatization and corporatization of public higher education as well as the increasing use of "student labor" to meet the needs of the teaching machine. While laudable in itself, this success will remain rather limited if it reinforces the existing schisms between different segments of the working population as well as those between campuses and communities as a whole. Contributions to community activism might be a way to counter, if not prevent, such a development.

I am suggesting this, however, not because I have some abstract concern for the future of the labor movement (maybe), but mainly because my own graduate education has been profoundly influenced by frequent activities with community activists: I have met members of the peace movement who have been protesting the expansion of the military-industrial-entertainment complex long before I started reading alternative newspapers, farmers who have worked to establish bioregional economies long before I heard about local community-supported agriculture programs, and older organizers who still remember the National Guard taking aim at their activist friends and relatives. As educated as student labor activists may be, they are not necessarily linked to these histories, and yet these are stories which challenge comfortable clichés of small-town conservatism and political backwardness.

Beyond the pathos, there are some ideas for concrete projects, efforts the GSEU has been involved in some way or another:

- the local Peace Action has organized demonstrations around the closure of the School of the Americas and provided interested students with instructional material (in this case, to stage an Anti-Columbus Day on campus);
- Opportunities for Broome (OFB), a local community-development organization committed to the exposure of corporate welfare-fraud, organizes an annual picnic attended by almost all of the community groups; GSEU members are also frequent contributors to the OFB-published "labor community reporter." In conjunction with OFB, we are building a "Coalition for Corporate Accountability," initiated to connect campus and community groups committed to the establishment of codes of accountability that will make corporations more responsive to the communities which host and support them. We are currently investigating examples by other citizen groups who have successfully sued city governments for granting subsidies to corporations without establishing mechanisms of accountability. The local issue of concern is a telemarketing facility which is slotted to receive monies despite the fact that a recent university/community forum on workplace discrimination revealed that racism is rampant in other, similar facilities in the area;
- in conjunction with the newly-invigorated local Green Party, the GSEU and a group of organic farmers are co-sponsoring a forum on bioregionalism and community supported agriculture to inaugurate a series of workshops in the course of which all participating community groups will have a chance to present the issues most important to them to a larger audience of potential supporters and coalition-members;
- in our largest success to-date, we brought together over 15 student and community groups in "Project No Sweat!," an anti-sweatshop effort following the current momentum on university campuses nationwide; this project was also started by the GSEU-sponsored Coalition for Corporate Accountability and is about to hold major rallies as well as support state legislation regulating the licensing of university-logo apparel. Please see our [website](#) for upcoming events.

While the statement by Sodexho-Marriott (local businesses as "revenue robbers") may be indicative of an

unfortunate trend in higher education, it is itself only symptomatic of a paradoxical development: on the one hand, colleges and universities mired in their "global" role are interested in dissociating themselves from the communities around them. On the other hand, these communities are uneasily aware of existing (and irreducible) economic dependencies without being able to challenge a reality characterized by the student-as-consumer but not the student-as-contributor-to-community. Part of what student (labor) activists can aim to do, then, is to demonstrate that they can help maintain lively interaction between campus and community to both support local agendas and offer to their own activism a brighter future of solidarity and support, beyond a narrowly conceived politics of privilege.

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