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MAY DAY, 2000: A TRIBUTE TO BARBARA BOWEN

*Asking myself what led Barbara to the point of laying aside her teaching and research for at least a three-year term to work as president of a large academic union, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) of the City University of New York, I ruffled through some of her papers from a class teaching public school teachers how to teach Shakespeare, and found an exercise asking the teachers' students to write two pages, using the OED and a concordance, on the history of a single word from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, like custom, silly, luxury, or tongue. Assuring her class of teachers that though the project terrifies, "once students get started they can't stop; they love the authority they gain from mastering the history of a single word," her notes go on:*

The beauty of the assignment, which I have adapted from one designed by the Shakespeare scholar Peter Stallybrass, is that it works on language in history, as part of culture. Often we can remove language from history in our attempts to introduce a new vocabulary to students. The assignment also frankly admits the difficulty of Shakespeare's language, and uses that difficulty as a starting point for new thought. At the same time, it gives students a glimpse of doing scholarly research, and introduces them to the OED, which can be a friend for life.

This glimpse of her teaching notes reveals the essential answer to why she wants to lead an activist group, the New Caucus, in taking the PSC into a different mode of unionism adequate to our crisis: for her, teaching and scholarship, those friends for life (as they will undoubtedly remain even if the three-year term expands), are in history, part of an inevitably political culture; intellectual work is action in history, and only by the binding of tradition's chains or some dumb center-right hegemony can it be "removed from history," isolated in a Lacanian idle chatter while young immigrants the age and color of your students are shot to death at will by the police of your city. Some of her class teach in the Brooklyn high schools where student walkouts led by radical teachers and students, unashamedly working together politically, protested the Amadou Diallo verdict. She wants to drop the OED assignment into the vortex of those schools, bringing into their political speech about Diallo (whose stuttering in English became part of his fatal crime of breathing while black) the history of tongue; bringing new thought by teaching what is difficult, by teaching mastery of history in a single word, applying Brecht's vocabulary lesson, you must learn the ABC, you must take over the government. What CUNY could do, combining open admissions and free tuition with materialist Shakespeare (a scholarship with historical and theoretical bite), is bring intellectual work into the making of a city worthy of its students, I thought, looking at these notes of Barbara's, trying to gauge her motive for union work. The academic union has become the new classroom in which we learn and teach the fighting words by which as students and teachers acting in history we make a university worthy of us.

But the city's history prevents, the city's masters prevent, the new CUNY Master Plan revealing the Trustees' intention to make over the university into an incubator for business ventures, business practices,

business education, business culture. And therefore we must take back CUNY, take back the city, take back our union, take back our labor movement: it's the ABC of intellectual activism in our time now we have been forced to become reflexively self-conscious about our workplace, and Barbara Bowen has learned her ABC and is teaching it, at the head of the largest recent victory so far by an insurgent caucus in a New York labor union. It's amazing that this should be in the CUNY professors' union! New Directions in the vastly more significant Transit Workers Union has been trying for a long time, and almost made it in the last election; but it's happened at CUNY, after other victories in the librarians' and park workers' locals of the municipal workers' union, DC 37, and in our case it comes right out of our sense of vocation, our "job consciousness," as scholars, writers, teachers. The New Caucus victory has come right out of our class notes.

Barbara's effectiveness in union work also comes out of a paradox: the work of university intellectuals is all-absorbing, taxing, exhilarating, more than full-time, and yet it's not enough, if you really think about it, and so you must take up the second shift of political action; but how can you, given what our work is, given time? This paradox is often crippling, in either direction, but Barbara has shown us how it can be enabling; as a shining example of the New Caucus's many heroes of the second shift, she has shown us that the answer to the paradox is to embrace its impossibility, to live our dual desire to the limit. (The method? collective work.) As a new Oberlin graduate in love with the Roman ode, she nevertheless acted on her desire to serve the people. Farmworkers in the Connecticut Valley sustained and deepened that desire, but nevertheless she embraced our paradox, left that work (crying all the way to New Haven in the car of a legal services activist from the Valley), and wrote her dissertation on Shakespeare while helping organize tenants and clerical workers. They in turn developed rather than diverted her desire to write and teach, and in CUNY it was her doctoral students in "English" (i.e., women's studies and cultural studies), students who had demanded her by name as the young feminist scholar they wanted in the doctoral program, with whom she first went into action against the obscene and ruthless destruction of our university. Those early days of CUNY activism were also the time Barbara wrote her book on gender and the theater of war in *Troilus and Cressida*, a time of street demonstrations against the neo-imperialist oil war in the Gulf; and the paradox asserted itself now more as opportunity than as anguish, as anti-war work with her students infiltrated the later chapters of her book and suggested tactics and thinking for the defense of CUNY (an inadequate formulation, now sounding almost antique, as we have changed the terms of the battle and decisively rejected a defensive strategy).

She honors those Grad Center students of the late Eighties, those Kimberly Flynnns, as the midwives of the New Caucus movement, the New CUNY movement as it might just as well be called; like the tobacco workers and apple pickers and secretaries Barbara had worked with earlier, these grad students faced a horrific situation at work as the casualizing academic job system took hold, and like them they reacted by organizing. The paradoxical desire she had to embrace is that teaching itself, the service we offer our students, draws us into their lives as it draws them into our books; and these doctoral students were also teachers alongside her, passionate about their own students facing budget cuts and tuition hikes and being forced out of CUNY. In the heat of that alliance of faculty and grad students, which included some like Vinnie Tirelli who were already organizing, studying and writing about the adjunct system, was forged Barbara's understanding that the development of each is the condition for the development of all, that CUNY adjuncts must be at the center of CUNY organizing and CUNY labor thinking. In the high tide of that pre-New Caucus struggle, 1995, year of the great 15,000-strong CUNY demonstration at City Hall, year of the City College sit-in and hunger strike which, broken up by the police, poured into the streets of Harlem at midnight and marched in the rain for two hours--in that swelling tide Barbara, along with other founders of the New Caucus, made the turn to academic labor activism.

The reason was simple: the ad hoc organization Concerned CUNY Faculty and Staff carrying on this struggle appealed to the PSC leadership for help, and appealed in vain. Nothing could have been further from the minds of the business unionists at 43rd Street than plunging into the life-and-death struggle to

save the university. Stunned by that response, and forced to see that we did not have the resources to carry on as an ad hoc organization, Barbara's group linked up with a small, determined group of union reformers like Steve London, John Hyland, Mike Frank and others, who had been working to get elected as chapter officers in the PSC in the hope of changing its moribund ways. The five years of building the New Caucus to the point of our election victory were a complicated time. As we grew, so did the attack on CUNY, its public relations component getting increasingly harsh and racist as we were derided by Giuliani and Badillo, essentially for having the students we have and working effectively with them. The abolition of developmental courses ("remediation," to the racists) at senior colleges, further erosion of full-time lines to the point where adjuncts teach 60% of CUNY courses, the publication of the Schmidt Report, CUNY: An Institution Adrift, the installation of Badillo as chair and Benno Schmidt as Vice-Chair of the Board of Trustees, and then of Matthew Goldstein as their enthusiastic Chancellor, all created the conditions for the city Establishment to turn CUNY radically toward downsizing and reconstruction as BUNY, The Business University of New York--just as we were taking over the union! The stage is set, then, for a showdown, and Barbara is now leading the whole union into that battle.

The five years of the New Caucus (which now begins a different life as a rank and file organization in support of the new leadership) were extremely testing for Barbara, even as we went from victory to victory after our first defeat in the CUNY-wide union election in 1997. One thing that sustained her in these struggles was the PSC chapter at Queens College which she led for two terms; this "home" collective, her faith in the collective of friends she always gathers around her, and their faith in her, gave her confidence in the principles of rank-and-file activism she will now try to bring to the whole union. She saw it at Queens, and it worked.

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