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LEARNING AND LABOR

William Vaughn

In the fall of 1997, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) opened a new building complex designed to function as a gateway to the university. The gateway included an arch featuring the motto from the school's seal: "Learning & Labor." The seal itself, which shows up on all manner of school merchandise, features an illustration: a book, open to pages bearing the words "Agriculture" on the left, and "Science & Art" on the right, appears to be radiating light illuminating three images below the book—a hammer and anvil, a plow and rake, and a steam engine.

As a graduate of UIUC, I can report that I have never plowed, blacksmithed, or operated a steam engine (though I have done my share of non-degree raking over the years). In the nine years I worked as a graduate teaching assistant (GTA) in the English Department—that is, learned and labored—at UIUC, I taught approximately 1000 students, most of whom were studying to be accountants, engineers, or captains of industry, and never once did I hear them discussing the brutal midterm for Ironworking 101, or the boring lectures in Intro to Pistons and Cylinders.

The symbols on the school's seal speak to the era in which the university was founded. Chartered in 1867 and originally named Illinois Industrial University, UIUC is a land-grant institution, whose purpose has always been to serve the interests of the state and its people. Insofar as those interests often were and continue to be quite practical, the link between learning and labor would seem similarly outcome-oriented. Labor is applied learning; one studies in order to do one's job better. But in laboring, one also learns—conducts, as it were, a kind of research. John M. Gregory, the school's first regent, acknowledged these connections in his 1868 inaugural address. "We shall," he said,

effect the more formal and more perfect union of labor and learning. These two will be married in indissoluble bonds at our altars. The skilled hand and the thinking brain will be found compatible members of the same body. Science, leaving its seat in the clouds and coming down to work with men in shop and field, will find not only a new stimulus for its studies, but better and clearer light for its investigations and surer tests for its truths. And labor, grown scientific, will mount to richer products as well as easier processes. Thus, these two, Thought and Work, which God designed to go together, will no longer remain asunder.¹

That kind of applied learning and research endures at UIUC, which in areas like agriculture and animal husbandry remains one of the top institutions in the world. But I would like to think that my own field of English can be as useful and practical as those symbolized on the school's seals. And I would hope it is possible for students to apply in their own worlds ideas from the literature they read, just as I would encourage my students to test those ideas against the felt experience of their lives.

I say this because I believe it, and because that belief issues from my own experience as a student and

teacher at UIUC. Like many of my GTA peers I learned and labored. More importantly, we learned *to be* labor, learned what labor means in an environment that would trade us education for work, all the while denying work was taking place. That lie—the claim that teachers, researchers, and administrators are not true employees—continues to underwrite the everyday business of a major research university like UIUC, where some 5600 non-employees teach a third of all courses, run its world-class labs, and staff its many offices, all without right of representation. Such conditions bear out a warning in Gregory's 1868 address: "Those whom labor perpetually degrades, learning can never successfully lift up."²

Consider this essay an alternative gateway. In its historically informed version of the University of Illinois' motto, which expresses the intent of the school's founders, learning and labor are recognized for their inherent reciprocity. They are understood to be the necessary elements of any education, whether it is the teaching that makes learning possible, the learning that makes research meaningful, or the sheer institutional support that gives learning and labor a place to be. What follows is the story of our learning to be labor.

Hope is either a necessary or fatal quantity for an English grad student. Necessary, because given the odds against ever finding a tenure-line position, a student needs something to sustain himself while fulfilling the requirements of a Ph.D., a task many manage only by working a series of assistantships, or else going seriously into debt (or both).

But in the beginning, anyway, there is hope, however naive it might be. "I didn't know much when I came to grad school," a colleague told me,

so I wasn't really aware of the crisis in the humanities. I suppose I knew that there were some problems, but I thought eventually if I worked hard enough and did certain things right, or learned and then began doing certain things right, that I could eventually end up with some sort of teaching position.³

"I wanted to be a professor," said another, explaining her decision to go to grad school. "I had this idea about the academy ... I thought, 'Wow. You can get paid to think about stuff, and write about it, and publish it. And you also get to teach.' I thought ... it was the perfect job."

I want here to record our idealism because I believe it was ultimately related to our decision to unionize. By the fall of 2001, several of our union's earliest members had landed academic jobs, and many are still looking. At least some of our persistence and success can be attributed to the hope we generated when we first came together to address our problems collectively.

That coming together took place on September 17th, 1993. Approximately ten of us in the English Department met "to help research and to start our University of Illinois TA union drive," as the memo read.⁴ It is safe to say we had little sense of what we were contemplating. Despite having belonged, nominally, to two unions—as a food service worker and as a teacher in the Chicago public schools—I had never participated in either beyond paying dues, and I certainly had never built one from scratch. And yet that is just what we proceeded to do.

What prepared us to build a union? When I was accepted into the English program at UIUC, one of the first letters I received came from the English Graduate Student Association (EGSA). It made a point of saying how the teaching opportunities for grads at Illinois were superior to those of almost any other school. As a relative newcomer to the field, I read that remark uncritically, and with the same avidity with which it seemed to have been written. In fact, I accepted Illinois' offer because it was the best I received: seven years of guaranteed funding, assuming I fulfilled the academic requirements. Most of this funding would take the form of assistantships, which, I had learned from one of my undergraduate

English professors, mostly meant teaching something called "Composition," a class I myself had never taken. But I was eager to teach Composition and, the EGSA letter said, still other courses were available to me. It was as if I had already achieved that perfect job which my colleague imagined, and I did not even have the degree.

It never occurred to me to ask why Illinois appeared to be so generous with its course assignments. Only gradually did a clearer picture emerge. The majority of graduate students held appointments equivalent to a professor's (two classes each semester), and grads overall taught two-thirds of all courses. These are staggering totals, and it was estimated at the time it would cost the department \$4 million a year to staff those courses with full-time regular faculty.⁵ The point is not that we were oppressed, especially relative to the average part-time faculty in our discipline. Rather, what was sold to us initially as funding was quite clearly *work*, both in terms of how we experienced it, and with regard to what it meant to the department, which simply could not have functioned without our labor.

Significantly, the inevitable disillusionment we all experienced was transformed into a process that helped create our identity as workers. The process occurred in two stages. The first involved recognizing the inherent trade-off between our roles as students and teachers. "[W]orkload," said a colleague, describing how she became an active unionist,

was a big issue.... [I had] forty-four papers to grade every couple of weeks.... either I can be a good student or I can be a good teacher. I can either blow off my students and get my work done, or I can do a half-ass job in seminars and get my grading done and be conscientious to my students, and I was feeling really bad about that.

What we did in our classrooms *felt* like work. Why were we not treated like workers? That question was answered in the second step by which we developed a labor identity. It soon became clear that the same opportunities that favored us as grads worked against us when we finished our degrees and looked for work elsewhere. In effect, we were always competing with other versions of ourselves, winning the battle when we were cheap labor grad students, losing it when our Ph.D.s made us prohibitively expensive, relative to newer cheap labor grads, or adjuncts.

For future organizers that lesson was brought home by the experience of senior peers. Asked when she first began thinking about unions, one of our founders responded,

I think when we got to graduate school ... there was a certain hysteria surrounding the market, and I think that was a direct result of really good candidates ... not getting jobs: people who had their books published by Oxford, I believe⁶.... I was in seminars where people's very personal stories were being told and these people became sort of mythical figures.... I think these issues very much informed many of the debates.

Thus, in a climate where we were compelled to think of ourselves as workers, we were also confronted with the prospect of a jobless future. We had been given an identity, only to see that identity jeopardized. In attempting to resolve the problem individually, even the most seemingly qualified of our peers met failure after failure. The only solution, both for our current circumstances and our future prospects, seemed to be collective. The solution meant organizing a union.

Traditionally, workers unionize for immediate benefits: to raise their pay, better their conditions, redress the power imbalance on the job. UIUC implicitly regarded graduate students as management trainees. But we had no future for which to be trained. In addition, in the university's eyes we were proto-professionals, rather than cheap labor. Thus many who gravitated quickly to unionizing may have felt as though they were at least partially repudiating the ethos of their profession. Never mind that it was our employer that first abrogated the implicit contract sustaining the myth of grad school as apprenticeship.

For it was not just new graduate students who possessed an idealized vision of the academy. This remains the way the academy would like to think about itself. One associate dean for graduate affairs was fond of referring to us as "junior colleagues," a description that would better capture our status were it preceded by the qualifier "highly expendable." Just how expendable became clear as the result of another early development that helped stimulate our campaign.

In the late 1980s, the Graduate College chartered a body known as the Graduate Student Advisory Council (GSAC). Its members were appointed by the Associate Dean for Graduate Affairs, and it would meet regularly during the academic year and offer input on the needs of their peers. GSAC channeled students' concerns to the College and disseminated the College's news among grads. News dissemination became prominent once there was an organizing drive on campus and GSAC began to function as a sort of company union. Because GSAC's members had to be approved by the Grad College and could be removed at any time for any reason, and because its mission was no more than advisory, it was and is a basically toothless organization.

Its toothlessness would become even clearer in the spring of 1996, when, toward the end of our union's authorization drive, GSAC announced that grad employees would receive, for the first time, dental insurance. Dental insurance had been an organizing issue from the start. Indeed, one of my first responsibilities coming out of that September '93 meeting had been to learn about campus groups such as GSAC, to see what they did and whether they would support us. When I informed the council members of our interest in obtaining dental insurance, they laughed and told me I would get nowhere: they had recommended such a plan years ago to no effect. GSAC's proposal from the late '80s never made it out of the Grad College, because the administrators there were only motivated to respond when they felt compelled to.

Besides addressing grad employee needs by creating feckless bodies such as GSAC, UIUC commissioned reports about the status of the school's graduate programs. In 1993, the university released a survey of the school's science and humanities programs entitled *LAS Resources, 1993-2000*, popularly known as "the LAS Resources report." To their credit, the report's authors recognized more needed to be done for grad students, specifically in terms of salary and benefits. But consonant with the corporatist mentality that has come to govern how universities think about themselves, many of the report's recommendations seemed to conceive of graduate students as a product whose success shaped the image of the university. If, under this way of thinking, not enough Ph.D.s got jobs, the school's (read: the company's) reputation might suffer. Although the report never specified cuts in enrollment, it was widely perceived to be doing just that. "[O]ne thing they were really stressing," as a colleague put it, "given the job market conditions, [was] that departments across LAS would admit fewer graduate students; that what departments should be concerned with was ensuring that their graduates got jobs and this would ensure in fact the quality and reputation of the departments at the university."

Significantly, the report made these recommendations while acknowledging that departments like English knowingly admitted a glut of graduate students because they needed them to (cheaply) staff the courses they had to teach. In this instance, the connection between learning and labor could not have been more obvious. As one union founder expressed it, "[W]hat ... English needs to be concerned with doing is not narrowing the access to higher education, but expanding it, and expanding its own conception of the relevance of our work." What motivated some of our earliest activists was a genuine sense that their relevance, their livelihood, was at stake. And the level of that threat, which for English meant at most shrinking the program, was more severe elsewhere on campus. Certain units, like Comparative Literature and Ecology, Ethology, and Evolution (Triple E), were targeted for possible elimination because deemed potentially irrelevant.⁷

But as my own department was to learn, after partially implementing the proposals from the report, if you shrink the number of instructors in your department by reducing admissions, you still have to find people

to staff your courses, either grad students from other departments or adjuncts of one flavor or another. At best you reduce your own culpability in the problem, but you also fail to address the real issue, which is not that there are too many Ph.D.s competing for too few jobs, but that there are not enough good jobs.

Similarly, if the arguments for eliminating or otherwise radically modifying certain academic units are entirely driven by fiscal imperatives, one approaches a slippery slope that could mean the death of even that limited notion of the liberal arts preserved at a school like Illinois. If profitability or, to a lesser extent, public/institutional profile are the only indices of merit in higher education, many of us, not just in the humanities, are in trouble. For all that the *LAS Resources, 1993-2000* report claimed to *assume* responsibility over the health of various programs and the well-being of their graduates, it could not address the basic, structural dynamic whereby research institutions like UIUC balance their budgets on the backs of grad employees and then send those employee/students into a world where they are now too expensive to hire. Reducing faculty FTE to better fund the remaining faculty and graduate students cannot solve that problem, and in the short term, only exacerbates it. To the extent that the report repeatedly calls for steps to "improve graduate student recruitment" and "attract first-rate graduate students,"⁸ the authors' opinion of *existing* UIUC grads would appear to be less than enthusiastic. Again and again, one encounters the clash between learning and labor: between wanting "first-rate graduate students" who will make the university look better, and settling for the ones you can actually attract, on whose labor you can at least turn a profit. Needless to say, those of us who came to the university with an idealized vision of it did not appreciate learning that we really were not good enough to be there, *except as teachers*. But then, we were not so valuable as teachers that we were worth paying anything, either.

So it was in the context of our experience as workers, our recognition of a dismal employment future, and our reaction to a report that inadequately addressed these circumstances, that the first English grad students began thinking about unionizing. Out of our multiple concerns momentum built. One of the founders remembered, "[I]t was something in the air--other schools were unionizing, there seemed to be sort of a national trend." Another remembered the origin of our campaign this way:

I think maybe the first conversation that we had about forming--... we hoped it would be a union, but we weren't calling it that, I don't think, at that point--... was the spring of 1993.... [We ran] ... for the English Graduate Student Association executive council, and ... put out flyers saying [t]hat we wanted EGSA ... to start thinking about forming a union.... we won the election, which we worked on all summer long, and indeed the whole school year, '93-'94... the English Department had to recognize its relation to the university administration, to other departments, to broader institutional structures that the EGSA up to this point [hadn't done].... And I think all three of us agreed that what we wanted to do as EGSA was to make connections between EGSA and these other constituencies.... continually trying to make it more interdepartmental.... [W]e also wanted ... to have a connection to the community, so we worked on a literacy project ... We wanted ... to connect with other national issues that were affecting education, particularly the move among the conservative Right to challenge what they were calling political correctness, so we helped organize a conference of Teachers for a Democratic Culture, which is a national progressive group of academics trying to counter the Right's criticism of things like multicultural education. And then we also wanted ... [to] address the job market conditions for people in English at that time. So what EGSA was doing, which I think very much tied into why we were wanting to get a union started,... [was] to redefine English as a discipline, to expand the definition of what it meant to do academic work in English, and to constantly be making connections to other departments, to the conditions that shaped our work and our research. And I think that was a sympathetic environment for the union movement to begin.

Coming out of our first meeting we emphasized connections. But what we learned from other campus groups was discouraging. The LAS Council, for example, turned out to be an undergrad group, designed "to further interest and support for Liberal Arts and Sciences" and "to promote communications between students, faculty, and alumni."⁹ Although we shared some of their goals, and would even come to offer our own membership similar "benefits," e.g. "attain[ing] leadership experience," "discuss[ing] and gain[ing] insight into campus issues," and "work[ing] with" (and sometimes against) "faculty and administration,"¹⁰ the LAS Council was essentially a localized and undergraduate version of GSAC. Similarly, and unsurprisingly, it focused only on academic issues, insofar as it was also chartered by the university itself, which preferred to mystify its role as employer.

Our efforts to link up with other grad employee unions proved more profitable. Early on we received encouragement from an organizer who had been active in the campaign at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. "[M]ore and more Unions are interested in setting up TA locals," he told us. "Use this to your advantage—get funding!" He also described what it would be like to conduct a campaign, which "meant hunting down students in chemistry, architecture, business, etc. Of course, forcing us to talk to other students was one of the best things the Union did for us, and helped us resist the division of academic labor, always worth doing. We found we had more in common than we expected."¹¹

It would be two years before we affiliated and began our authorization drive, and almost four before we won our election, but this advice proved prescient. So, too, did what we learned from the then ongoing drive at Iowa. One of us visited the campus, and found that the issues there—with the exception of tuition waivers, which UIUC grads enjoyed—could have comprised our own platform: low salaries, poor health insurance coverage, no childcare, no formal grievance procedure. Similarly, Iowa's union structure anticipated one of the earliest organizational models we would adopt. Finally, the Iowa organizers advised us to affiliate, because "unionization is a very complex legal issue and [we would] need a lawyer."¹² In fact, our GTA union has been engaged in a legal fight with the university's Board of Trustees from the moment we filed for an election with the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board.

What seemed striking was the growing sense of solidarity we experienced with fellow unionists, at campuses such as Milwaukee, Iowa, and UW-Madison, who also offered much crucial, early advice and support. In fact, we had stronger links with other unions than we did with colleagues in different departments on our campus. By mid-semester in the fall of '93, we were still just a small band of English grad students, trying to use their professional association to politicize their discipline. This was to change when EGSA began contacting other departmental associations about our efforts.

Out of these contacts came the first interdepartmental meeting of our proto-union. One early activist, Randi Storch, remembered the event in the following manner:

[W]e were sponsoring a Labor History conference for graduate students ... and people were coming here from Iowa, where a graduate employee campaign had been going on, and actually had failed¹³.... I remember very clearly [someone] ... announcing that there were some graduate students in the English department who were getting together here to talk about graduate employee unions, and maybe unionizing. I was very interested in this because [a friend] and I had talked about this before.... but neither [of us] had the resources, the time, the energy, and the connections to ... make it happen, and we were too new as graduate students here. It wasn't until this conference, where it seemed like it was happening at Iowa [and] ... the English department was interested, that we got really excited [and] immediately, of course, jumped on board, and met over in the English Building, where [EGSA] led this meeting.... Maybe twenty-five, thirty people sat in a circle, and talked about why we all thought we needed a union here, and what we were going to do about it.

Another early activist from the same department came to that meeting with considerably less enthusiasm. Having already tried and failed to address a workload-related labor problem in his own discipline, he construed the experience as

a lesson that we can't really do anything about this stuff inside your department. And shortly after that, word came around that there was going to be a meeting of people who wanted to unionize TAs.... we were all sitting in my office, talking about some exam ... I remember that I was so frustrated with ... having to write these exam questions, because this meeting of the G.E.O. [Graduate Employees' Organization] was happening at the same time. Finally I [said], "You guys decide this by yourselves, I'm going to go to this meeting." So I came over ... and they all showed up shortly after.... And then we sat through this meeting ... you know, we're talkin' about having a union, this is what a union would mean, there's unions at other schools, you know, let's have some committees, and start working on it.

Although this individual would come to be a major participant in the union, he was initially skeptical about its prospects. "[H]aving studied labor history," he related,

... I actually felt it was probably ridiculous to try to unionize grad assistants, because it was going to be really hard.... And I thought probably most people didn't realize how hard it was going to be to do this. And so I wanted to give my opinion that this is ... too hard to do, and we shouldn't do it.... this is ridiculous, it's never going to happen. I don't remember totally what I was thinking: you know, we're not really oppressed enough to have a union, or to merit this sort of activity. Or if I was just thinking, it's too much work and we have to do all this other stuff, too. So, whatever, that is what I was going to say when I went into that meeting. But ... there were so many other people there, and at that time, I had never really met anyone from outside the History Department. I didn't know anybody else. So my whole world was the History Department, and seeing people in other departments basically saying the same things that we were saying, or even worse, actually, was quite a revelation. And that totally changed my mind in terms of the possibilities of doing it, or starting to, anyway.¹⁴

At another point, he spoke of that "revelation" in even stronger terms. "I was," he said, "immediately won over."

That process of conversion has continued now for eight years. Indeed, the union renews itself every time a new member is recruited. In that interval the GEO affiliated with the Illinois Federation of Teachers, conducted an authorization card drive and filed for a union election, fought an ongoing legal battle with the administration to have graduate students in Illinois qualify as employees, won an independently sponsored union election in spring 1997, secured additional medical and professional benefits for Illinois grad employees, lobbied the legislature, and conducted a series of organizing drives and events intended to escalate the campaign for recognition.

Looking back on our origin, I am most struck by the gap between what we knew and were qualified to do and the magnitude of what faced us. That the union at Illinois has yet to achieve formal recognition, despite an array of interim victories in expanding benefits for grads, testifies to the continuing difficulty of their project. Nonetheless, I continue to find hope in a campaign to which I gave seven years of my life, because I continue to believe in the potential of academics to learn from their labor, to learn to be labor, and to work toward a time when these two practices shall seem quite natural complements. I saw it happen once. I trust it will in the future.

NOTES

¹ John M. Gregory. "Inaugural Address." *First Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Illinois Industrial University, from their Organization, March 12, 1867, to the Close of the Academic Year, June 13, 1868* (Springfield, IL: Baker, Bailhache & Co. Printers, 1868), p. 181.

² *Ibid.*, p. 182.

³ Between 4 September 1997 and 29 June 1998 I conducted 19 interviews with UIUC grad student activists who were early members of the union. Their distribution by fields was: History—6, English—5, Physics—3, Kinesiology—2, Communications—2, Anthropology—one.

⁴ Memo from Vivian Wagner, 13 September 1993.

⁵ Cary Nelson, *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* (NY: NYU P, 1997), p. 168.

⁶ That individual finally got a position after four years on the market. And his book really was published by Oxford.

⁷ *LAS Resources, 1993-2000: Priorities and Principles for Allocations in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences*, 16 April 1993, p. 18.

⁸ *LAS Resources, 1993-2000: Priorities and Principles for Allocations in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Area Committee III*, 4 January 1993, p. 13.

⁹ LAS Council brochure.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Letter from Art Redding to Vivian Wagner, 31 August 1993.

¹² Report of meeting with Dan Swinarski, Chair of the Research Committee of the Campaign to Organize Graduate Students (COGS) at University of Iowa, nd.

¹³ Ultimately, however, that effort would succeed.

¹⁴ I discuss this phenomenon in my essay, "From Sociality to Responsibility: Graduate Employee Unions and the Meaning of the University," *Perspectives*, 37.8 (November 1999): 41-43.

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