

## The Escape from Contingency, or, Students are Already Workers

Marc Bousquet

Some of this piece, including the title, is adapted from a talk I gave on a panel with Dick Ohmann at McGill University in May 2005.<sup>1</sup> He and I have worked together on a few things recently. With Laura Bartlett, we created a partnership between *Radical Teacher* and *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor* for special issues that addressed the relationship between information technology and academic workers. With Leo Parascondola and others we drafted a resolution for the 2004 MLA annual meeting that committed the association to financial support of the annual COCAL conference for contingent faculty activists. In 2003, we appeared together on a CCCC panel that, it turns out, took place while the first warplanes that Bush II had ordered into Iraq were in the air. Dick of course varied from his advertised topic to speak about the immediately pending war; I did not. And I had the pleasure of editing his contribution to *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers*. Typically, he found no easy path to utopia in literacy activism, the labor movement, or any of the many forms of “good citizenship” supported by progressive educators.

During that first week of the war, with half a million New Yorkers in the streets in a protest not televised by the major networks, I interviewed Ohmann in his Upper West Side apartment. We talked about many things, especially the invasion and the social uses of literacy. I asked him to answer his own rhetorical question from the mid 1970s: “What would writing look like if it had been invented for purposes of solidarity and revolt?” We talked about the fact that he is, with Fred Pfeil and the late Michael Sprinker, among the many academic Marxists with a closet addiction to the game of poker, and one who keeps close account of his wins and losses. And we talked quite a bit about the contradictory class position of professionals and managers.

With respect to university educators, I asked whether they could be viewed, a la Gramsci, as members of the working class, but class traitors by way of taste and function, or instead ought they be

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viewed, as by Bourdieu, “the dominated fraction of the dominant class?” At stake in this question is our understanding of the ways that persons who work in order to live can enjoy solidarity: are highly trained professionals like surgeons and accountants best viewed in relation to other forms of labor aristocracy, such as skilled craftspeople, or are they more like the leisure classes (who may work rather hard at a career, but for distinction, not in order to live)?

On the one hand, he agreed with Bourdieu, noting that the professions captured a “historic opportunity” to extend monopolies over knowledge and credentialing in areas of expertise critical to the modernization process, “how to build the cities, how to create water supplies, sanitation, railroads, the whole complex of applied science and law.” However, he noted that when he first tackled these questions with the aim of attacking professional privilege, it looked to him:

as if the professions would be around until hell froze over or capitalism ended, whichever came first. And I was so wrong about that. They'll still be around for a long time to come but already our profession for instance has run into serious obstacles...There are parallel processes in accounting and engineering, which have become like law and medicine a two-tiered profession with the top tier more or less answering to the tune that business calls and the other tier preparing my income tax. So on the other hand, if the professional managerial class is dissolving, or rather thinning out, dispersing, then these people will have a lot more in common with workers in other fields. The idea of organizing with restaurant workers may not be so repellent to professionals as it has seemed in the past. And that's probably the most optimistic thing I'm going to say in this entire interview.

His views regarding the proletarianization of the professional worker, including educators (as observed by Bowles and Gintis, Braverman, Aronowitz, etc.) are “optimistic” in the sense that some kinds of organizing offer better prospects than others for a movement with revolutionary commitments to democracy and equality.

The tendency of professional workers and other labor aristocrats toward the more self-interested forms of self-organization suggests that worker self-organization is essential but not sufficient to the expansion of democracy and equality, regardless of whether one is talking about physicians, teamsters, or civil servants. The tenure-stream faculty, for instance, have for the most part organized on a typical trade-union basis, almost exclusively in the National Education Association, American Federation of Teachers, and the American Association of University Professors. On the one hand, both of the two moments of faculty unionism (in the 1930s and the 1960s through 70s) were closely associated with upsurges of

movement politics, and with vast waves of worker self-organization, often in previously unorganized sectors (minority workers, public employees). The major wave of faculty unionism that began in the 1960s was part of an epochal shift in U.S. organized labor—from a point where almost no public employees were organized to the point where they are the majority of organized workers. During the 1970s, while private sector unionism contracted severely, public employee unionism, supported by enabling legislation (won by the political efforts of organized public employees) broadly enlarged.

Riding a wave whose avant-garde was formed of civil servants, school teachers, and firefighters, from the 1960s through the 1980s the tenure-stream faculty in public higher education have grown into one of the most highly-unionized workforces in the United States. Public university faculty are now four times more likely to bargain collectively than the average American worker. That figure would likely have been similar for the professoriate on private campuses were it not for the infamous and narrowly-decided 1980 *Yeshiva* decision by the Supreme Court. The one-vote majority shocked most observers by upholding an unlikely argument by counsel for *Yeshiva's* management, claiming that extremely limited faculty participation in governance activities makes the faculty “managerial employees” (who are bereft of collective-bargaining rights under the Wagner act, a provision intended to protect union members from having management claim a right to join workers’ associations). Interestingly, the fanciful reasoning behind the *Yeshiva* decision applies only to private campuses, which are overseen federally, while public higher education is governed by fifty different state public-employee relations boards.

After *Yeshiva*, the “managerial exclusion” argument was used to deny many others the right to bargain, especially nurses. More recently, it has been used to deny millions their rights to overtime pay. Under the Bush administration’s new overtime regulations, all kinds of low-level and low-paid supervisors, as at a Starbucks or retail outlet, previously entitled to overtime pay, were re-classified as “managerial employees,” losing the right to be paid for compulsory overtime. (“Battle Engaged,” Greenhouse) Of course these cynical abuses of the managerial exclusion, designed to protect workers and to protect the integrity of their unions, have not been endorsed by persuasive legal scholarship, or by any government body anywhere else in the industrialized West. Indeed, while faculty at public colleges are even more likely to participate in governance (and therefore would be yet more “managerial” according to the 5-4 Supreme Court’s characterization), the state-level employee relations boards have generally rejected any attempt to apply the absurd *Yeshiva* standard in their jurisdictions. Even so, the unionization of public campuses has slowed since 1980 as well, in large part due to Reagan’s assault on the workplace rights of public employees, beginning with the decertification of the air-traffic controllers’ union in that year (DeCew, Saltzman, Arnold).

There are many good things about the unionism of tenure-stream faculty. But—like most other U.S. union members—the organized faculty have to an extent collaborated, albeit generally passively, with the creation of a second-tier workforce. In this respect, they're little different from the associations of the dockworkers at the big coastal ports, who conserve the possibility of six-figure salaries and lifetime job security for themselves while permitting management to employ the majority of new workers on a future-less second tier, on fast-food wages and in a state of permanent insecurity, a disposable, invisible, often voiceless majority. One of the great ironies for organized academic labor is that by acceding to the vast expansion of the nontenurable second tier, the tenured minority of faculty increasingly *do* have the managerial relationship that the Yeshiva decision ascribed to them. (Because it is the tenured who hire, fire, and supervise the nontenurable.) From the perspective of the academic workers' second tier, the major faculty unions—NEA, AFT, AAUP—and the complacent, often complicit, tenure-stream constituency they serve have often been at least part of the problem and much less of the solution than they ought to have been. (This is a situation that is changing, and all three of the major higher-ed unions have devoted new resources to organizing the nontenurable in recent years; nonetheless, the more democratic elements of union culture have had little effect on the hierarchical sensibilities of the tenure-eligible professoriate, which serves as a natural ideological entry point for accepting the tiering of the academic workforce.)

From the perspective of the insecure constituency, the disposable teachers, there's merit in Dick's refusal to have a lot of sympathy with unions of professionals that willingly serve as the "tenured bosses" of the disposable majority and seek in other ways to collaborate with privatization (for example, by squabbling with the employer and corporate capital over the proceeds of newly-created intellectual "property rights," all based in a massive enclosure of our intellectual commons). He prefers to see the moment as an opportunity, a crisis of legitimacy for traditional forms of unionism and professional organization, in which the purpose of unionism cannot be the recovery of professional privilege. Indeed for him the meaning of faculty self-organization is at least potentially up for grabs: now that the knowledge that professionals "were guarding supposedly for the public good is now being appropriated in various ways, privatized, commodified," he observes, the meaning of the struggle by professionals to retain elements of autonomy over their work processes could be returned to the common good—"not by saying we have to get back our own little hoard of knowledge again, but rather to try and control the resocialization of knowledge."

Clear-eyed and the tiniest bit ruthless, as ever, Dick maintains a similar hope for the self-organization of the casualized academic worker. Regarding the emergence of the nontenurable second tier into the majority of the teaching workforce, he says, "that's too bad, but it certainly helps if a certain militancy among those who are not

on a tenure track leads to a search for other forms of job security and other kinds of alliance.”

Of necessity, not idealism, graduate employees and contingent faculty have pursued Dick’s prescription for “other forms” of security and alliance, including organizing in close connection with restaurant workers. Graduate employees are far more likely to seek representation with unions representing nonteaching employees on and off the campus, such as AFSCME and SEIU, as well as the UAW, which has scored important victories on key campuses in New York and California. Contingent faculty are finding real success with the metropolitan union model pioneered by COCAL in Boston, Chicago, and California (Berry). What drives that necessity is the failure of professionalism’s promise of a future for the majority of faculty in the sub- and para-professional second tier. This is where I first encountered academic unionism, as a member of an insurgent caucus of adjuncts, graduate students, and progressive tenure-stream faculty within the City University of New York faculty union, seeking to redefine the meaning of “union democracy” to include the nontenurable majority of persons whose representation by the union had been less than energetic. Many of the folks active in CUNY’s New Caucus, like the Senate’s current president Susan O’Malley, were members of the MLA Radical Caucus, which is how I got to know Dick in the first place. In CUNY terms, the “other forms” of alliance supported by the insurgent New Caucus tended to have the meaning of alliance with the institutions of new social movements in the city of New York, and the elaboration with those institutions of shared political goals, such as support for educating the most remarkable student population in the world. The CUNY New Caucus campaign was the successor to a (failed) effort by nontenurable CUNY faculty to decertify the union and get independent representation of their own, and time will tell how far toward union democracy the New Caucus victory will take the part-timers and graduate students.

As a union member and an activist I eventually, somewhat unwillingly, accepted what I’ve called the one indispensable awareness of the graduate student employee: that we were not merely preparing ourselves for future employment, but were in fact employed already. This realization is difficult. Most people think of education as a time apart from employment, a preparation for employment, and any work performed during that time as ancillary to the future. The logic of future expectation encourages most people to accept conditions they would otherwise reject: salaries well below a living wage, uncertain legal standing, little or no access to workplace due process, and few, sometimes none, of such basic employment benefits as health insurance, maternity leave, unemployment benefits, pension contribution, and so forth. The logic of the future interlocks neatly with a policy flight from legal entitlement to the rhetoric of self-investment and a finance-capitalist model of selfhood—one requiring the self-management of one’s own person as a human resource (Martin).

In terms of higher education, thirty-five years of steady substitution of graduate student labor for faculty labor has positioned the graduate employee to view the logic of the future with particular suspicion. As I've written before: at a certain point in graduate education it becomes impossible not to realize that for many of us the Ph.D. is the end and not the beginning of a long teaching career. Sadly, the authorized mode of confronting this contingency is to view graduate education as risk arbitrage, the sheepskin as junk bond, and the degreed self as a form of initial public offering. Dick Ohmann, Phd—IPO. Management legitimizes this view, the tenure-stream faculty circulate it as folk knowledge ("How to get ahead on the 'job market'"), and the unions of the tenured fail to confront it. What's fascinating is the degree to which graduate employees and other contingent faculty reject this authorized subjectivity, in what appears to be a remarkable third wave of thinking about the academic labor system after 1945.

As I see it, the first post-war wave of thought about academic labor appears in the unionist commitments of the tenure-stream faculty, which I've discussed above, and which peaked around 1970. The second wave of thought is the logic of university management that swept to dominance about 1980 and remains dominant at this time (2005). Rather than an objective tool for measuring our lived reality, I view the managerial rhetoric of market as a vector for imposing what Jameson calls the "Reagan-Bush and Thatcher utopias" or what Harvey calls "the political correctness of the market" (2003, 2004).

I have argued for the accuracy and justice of the emergent third wave of knowledge represented by the contingent workers' union movement, en route to claiming that we should be moving toward a "dictatorship of the flexible" in terms of our efforts to transform the labor system (2002). By dictatorship of the flexible I mean to raise and name the spectre of a real and fully functioning workplace democracy in higher education, in which questions of justice are raised and commonly resolved from the standpoint of the most exploited. This is not a theoretical position for me. I think the university would be better and more justly run by its employees, including undergraduate workers, clerical and maintenance staff, and working faculty, the majority of whom happen to be contingent faculty and graduate employees. Nor am I being rhetorical. It's my view that if we dictated to the administration, rather than the other way around, the money would be better spent, there'd be more comfortable chairs and more swimming pools, and a more socially productive knowledge labor all round.

Of course it's worth keeping in mind as Dick tirelessly and accurately points out, that the university isn't a total system in itself, far from it, and that the margins of the system of, for instance, U.S. higher education are neither in the U.S., nor highly educated. That much acknowledged, I'll still happily wager the rule of the flexible, with their structural tie to the globally contingent, to the rule of the trustee and their structural tie to global capital.

In trying to understand the relationship of the marginalized within the university to the marginalized without, I've devoted some time to exploring a central trope of the higher education discourse—the information university. I say “trope” because the idea of an “information university” is a discursive construction, not a description of the actually-existing or concrete university (2004).

In its wildly condensed form, the observation I make here is that the “information university” is less about producing digital information goods than it is about extracting surplus value from workers who are required to deliver their labor “in the mode of information.” Again, to be far too condensed: labor in the mode of information is labor delivered “just in time” and “on demand,” appearing when needed on the management desktop, called up by a keystroke and dismissed just as easily. Laboring in this “informatic” mode doesn't mean laboring with less effort: quite the reverse. For capital to have labor appear and disappear at the speed of the bit-stream might, for instance, require concrete labor to drive sixty miles between part-time gigs, gulping fast food on the highway, leaving its children insufficiently attended: the embodied flex timer is in constant motion, maintaining an ever more strenuous existence in order to present the working body required by capital: healthy, apparently childless, trained and alert, displaying an affect of pride in representing zero drain on the corporation's resources. The informatic mode doesn't eliminate all of this effort; it just makes it disappear from the management calculus, offloading the costs of feeding, housing, and health care onto locations in the system other than those using the labor power (2004).

This is the real jumping-off point for thinking about the “information university,” as participating less in a “high-tech, high wage” information economy and more in the low-wage, low-profit service economy, especially the ultra-low-wage sector of informal economic activity taking place outside, or at the margins of, a regulatory environment: gypsy cab driving, day labor, unlicensed child care and domestic work, prostitution.

In this frame, “student” status, a status university employers have spent many tens of millions to defend, creates a semi-formal or under-regulated labor relation ensuring low wages and—equally important—low worker agency (2004).

### **Internal Outsourcing and Ten Million “Students Who Work”**

I received tenure at a public institution in the southeast that was hanging by its fingernails to its Carnegie research classification, with a massive medical and engineering complex carrying valid research credentials, nationally-ranked football and basketball teams, and an arts-and-sciences unit that, depending on your perspective, was either grossly underfunded or grossly “underperforming,” year after year recording graduation rates below 40 percent. While an unhealthy administrative culture and a passive faculty at the “U of Hell” certainly contributed to the institution's failure to meet student need in instructional terms, the biggest part of

unmet student need was financial (though in the context of multi-millionaire coaches and a wide public trough for medical researchers seeking patents, this failure too represented core institutional values and commitments).

Given the low graduation rate, and high level of student financial immiseration (the institution has one of the lowest dormitory populations of any school in its Carnegie class), I was astonished to discover that the department, college, and university administration considered student financial assistance one of their success stories.

What they held forth as the centerpiece of their "success" was their partnership with the United Parcel Service in creating financial aid packages that included a job requiring most aided students to work midnight to four a.m. five days a week, lifting heavy packages onto conveyor belts. These students were essentially contracted out by the university, which benefits not only through the collection of tuition and various subsidies, but through the construction of new dormitories and other structures funded by the UPS initiative. In reality, of course, UPS's motivation is not benevolence, but the cheapness and docility of the student workforce. In addition to the wage, student dependency on UPS includes loan guarantees and tuition remissions, much or even all of which could be lost if the student resigned "prematurely" from the program.

As it turns out, the campus was just one of scores on which UPS has recruited thousands of student shift workers in its "Earn and Learn program," and is just one of thousands of employers large and small whose business plans revolve centrally around the availability of a workforce who primarily consider themselves something other than workers.

To the extent that one function of education is people production, the question of subjectivity is unavoidable: what sort of consciousness is being framed by this experience? One answer, one of modernity's classic answers, is that it is a consciousness who is really someone other than the embodied person working: I am not a package handler; I am a student working as a package handler for a while. Very little work of any kind has been done on the question of undergraduate labor. Of particular interest is Laura Bartlett's *Working Lives of College Students* website, featuring the original compositions of scores of student workers regarding their experience: <http://composition.dc-marion.ohio-state.edu/workinglives>.

Still in development as this essay goes to press, Bartlett's site is, even in this early stage, a rich resource for understanding the experience of undergraduates who work. The essays feature the complexity of student consciousness regarding their working lives. Some emphasize positive dimensions, such as the student who acquired her educational sense of purpose from her part-time job assisting the disabled. Others attempt to make a virtue of necessity, hoping that working while studying will teach them "time management and multi-tasking" or "build life-long coping skills," one adding the afterthought, "Hopefully I will survive!" ["Work, Meet Education;" "The School-Work Connection"]. More widespread was a sense of exploitation, sounded in the common notes of

“stress” and the running analogy to “imprisonment” in several contributions. Some wrote of physical injury and mental anguish, even in light-duty service and office positions, or wrote of repeated indignities, sexual harassment and bullying: “I am treated as if I am subhuman” (“Wonderful World of Work”). One made precise calculations of the huge gap between the costs of education and the wages earned from the university and other employers (tuition, books and fees at an Ohio State campus consuming nearly the whole of a 40-hour week’s wages, leaving just six dollars a week for housing, transportation, food, clothing, entertainment, medical expenses and the like). Some described the need for simultaneous multiple part-time jobs in addition to loans and grants.

Most of the contributors viewed their work as something very different from the “real” work they hoped to land after graduation. After describing her work-related injuries in a pretzel concession at an Ohio Walmart as akin to imprisonment and torture, for instance, one of the contributors concludes by observing, “Someday, this little pretzel shop will be just something I did once upon a time just to get through college” (“A Rude Awakening”). We could go any number of ways from here. For instance we could ask what are the consequences of separating one’s consciousness from “being” the pretzel baker or package handler? And one terribly important answer is that persons who were unable to recognize their own humanity in pretzel baking or package handling are perhaps less likely to acknowledge the humanity of others who handle packages, or clean toilets, or paint walls and operate cash registers. I’ll return to this point before concluding.

Nearly 60 percent of US high school grads enter college (though fewer than half of these complete a four year degree, and average far more than four years to do it). About half of those with a baccalaureate feel the need to go on to graduate school. This professionalization of everything—the provision of degrees for so many different kinds of work—is one form in which higher education acts opportunistically. That is, it attracts more customers for credit hours with the (increasingly hollow) promise of the kinds of security nostalgically associated with the classical professions of law, medicine, education and so forth.

There is a social bargain with youth-qua-student that goes something like this: “accept contingency now, in exchange for an escape from it later.” The university’s role in this bargain is crucial: it provides the core promise of escaping into a future, without which their “temporary” employment would otherwise require larger enticements. The campus brokers the deal: give us, our vendors, and our employing partners what we want (tuition, fees, and a fair chunk of labor time over several years), and you can escape the life you’re living now.

Let’s take a fairly typical public campus offering the baccalaureate and a few M.A. programs. To make our example more than fair let’s add in powerful campus unions and look for a school with a relatively labor-friendly legislative environment. Given our bending over backwards, SUNY Oswego is a fairly modest employer of stu-

dent labor, directly employing 2000 undergraduates as part time workers, or a bit more than a quarter of the student population. Nonetheless students are overwhelmingly the largest sector of the work force on campus, substantially outnumbering all other employment groups combined: taking full-time and part-time together, the campus only employs 1500 non-student employees. Measured by full time employee equivalent, it appears that student workers provide as much as half the labor time expended on campus.

At Oswego and nationally student labor time is expended in work that mirrors similar low-wage benefitless positions in the service economy at large: food service, day care, janitorial work, building security, interior painting and carpentry, parking enforcement, laundry service, administrative assistance, warehouse restocking, and so on. These activities are far more typical than the tutorial, library, community service and internship activities that provide the public image of student work. (The nature of the work in "internship" and "community service" positions is another story, but is itself commonly similar service-economy activity such as data entry, document reproduction, and so forth.)

Essentially student employment offices work as temp agencies or outsourcing contractors for local businesses and campus units. At a typical public campus, the student employment office has hundreds of positions advertised by off-campus employers generally entirely without benefits or unemployment insurance, with a wage in the vicinity of 6 or 7 dollars an hour (sometimes more and often less). The off-campus work includes farm labor, satellite installation, short order cooking, commission sales, forklift operation, personal care in nursing homes as well as clerking in banks, malls, and insurance offices. Public universities will sometimes provide cheap workers for nearby elite private universities (which often place limits on the number of hours that their own undergraduates can work). The federal government employs cheap student labor in general office work and, for instance, as receptionists for the Social Security administration, in positions that formerly provided full-time employment for a citizen with reasonable wages and benefits. Student workers often replace full-time unionized staff.

Sometimes the temp-agency function is quite frank: at the University of Illinois Chicago, for instance, the student employment office maintains a separate Student Temporary Service exclusively for the purpose of providing near-minimum wage day labor on a just-in-time basis to any location on the campus.

That frank admission by UIC that they're running a temp agency may seem quite up to date and cutting edge but it is in fact quite old-school of them. The real cutting edge is MonsterTRAK, a subsidiary of the online job service Monster.com, which has standardized an interface with hundreds of public campuses. Initially providing on-campus interview services for graduates, the all-too suggestively named Monster.com has moved into the radically more lucrative business of managing undergraduate temp labor for hundreds of campuses, including Federal Work-Study positions on

major public campuses (U of Virginia, Cal Tech, U of Wisconsin). At all of these campuses, you cannot get work—even work-study positions funded with public money and which represent themselves as a citizenship entitlement, ie, “financial aid”—without registering with this private corporation, obtaining a password from them, and entering a nationwide temp agency, a world of work that is password protected and shielded from public view.

In the US, 20 percent of undergraduates do not work at all. About half of all undergraduates work an average of 25 hours per week. The remaining 30 percent work full time, more than full time, or at multiple jobs approximating the equivalent of full time, averaging 39 hours a week. This means that about ten or twelve million undergraduates are in the workforce at any given moment.

Indeed, if you’re a US citizen under 25, you are more likely to be working if you are a student than if you are not. Over three million persons aged 20-24 are unemployed. Being a student isn’t just a way of getting a future job—it’s a way of getting a job right now.

Here’s something to think about. The main demographic fault line employed by the National Center for Education Statistics is a fairly reasonable sounding division of the school-work continuum into two groups, “Students Who Work” and “Workers Who Study.” This sounds very clean, scientific, even empirical. But here’s the thing. Those divisions—quite unusually, I might add—involve no empirical criteria. They’re entirely subjective, based on the self-reporting of subjects who are given just two choices for self-description: “I consider myself a student who works,” or “I consider myself a worker who studies.” There are patterns within that self-reporting, but they aren’t clear cut at all: a huge fraction of persons describing themselves as “students who work” work full-time or more, and likewise a large proportion of those self-reporting as “workers who study” work part-time and/or go to school on a full-time basis. (NCES 2002-168, NCES 2003-167)

My point is not that self-reporting of this kind is a somewhat questionable primary organization of a core national database, though it is, in my opinion. My point is that these researchers resorted to the gambit of subject self-reporting as a primary organization *because in the current relationship between schooling and work, including the regulation environment, there isn’t any clear way of “distinguishing” between students and workers.*

This isn’t just a problem for investigators with the NCES, it’s also a problem for the most thoughtful analysts of labor, social justice, and the social function of higher education, such as many of the folks reading and contributing to *Works and Days*. I’m going to use an essay by Barbara Ehrenreich as an example, but let me emphasize that I am not criticizing Ehrenreich: where she misses a pot-hole, I tumble into Grand Canyons of error.

In fall 2004, Ehrenreich penned a column for the *Progressive* called “Class Struggle 101.” It’s about the exploitation of the higher education work force, and does an excellent job of making the necessary parallels to the wages, hypocrisy and union-busting of Wal-mart, and pointing out the good things that Harvard and

Stanford undergraduates have done in support of what she calls “campus blue collar workers.”

But throughout this piece, she uniformly identifies students and workers as two mutually exclusive groups. And she schematically assigns agency to “the students” and helplessness to “the workers,” which is erroneous even on the unusual campuses where her distinction even approaches the clear-cut division she wants it to be. At her Harvard example for instance, Ehrenreich doesn’t address the impact of one of the most noteworthy staff unions in the country, mainly comprised of, and wholly organized by, women. Similarly at Yale, it was the militant “blue collar” and “pink collar” unions with a \$100,000 grant that put the union of graduate students on its feet

It is difficult, in other words, to do the usual thing in left theory or in labor studies and write about an “alliance between students and labor,” as Ehrenreich does with so many others, when we haven’t made sense of the fact that students *are* labor. As one of Laura Bartlett’s student contributors observes, “Work, Meet Education, Your New Roommate.”

In short, I believe Ehrenreich is correct in assigning a powerful agency to the undergraduate population but at least partly for the wrong reasons—that is, *while they do have a degree of agency as students and credit-hour consumers they also have a powerful and enduring agency as labor.*

### **The Social Meaning of Student Labor**

In 1964, all of the expenses associated with a public university education, including food, clothing and housing could be had by working a minimum wage job an average of 22 hours a week throughout the year. (This might mean working 15 hours a week while studying and 40 hours a week during summers.) Today, the same expenses in a lowest wage job require 55 hours a week 52 weeks a year.

At a private university, those figures in 1964 were 36 minimum wage hours/week, relatively manageable for a married couple or a family of modest means, and still quite manageable for a single person working the lowest possible wage 20 hours a week during the school year and some overtime on the vacations. *Today, it would cost 136 hours per week 52 weeks a year to “work your way through” a private university (Mortenson). Each year of private education amounts to the annual after-tax earnings of nearly four low-wage workers working overtime.*

Employing misleading accounting that separates budgets for building, fixed capital expenses, sports programs and the like from “instructional unit” budgets, higher education administration often suggests that faculty wages are the cause of rising tuition, rather than irresponsible investment in technology, failed commercial ventures, lavish new buildings, corporate welfare, and so on. The plain fact is that many college administrations are on fixed-capital spending sprees with dollars squeezed from cheap faculty and stu-

dent labor: over the past 30 years, the price of student and faculty labor has been driven downward massively at exactly the same time costs have soared.

If we are to talk about wages as a factor in rising higher education expenditure, we might look to the bloating of administration: I haven't been able to locate reliable statistics for marketized and managed higher ed so far, but I suspect the costs of administrative bloat parallel the spiraling administrative costs of the "marketized" US health care system. In covering only half the population, the US system spends over \$1000 per year per person on administering "competition" and "entrepreneurship" in the interest of "market efficiency." By contrast the Canadian single-payer health care insures *everyone* incurring administrative charges of \$300 a head, and at an overall per-capita cost of *one-half* the "efficient" US market systems (Woolhandler).

Higher education and its promise of a future for the 80 percent of students trying to work their way through is increasingly a form of indenture, involving some combination of debt, overwork, and underinsurance, as well as the pervasive shortchanging of health, family obligations, and ironically, even learning and self-culture. As more and more students reach the limits of endurance with the work that they do while enrolled, they increasingly barter their future working lives to institutions of higher education as well. One major consequence of this shift of the costs of education away from society to students, including especially the costs of education as direct training for the workforce, is a regime of indebtedness, producing docile financialized subjectivities (Martin) in what Jeff Williams has dubbed "the pedagogy of debt," in which the horizon of the work regime fully contains the possibilities of student ambition and activity, including the conception of the future.

Overstressed student workers commonly approach their position from a consumerist frame of analysis (in large part because they are socialized and even legally obliged to do so, while being disabled by various means, including employment law, from thinking otherwise). To a certain extent the issue is indeed that student workers are underpaid and ripped off as consumers. In terms of their college "purchase" they are paying much more, about triple, and not getting more: the wage of the average person with a four year degree or better is about the same today as in 1970, though for a far greater percentage it takes the additional effort of graduate school to get that wage. From this consumerist perspective, this is a bargain that's gotten worse for purchasers of credit hours, because there are many more years at low wages, fewer years at higher wages, plus reductions in benefits, a debt load, and historically unprecedented insecurity in those working "full time" jobs.

But the systematically fascinating, and from the perspective of social justice far more significant issue or difference is that the US worker with only a high school education or "some college" is paid astonishing less than they were in 1970, when the "college bonus" was only 30 to 40 percent of the average high-school educated worker's salary. *Now, the "going to college" bonus is more than*

*double the high-school educated worker's salary, except that this "bonus" represents exclusively a massive reduction in the wage of the high-school educated, and in no part an actual "raise" in the wages of the college educated.*

So while it is true and important that higher education is much less of a good deal than it used to be, we also have to think about the role higher education plays in justifying the working circumstances of those who can't make the college bargain. Whether one is inclined to accept higher education as an unspecial and seamless path—school to work—or alternatively as something “special,” without any necessary or obvious relation to work, it can be considered straightforwardly as a distribution issue. That is: who should enjoy the “specialness,” whether that specialness is college as self-culture or college as a relatively larger and safer paycheck? On what terms? Who pays for it? What kinds and just how much specialness should the campus distribute? Why should the public fund a second- and third-class specialness for some working lives, and provide the majority of working lives no specialness at all? Wouldn't it be a straighter—not to mention far more just—path to dignity, security, health and a meaningful degree of self-determination—even for the most highly educated—if we simply agreed to provide them for everyone regardless of their degree of education? Why should education be a competitive scramble to provide yourself with health care?

And here we've run up against the classic question of education and democracy: can we really expect right education to create equality? Or do we need to *make equality* in order to have right education?

That question, the larger question, is a point on which Dick is more eloquent than most. Not an optimist, but certainly a utopian, he challenges us to make equality a reality. He asks us to identify the agencies of inequality in our lives (including the ideologies and institutions of professionalism), and to find a basis for solidarity with inequality's antagonists, and to have hope for a better world on that basis.

For me, the basis of solidarity and hope will always be the collective experience of workplace exploitation, and the widespread desire to be productive for society rather than capital. So when we ask, “Why has higher education gotten more expensive?” we need to bypass the technocratic and “necessitarian” account of events, in which all answers at least implicitly bring the concept of necessity beyond human agency to bear (“costs ‘had to’ rise because...”).

Instead we need to identify the agencies of inequality and ask, “To whom is the arrangement of student debt and student labor most useful?” The “small narratives” of technocracy function to obscure the fundamental questions of distribution.

Not just: who pays for education? But: who pays for low wages?

The employer doesn't pay. By putting students to work, UPS accumulates more than it would otherwise accumulate if it put non-students to work, because of the different material costs represented by persons who claim citizenship in the present, not citizenship in the future. These low wages aren't cheap to society, they're just cheap to employers. It's a subsidized cheapness, and my question is, who does the subsidizing? Parents and spouses do, providing housing and food, clothing, cars and health care that the wages of persons who study don't cover. Students themselves subsidize this cheapness, by doubling the number of life hours worked, by giving up self-culture and taking on debt. The families of adult students subsidize the cheapness both in direct labor time and in sacrificed leisure, in time lived together, and other emotional costs. Other service workers subsidize the cheapness, as the huge pool of cheap working students helps to keep down the price of non-student labor. And student workers, located, as I've said, in a kind of semi-formal regulation environment, are themselves inevitably patrons of the larger informal economy of babysitters, handymen, and the cheap-work system of global manufacturing and agribusiness.

So on the one hand, the labor time of the low-wage student worker creates an inevitable, embodied awareness that the whole system of our cheap wages is really a gift to the employer. Throwing cartons at 3 a.m. every night of one's college education, it becomes impossible not to see that UPS is the beneficiary of our financial aid, and not the other way around. As Dick said of another group of campus flex-timers, the contingent faculty, there's some potential in this experience for militancy, for new kinds of self-organization for workplace security, and even a quest for new alliances with other hyper-exploited and insecure workers. And in the United States, there are ten million people who are simultaneously workers and students at any given time, for many of whom the prospects of an "escape" from contingency are dim at best. Even under present conditions of extreme labor repression, the transformative agency of the millions of student employees is evident in the anti-sweatshop movement and in graduate employee union movements, which have allied themselves with other insecure workers and not with the tenured faculty, whose positions represent their own prospects of a future without contingency. For many whose work is shaped and mediated by the experience of higher education, especially the contingent forms of the work process pioneered by higher education, "professional" workers increasingly have interests and experiences in common with other workers.

On the other hand, especially for those for whom schooling does indeed provide an escape from contingency, these long terms of student work can also serve to reinforce commitments to inequality. The university creates professional workers who understand the work that everyone else does in a very particular way: they see manual work and service work through the lens of their own past, through their own sense of their past selves as student, likely com-

prising all of the feelings of the non-adult, of the temporary, of the mobile, of the single person. As the contributor to Bartlett's *Working Lives* site has it, "something I did once upon a time just to get through college." For the professional workers created by the university, these "other" workers, no matter their age or circumstances, are always doing the work of someone who isn't really a full citizen and who doesn't make the full claims of social welfare—just like themselves when they were not (yet) full adults and citizens. Their feeling is that these other workers, like the students who aped them for a few years, really ought to be moving on—out of the sphere of entitlement, out of 'our' schools and hospitals, out of 'our' public: the view of globalization from above is assisted by the voice of the beat cop to the guest worker loitering around the health-care system: move along, move along.

From here we could go on to explore the meaning of contingency: not just part time work, but the insecurity and vulnerability of full time workers, or to ask for whom is this contingency a field of possibility? And for whom is contingency in fact a field of constraint?

I would hope that we can share Dick Ohmann's lifelong commitment to equality and democracy. If it takes a village to pay for education and to pay for low wages and to pick up the cost for life injuries sustained by the absence of security and dignity, perhaps the village should decide what education and wages should be, and the sort of dignity and security that everyone should enjoy, very much apart from the work they do.

### Note

<sup>1</sup>Earlier versions were aired in 2004 at Carnegie Mellon and the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Summer Institute. I am especially grateful to Jeff Williams and David Downing for arranging those events. Brief sections of this paper draw on earlier publications, generally as noted. A short portion of this piece will appear in different form in *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (NYU Press, forthcoming).

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