

Students Are Already Workers

I know that I haven't updated in about two and a half weeks, but I have an excuse. UPS is just a tiring job. You see, before, I had an extra 31 hours to play games, draw things, compose music . . . do homework. But now, 31+ hours of my life is devoted to UPS.

I hate working there. But I need the money for college, so I don't have the option of quitting. My job at UPS is a loader. I check the zip codes on the box, I scan them into the database, and then I load them into the truck, making a brick wall out of boxes.

—"Kody" (pseud.), high-school blogger in a UPS "school-to-work" program, 2005

The alarm sounds at 2:00 AM. Together with half a dozen of her colleagues, the workday has begun for Prof. Susan Erdmann, a tenure-track assistant professor of English at Jefferson Community College in Louisville, Kentucky. She rises carefully to avoid waking her infant son and husband, who commutes forty miles each way to his own tenure-track community college job in the neighboring rural county. She makes coffee, showers, dresses for work. With their combined income of around \$60,000 and substantial education debt, they have a thirty-year mortgage on a tiny home of about 1,000 square feet: galley kitchen, dining alcove, one bedroom for them and another for their two sons to share. The front door opens onto a "living room" of a hundred square feet; entering or leaving the house means passing in between the couch and television. They feel fortunate to be able to afford any mortgage at all in this historically Catholic neighborhood that was originally populated by Louisville factory workers. It is winter; the sun will not rise for hours. She drives to the airport. Overhead, air-freight 747s barrel into the sky, about one plane every minute or so. Surrounded by the empty school buildings, boarded storefronts, and dilapidated underclass homes of south-central Louisville, the jets launch in post-midnight

salvos. Their engines lack the sophisticated noise-abatement technology required of air traffic in middle-class communities. Every twelve or eighteen months, the city agrees to buy a handful of the valueless residences within earshot.¹

Turning into the airport complex, Susan never comes near the shuttered passenger terminals. She follows a four-lane private roadway toward the rising jets. After parking, a shuttle bus weaves among blindingly lit aircraft hangars and drops her by the immense corrugated sorting facility that is the United Parcel Service main air hub, where she will begin her faculty duties at 3:00 AM, greeting UPS's undergraduate workforce directly as they come off the sort. "You would have a sense that you were there, lifting packages," Erdmann recalls. "They would come off sweaty, and hot, directly off the line into the class. It was very immediate, and sort of awkward. They'd had no moment of downtime. They hadn't had their cigarette. They had no time to pull themselves together as student-person rather than package-thrower." Unlike her students, Susan and other faculty teaching and advising at the hub are not issued a plastic ID card and door pass. She waits on the windy tarmac for one of her students or colleagues to hear her knocking at the door. Inside, the noise of the sorting facility is, literally, deafening: the shouts, forklift alarms, whistles, and rumble of the sorting machinery actually drown out the noise of the jets rising overhead. "Teaching in the hub was horrible," recalled one of Erdmann's colleagues. "Being in the hub was just hell. I'd work at McDonald's before I'd teach there again. The noise level was just incredible. The classroom was just as noisy as if it didn't have any walls." In addition to the sorting machinery, UPS floor supervisors were constantly "screaming, yelling back and forth, 'Get this done, get that done, where's so and so.'"

Susan is just one of a dozen faculty arriving at the hub after midnight. Some are colleagues from Jefferson Community College and the associated technical institution; others are from the University of Louisville. Their task tonight is to provide on-site advising and registration for some of the nearly 6,000 undergraduate students working for UPS at this facility. About 3,000 of those students work a midnight shift that ends at UPS's convenience—typically 3:00 or 4:00 AM, although the shift is longer during the holiday and other peak shipping seasons.

Nearly all of the third-shift workers are undergraduate students who have signed employment contracts with something called the "Metropolitan College." The name is misleading, since it's not a college at all.

An “enterprise” partnership between UPS, the city of Louisville, and the campuses that employ Susan and her colleagues, Metropolitan College is, in fact, little more than a labor contractor. Supported by public funds, this “college” offers no degrees and does no educating. Its sole function is to entice students to sign contracts that commit them to provide cheap labor in exchange for education benefits at the partner institutions.² The arrangement has provided UPS with over 10,000 ultra-low-cost student workers since 1997, the same year that the Teamsters launched a crippling strike against the carrier. The Louisville arrangement is the vanguard of UPS’s efforts to convert its part-time payroll, as far as possible, to a “financial aid” package for student workers in partnership with campuses near its sorting and loading facilities. Other low-wage Louisville employers, such as Norton and ResCare have joined on a trial basis.

As a result of carefully planned corporate strategy, between 1997 and 2003, UPS hired undergraduate students to staff more than half of its 130,000 part-time positions (Hammers). Students are currently the majority of all part-timers, and the overwhelming majority on the least desirable shifts. Part of UPS’s strategy is that only some student employees receive education benefits. By reserving the education benefits of its “earn and learn” programs to workers who are willing to work undesirable hours, UPS has over the past decade recruited approximately 50,000 part-time workers to its least desirable shifts without raising the pay (in fact, while pushing them to work harder for continually lower pay against inflation) (“Earn and Learn Factsheet”). The largest benefit promises are reserved for students who think they can handle working after midnight every night of the school week.

Between 1998 and 2005, UPS claims to have “assisted” 10,000 students through the Metropolitan College arrangement (Conway). Of the 7,500 part-time employees at UPS’s Louisville hub in May 2006, some were welfare-to-work recipients picked up in company buses from the city and even surrounding rural counties. A few hundred were Louisville-area high school students in school-to-work programs. Three-quarters of the part-timers—5,600—were college students (Howington). More than half of the students—about 3,000—were enrolled in Metropolitan College, which, with few exceptions, accepts only those willing to work the night shift. Metropolitan College “enrollment” and “recruitment” activities are entirely driven by UPS’s staffing needs. Ditto for scheduling: all of the benefits enjoyed by Metro College students are

contingent on showing up at the facility every weeknight of the school year at midnight and performing physically strenuous labor for as long as they are needed.

The consequences of night-shift work are well documented, and the preponderance of available evidence suggests markedly negative effects for the Louisville students. Every instructor to whom I spoke reported excessive fatigue and absenteeism (due to fatigue, but also an extraordinarily high physical injury rate: “They all got hurt,” Erdmann reports). Students who signed employment contracts with Metro College showed substantial failure to persist academically. “I would lose students mid-term, or they would never complete final assignments,” Erdmann said. “They would just stop coming at some point.” Erdmann served as chair of a faculty committee that attempted to improve the academic success of students employed by UPS at her institution. The group scheduled special UPS-only sections between 5:00 and 11:00 PM, both on campus and at the hub, and began the ritual of 3:00 AM advising. Since nearly all of the faculty involved taught and served on committees five days a week, their efforts to keep students from dropping out by teaching evenings and advising before dawn resulted in a bizarre twenty-four-hour cycle of work for themselves. The institutions even experimented with ending the fall semester before Thanksgiving for the thousands of UPS employees, in order to keep their finals from conflicting with the holiday shipping rush (and the one season a year when the students could be assured of a shift lasting longer than four hours). Even in the specially scheduled classes and shortened terms, Erdmann recalls classes with dropout rates of 30 to 40 percent. “It was most definitely worse for those with children,” she concluded:

It was a disaster for those with children. Students who had family obligations tended to do poorly. When you had younger, more traditional age students with a very clear and limited goal—and they were often men—if they had a limited goal, such as “I am going to get Microsoft certified,” and if they were healthy and young, and physically active, those individuals might be okay.

Whenever you had people with children—you know, people who can’t sleep all day, they would get tremendously stressed out. I feel like very few of them actually did well with the program, the ones with family.

Pressed to offer instances of individual students who undisputably benefited from the program, Erdmann described just two individuals, both at the extreme margins of economic and social life. One was a single mother who worked multiple jobs and saved some of her wages toward a down payment on a residential trailer, thus escaping an abusive domestic life. The other was a young man coping with severe mental illness.

Rather than relieving economic pressure, Metropolitan College appears to have increased the economic distress of the majority of participants. According to the company's own fact sheet, those student workers who give up five nights' sleep are typically paid for just fifteen to twenty hours a week. Since the wage ranges from just \$8.50 at the start to no more than \$9.50 for the majority of the most experienced, this can mean net pay *below* \$100 in a week, and averaging out to a little over \$120. The rate of pay bears emphasizing: because the students must report five nights a week and are commonly let go after just three hours each night, their take-home pay for sleep deprivation and physically hazardous toil will commonly be less than \$25 per shift.

In fact, most UPS part-timers earn little more than \$6,000 in a year. Most have at least one other job, because their typical earnings from UPS in 2006–2007 would generally have covered little more than the worker's car payment, insurance, gasoline, and other transportation-related expenses. "Everyone had another job," Erdmann says. "Even the high school students had another job. The high school students were working two jobs. For some people, that meant working Saturday nights as a waitress, but for others, it was much more extensive. For a lot of people, it meant that they got up every day and went to work in the afternoon before going in to classes and UPS in the evening." Every instructor to whom I spoke confirmed the pressure that the ultralow wage added to the unreasonable working hours and physical hazards as a detriment to students' chances for academic persistence. "That was when they skipped class," affirmed another instructor, "when they were going to another job. I was just amazed how many of them were going to another job."

UPS presents a triple threat to students' prospects for academic persistence: sleep deprivation and family-unfriendly scheduling; ultralow compensation, resulting in secondary and tertiary part-time employment; and a high injury rate. Student employees report being pressured to skip class. Especially at the end of the fall term, the night sorts can

run four or five hours beyond the anticipated 4:00 AM completion: “Each time I said I was unwilling to miss class for an extended sort, the supe would tell me to ‘think long and hard about my priorities,’” reports one student employee. “I got the message.”

UPS refuses to provide standard statistics that would permit evaluation of the impact that this triple threat is actually having on the students it employs. None of its partner institutions appears to have responsibly studied the consequences of the program for its students in terms of such major measures as persistence to degree, dropout rate, and so on.

Amazingly, all of the press coverage of the UPS earn and learn programs in general, and the Louisville Metropolitan College arrangement in particular, has been positive. In fact, most of the coverage appears to have been drawn closely from UPS press releases themselves or conducted with students selected for their success stories. Acknowledging that the night shift “took some getting used to,” one local newspaper’s coverage is typical in quoting a student shrugging off the challenges, “I just schedule my classes for the afternoon” (Howington). Other stories are more meretricious, suggesting that the UPS jobs keep students from partying too much. One quotes a UPS supervisor who suggests that college students “are staying up until dawn anyway” (Karman).

Ironically, UPS has received numerous awards for “corporate citizenship” and was named one of the “best companies for minorities” in connection with the program. It emphasizes recruitment among Latino students, and numerous Hispanic organizations have either endorsed the program or published unedited UPS press releases marketing the program to “nontraditional students, such as retirees and moms re-entering the workforce” (LatinoLA).

“I Dread Work Every Day”

UPS has long pioneered low-cost benefitless employment, abetted by the Teamsters themselves, who under Jimmy Hoffa Sr. signed one of the first contracts in American industry to permit the regular use of part-time employees in 1962. This second tier of employment was massively expanded after the Teamsters agreed to 1982 protocols that raised the wages of full-time workers while freezing those of part-timers. In that year, part-time UPS employees started at \$8 an hour, the equivalent in

2007 of about \$17 per hour (\$34,000 a year). Similarly, in 1982, part-time employees averaged about \$10 per hour, the equivalent in 2007 of \$22 per hour (\$44,000 a year).

Not incidentally, at the 1982 wages, a UPS part-time worker could indeed successfully fund a college education. One employee from the 1970s recalls:

At the old full and fair rate prior to the 1982 UPS wage reduction, despite soaring volume and profits, a part-time worker in exchange for back-breaking work could afford to rent a room, pay tuition, buy food and clothing, and afford to own and operate a used car. This was a good deal that was profitable to the student and society, as well as profitable to UPS. I went through six years of college that way and am very grateful to the Teamsters for the good pay. I find it a national disgrace that UPS has effectively reduced the pay by nearly 65% adjusted for inflation since 1982 and destroyed a positive job for over a hundred thousand workers and for society as well. There are [UPS] part-time workers living in homeless shelters in Richmond, California, and other parts of the country. (“saintteamo,” Brown Café weblog, 2003; punctuation regularized)

As with Wal-Mart and other predatory super low-wage employers, many of UPS’s student workers are homeless. At the Louisville hub, “I knew people sleeping in their cars,” Erdmann recalled.

After the union’s concession to a radically cheaper second tier of employment, 80 percent of all new UPS jobs were created in the “permanent part-time” category. While the pay between part-time and full-time diverged slowly between 1962 and 1982, the differential accelerated rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s. Serving as a UPS driver is still a coveted blue-collar position. From the Reagan years to the present, these full-time Teamsters continued to enjoy raises, job security, due process with respect to their grievances, and substantial benefits, including a pension. But over the same period of time, these and other full-time positions became the minority of employees covered by the contract.

In less than fifteen years, permanent part-timers became the majority of the UPS workforce in the United States. The ratio of permanent part-timers was particularly pronounced at the Louisville main hub, where a high-speed, high-pressure night sort was conducted. As the wages of the part-time majority steadily shrank against inflation, opportunities to

join the full-time tier all but disappeared. Today, even the company's human resources recruiters admit that while full-time positions "still exist," it can take "six to seven years or even longer" to get on full-time. A single-digit percentage of the company's part-time employees last that long. Few of those who do persist are actually offered full-time work. During the long night of Reagan-Bush-Clinton reaction, according to employees, the company unilaterally abrogated work rules, including safety limits on package size and weight. Injuries soared to two and a half times the industry average, in especial disproportion among part-time employees in the first year.

As jointly bargained by UPS and the Teamsters, the part-time positions devolved into one of the least desirable forms of work in the country, with one of the highest turnover rates in history. Featuring poor wages, limited benefits, a high injury rate, and unreasonable scheduling, the Teamster-UPS agreement created compensation and working conditions for the part-time majority so abysmal that most rational persons preferred virtually any other form of employment or even not working at all.

Most part-timers departed within weeks of being hired. According to George Poling, director of the Louisville Metropolitan College, the average term of employment for part-time workers on the night sort was just eight weeks. At the Louisville facility, 90 percent of part-time hires quit before serving a year. Across the country in 1996, UPS hired 180,000 part-timers on all shifts, but only 40,000 were still with the company at the year's end. In part as a result of steadily accelerating turnover, UPS agreed in just sixteen days to the most publicized core demand of the 1997 Teamsters strike, the creation of 10,000 new full-time jobs out of some of the new part-time positions.

Overlooked during the press coverage of the Teamsters' apparent victory was the fact that these new "full-time" positions were paid well below the scale of existing full-timers and would earn just 75 percent of the rate of regular full-timers by the end of the contract. This introduced a new, lower-wage tier in the ranks of the full-timers. The lower wages of this group would continue to support the wage increases and benefits of the union's powerful minority constituency, the shrinking core of long-term full-timers. (Readers employed in academic circumstances will recognize this strategy as having been pioneered in their own workplaces, with the institution of nontenurable full-time lectureships as one of the "solutions" that the long-term tenured faculty have

accepted to management's expansion of part-time faculty.) It would take three years of foot-dragging through arbitration and federal court before UPS delivered even these watered-down full-time jobs.

Despite credulous ballyhoo about the strike as the decade's exemplar of labor militance and solidarity between full-timers and part-timers, the part-time majority of UPS workers benefited little from the Teamster "victory." The starting wage for part-timers, which had remained at \$8 for fifteen years (since 1982) was raised in the 1997 contract a grand total of 50 cents. Ten years later, the Teamster-negotiated starting wage for UPS part-time package handlers working between 11:00 PM and 4:00 AM remains just \$8.50, or exactly one raise in a quarter-century. This is a loss against inflation of more than half. In 1982, the \$8 per hour starting wage for part-timers was more than twice the minimum wage (of \$3.35), and slightly above the national hourly average wage (of \$7.72). In 2006, the UPS starting wage was about half of the national average hourly wage of \$16.46 for nonsupervisory workers. With the "minimum" wage so low that only half a million Americans earn it, the \$8.50 per hour UPS starting wage in 2006 was equal to or lower than what most traditionally "minimum wage" occupations actually earn and lower than the statutory metropolitan living wage established in many major cities. This isn't eight or nine bucks an hour for eight hours a day, 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM. This is eight or nine bucks an hour for showing up five nights a week at midnight and working three and one-half to five hours, depending on the flow of packages for physically demanding, dangerous, night-shift work at the company's convenience.

Moreover, there is at least half an hour, often more, of unpaid commuting around airport security on either side of the paid three hours. The commute each way can total as much as an hour, even for students who live just a mile or two from the facility: "When I was there, you'd have to be in the parking lot by 11:30 at the latest if you wanted the shuttle bus to get you to the gate by 11:40, where you'd then wait to have your ID checked, and then walk through the maze of hub buildings for 500 yards before finding your workspace and clocking in," one recalled. "The point being if I got parked at 11:45, I'd be late and get bawled out. The traffic outside UPS leading into the shift is nightmarish, so you'd really need to leave the house an hour before work to have a shot at getting to the sort station on time." With the unpaid commute, that's five hours of third-shift time, being paid close to the minimum wage for just three hours.

In the past twenty-five years, working conditions at UPS have eroded even faster than the wage. With the union's lack of interest in part-time workers, UPS has increasingly introduced ultrashort shifts, technology-driven speedup, and managerial surveillance of every aspect of the work process, including real-time tracking of errors. Employing constant surveillance by a battalion of "part-time supes," themselves generally students, UPS deploys cameras and manned watchtowers throughout the multilayer sort. "They're always watching you work from tall perches that exist nearly everywhere in the plant," one former student worker recalls; "the perches are ostensibly ladders to other layers of the sort, but the consistent presence of management at the stair landings creates the feeling of almost total surveillance. Even when you can't see them, you know they're in hidden rooms watching you on camera." Nearly all student workers are repeatedly tested by "salting" packages with bad address labels; employees decry the practice as a "particularly nasty" form of continuous stressing of their work environment.

Several current or former UPS employees have begun weblogs to chronicle the high-speed, high-stress nature of their employment. One, writing as "Brown Blood," explained that he'd begun the weblog for "the employees of UPS to express their true feelings about their job in all aspects," noting, "I must apologize now for any foul language that may . . . *will* occur in this community because most of these jobs not only test the limitations of your physical capacity it also shatters all anger management." On the JobVent weblog, UPS workers' rating of the workplace were commonly *below zero*:

Little did I know that I would spend 4 hours a day in a dark, oven hot dungeon being screamed at by idiotic powertrippers who having given up believing life has some kind of meaning and now want to make themselves feel better by humiliating the only people in their lives that they have any sort of advantage over. All this while you are sweating liters and giving your back life-long injuries. I couldn't help but laugh in disbelief when I received my first paycheck for \$120. IF YOU EVEN THINK OF WORKING AT UPS, realize that if you don't want to spend the next ten years of your life being treated like toilet paper just to become a lousy driver then go work for FedEx, the benefits are as good, the pay is better and you get just a little respect, a friend of mine worked there for 5 days and became a driver. UPS is no less than 7-10 years. Bottom line: UPS SUCKS A BIG ONE!!!!!!!!! I dread work every day.

According to at least one long-term Teamster full-timer, the part-time students working the night sort are driven particularly hard: “They cram eight hours work into five.” Agreeing with this characterization of the workload for undergraduate employees, one student worker said, “Around finals time, I’d go for days without sleep. The scary thing is, I’d see the sleepless period coming, know there was nothing I could do about it other than quit school or quit work, and then learn to psych myself up for it.”

Most bloggers complained of the pay (“pathetic”), schedule (“random, terrible hours”), injuries (“I was killing myself physically”; “constant muscle pulls/strains, a lot of safety hazards”; “horrible; you’ll sweat like a dog in the summer and freeze in the winter—unsafe—watch out for sharp objects and falling boxes”), and supervisory harassment. As a whole, the evaluations were resoundingly negative: “This was the worst job I ever had”; “You can imagine it’s bad when the highest UPS scores with me in any category is a minus 2”; “If you’re thinking of working here, DON’T DO IT!” Many of the bloggers give a vivid portrait of the nature of the stressful nature of the work. Every error is tracked, and a minimum standard for error-free sorting is one error in 2,500. How often do you make an error while typing? If you’re like me, you make several typing errors per page, for an error rate per word of 1 in 60 or so. At UPS, an error of 1 in 500 is considered extremely poor. The student workers are particularly likely to be placed in these high-stress positions. If younger, they are commonly inexperienced at work generally. If older, they have typically suffered substantial economic or personal distress. Either way, those who don’t express rage and disappointment, or vote with their feet by quitting, appear likely to internalize management’s construction of them as slow-moving failures. Students sometimes contribute to weblogs like “Brown Blood” less to complain than to get coping advice (“Is there a better way of doing this without going miserably slowly? . . . I want to show that I can be competent in some form of employment.”)

The work of the loaders intensifies during the holiday rush:

I hate how UPS is always fucking you over. On a normal day I load 3 trucks and lately it’s been a total of about 800–900 packages. . . . They told me I would only have the 4th car one day per week. Well guess what . . . they gave me 4 cars 3 days this week. Today I had a total of over 1600 packages with no help, the bastards. My loads

were shit and my drivers were bitching, but what the hell can I do about it?

I suppose the fact that I've slept less than 5 of the past 55 hours had something to do with my despising work today. But Red Bull helps with that.

I'm so f——ing glad it's a long weekend. (“hitchhiker42”)

These notes of stress, fatigue, and powerlessness on the job are nearly uniform throughout the UPS permanent part-timers.

Employee of the Month

Some 70 percent of the workers in the main UPS hub in Louisville are women. The average age is thirty-four, and many are parents. Some of the women work in data entry, but most of the work involves package handling. For every teenage worker, there's another part-timer well into her forties.

The reality of the undergraduate workforce is very different from the representation of teen partiers on a perpetual spring break, as popularized by television (*Girls Gone Wild*), UPS propaganda (“they're staying up until dawn anyway”), and *Time*: “Meet the ‘twixters,’ [twenty-some-things] who live off their parents, bounce from job to job and hop from mate to mate. They're not lazy—they just won't grow up” (Grossman; for more, see Bartlett).

There are more than 15 million students currently enrolled in higher ed (with an average age of around twenty-six). Tens of millions of persons have recently left higher education, nearly as many without degrees as with them. Like graduate employees, undergraduates now work longer hours in school, spend more years in school, and can take several years to find stable employment after obtaining their degrees. Undergraduates and recent school leavers, whether degree holders or not, now commonly live with their parents well beyond the age of legal adulthood, often into their late twenties. Like graduate employees, undergraduates increasingly find that their period of “study” is, in fact, a period of employment as cheap labor. The production of cheap workers is facilitated by an ever-expanding notion of “youth.” A University of Chicago survey conducted in 2003 found that the majority of Americans now think that adulthood begins around twenty-six, an age not co-

incidentally identical with the average age of the undergraduate student population (Tom Smith).

The popular conception of student life as “delayed adulthood” is reflected in such notions as “thirty is the new twenty” and “forty is the new thirty” (Irvine). The fatuousness of these representations is confounded by looking at the other end of one’s employment life. Few people are finding, in terms of employability after downsizing, that “fifty is the new forty”: people in their fifties who lose their jobs often find themselves unemployable. What are the economic consequences for a person whose productive career can begin in their middle thirties or later, then end at fifty or sooner? This pattern presents real obstacles for both women and men wishing to raise a family. Yet mass media representations of extended schooling and the associated period of insecure employment are often cheery, suggesting that it’s a stroke of good fortune, an extended youth free of such unwelcome responsibilities as home ownership, child-rearing, and visits to health-care providers. In this idealistic media fantasy, more time in higher education means more time to party—construing an extended youth as a prolonged stretch of otherwise empty time unmarked by the accountabilities of adulthood.

Concretely, the apparently empty time of involuntarily extended youth associated with higher education is really quite full. It’s full of feelings—the feelings of desperation, betrayal, and anxiety, the sense that Cary Nelson has captured for graduate employees under the heading of *Will Teach for Food*. Writers like Anya Kamenetz and Tamara Draut have captured the similar feelings of upper-middle-class college graduates in books like *Generation Debt* and *Strapped*. Many of the persons Draut and Kamenetz describe will have added graduate school to successful bachelor’s degrees at first-tier or second-tier institutions. But little attention has been paid to the role of higher education in organizing the vast majority of the lives it touches—those who don’t graduate or those who graduate with community college, vocational, or technical degrees.

“Employee of the Month” (“The Dance That Is My Life”) is typical of the more successful students employed by UPS. As she tells it on her weblog, this “mom/stylist,” aged thirty, the mother of children aged three and five, is a fan of Christian apocalyptic fiction and a part-time student who hopes to become a teacher. She has an “A” average. She depicts her husband as a substance abuser who provides no contribution to the household finances; during the months covered in her

weblog, he moves in and out of the house. Like most students who find a job with UPS, she was already working hard before signing on with Big Brown. While parenting and starting school, she was working three jobs, including office work and hair styling. In the first few weeks, she enjoys the work: “I am digging this job! I get to work out for 4–5 hours a night,” plus collect education benefits. Anticipating the 50-cent raise, she writes, “The pay sucks at first but within 90 days I should be ok.” She plans to continue working as a stylist, but feels that she can quit her other two job part-time jobs, “with doing hair 3 days a week I will be making just as much as I have been making [with three jobs] and only working about 35–37 hours a week total. Woo Hoo!”

Rather than a partying teen, this typical working undergraduate is a devout thirty year old who is thrilled simply to be able to work a mere full-time equivalent at two different jobs, in addition to schoolwork and solo parenting of two small children.

After the Christmas rush, and still in her first two months of employment, the upbeat blogger notes: “I am getting muscles in my arms and shoulders, my legs are getting a little toned. I do need to lose about 25 lbs so the more muscle thing is a good start. . . . I am getting better at my job now that I am a little stronger and can lift the boxes up to the top shelf.” Within six months, by March 2006, she had made “employee of the month” at her facility. In the same month, she had her first work-related injury: a strained ligament from working with heavy packages. On a physician’s orders, she was placed on “light duty,” dealing with packages weighing one to seven pounds (seven pounds is approximately the weight of a gallon of milk). She had also grown discouraged about her prospects of continuing her education and was considering dropping out of school.

Her family life is increasingly stressed by the UPS job. In order to collect less than thirty bucks a night, she has to leave her children to sleep at her mother’s house five nights a week. Now that the holiday rush is past, she finds that, on her UPS salary and even with a second job, she is unable to afford such everyday staples as Easter baskets for her children, which her sister provided. “A guy at work told me about a job at a private school, I applied and had an interview. I hope I get the job. I need to pay bills and the UPS job isn’t enough,” she concludes:

My kids did have a good Easter, thank you to my sister. We went down to her house and she bought my kids candy, toys, and each kid a

movie!! I thought that was above the call of duty. I can't tell you how much I appreciate my family for coming to my aid in my time of need this past year. I know I could get another job and put my kids in day-care all day again and be able to support them better, but I wouldn't be able to go to school. It's hard right now, but I am already a year into school and I will be a teacher in a few years. I can't stop now. Even with this drama going on in my life I have still kept a 3.6 grade point average. I want to finish it. My son still wants me to be a teacher, so I have to show him that with work and perseverance you can accomplish anything despite your circumstances. Facts don't count when it comes to reaching a goal. ("The Dance That Is My Life")

In other words: for UPS to receive one super-cheap worker, that worker's parents have to donate free child care and other family members have to donate cash, time, and goods. Like the vast majority of her coworkers in a UPS earn and learn arrangement, this A student and employee of the month is so sapped by the experience, physically injured, under-compensated, and domestically disarranged that she's on the verge of quitting school.

Despite her qualifications, energy, and commitment, the only thing keeping this UPS worker going is the desire to shore up achievement ideology for her children ("I have to show him that with work and perseverance you can accomplish anything despite your circumstances"), to create a Disney narrative out of their lives when she drops them off to sleep at their grandparents five nights a week, a Disney narrative that will prove that "facts don't count when it comes to reaching a goal."

Supergirl: "My Back Hurts So Fricken Bad"

This five-foot two-inch, 110-pound, twenty-three-year-old undergraduate woman writing under the moniker of "supergirl" has a charming sardonic flair: "America needs no more cheese, ham, huge-ass boxes of summer sausage, holiday popcorn tins, or kringles. . . . I think I've moved enough of these that every man, woman and child should already have one by default. No wonder obesity is an epidemic."

As with most, her daily UPS shift is a second job. After a year, she's ready to quit. She's had one work-related arm surgery: "I really don't want to have another, or worse, risk permanently damaging the nerves

in both arms,” she writes; “and I sincerely don’t think I’m being paid enough to stay there 2 years and blow out both arms unfixably. . . . I know pain and can tolerate it, but I can’t even fucking sleep because every position somehow puts pressure on a nerve in my arm that’s already got problems and is being pushed to the limits.” When I asked another Louisville student employee to comment on “supergirl’s” representation of the injury rate, he called the physical toll exacted by the workplace a “key point,” adding, “The physical harm this work does will long outlast the span of the job.”

She complains of the culture of UPS—of speedup, the pressure to deny injuries and work through them, and the pressure to continue employment through the milestones that dictate education benefits such as loan and tuition remission. Under the rubric “don’t make UPS yours,” she warns other prospective student employees away:

My back hurts . . . so fricken bad. It doesn’t benefit me to say I hurt because I’ve noticed that if you hurt of any kind the sort super just asks you to quit (in not so many eloquently and legal to say to an employee words). . . . I lift tons of shit that’s got 20–30 pounds on me . . . but as I stand; a girl of 5’2” and a buck ten . . . I can’t do that kinda shit everyday. . . . I guess I can be supergirl fast or supergirl strong or a normal mix of either . . . but I can’t be both every fucking day. Who can, anyway?

What disturbs her most is the pressure (from family, coworkers, supervisors) to work through her injuries to benefit-earning milestones. She understands the pressures driving everyone else to push her to continue, “but shit why can’t I just say I’d like to not be at a job like that?” In any event, she writes, “everyone should know I’ll probably just stay there anyhow . . . cause I’m too damn busy to find anything else anyway.”

10,000 Students and 300 Degrees

There’s little mystery regarding UPS’s motivation for the earn and learn programs—not benevolence, but the cheapness and docility of the student workforce. In addition to the ultralow wage, students’ dependency on UPS includes loan guarantees and tuition remissions, which are lost or reduced if the student resigns “prematurely” from the program. As a

result of its campaign to hire undergraduates, UPS's retention of part-time package handlers has improved markedly, despite speedup and continued stagnation of the wage between 1997 and 2007. Average time of employment for part-timers grew by almost 50 percent, and retention increased by 20 percent, with some of the most dramatic improvements in the Louisville main hub. This tuition benefit is tax-deductible and taxpayer-subsidized. It's a good deal for UPS, which shares the cost of the tuition benefit with partner schools and communities and saves millions in payroll tax (by providing "tuition benefits" instead of higher wages), while holding down the part-time wage overall. All earn and learn students must apply for federal and state financial aid. Many of its workers attend community colleges, where tuition is often just a few hundred dollars. Many students are subjected to a bait and switch: attracted to the program by the promise of tuition benefits at the University of Louisville (currently over \$6,000 a year), program participants are instead steered toward enrollment in the community colleges—a decision that doesn't reflect their academic needs, but as Metropolitan College director Poling admits, exclusively the desire of the state and UPS to contain costs. Studying on a part-time basis, as most in the program do, a student seeking a B.A. can therefore remain in a community college for three or four years before earning the credits enabling transfer to a four-year school. One student pointed out that trying to schedule around the UPS jobs was a "lot harder than it sounds," and for many it was "downright impossible to do this and get the degree in any reasonable period of years." Students who attend inexpensive schools or qualify for high levels of tuition relief (as is often the case in the economically disadvantaged groups targeted by UPS recruiters) substantially reduce UPS's costs. Undergraduate students also represent lower group health insurance costs.

Another way in which students reduce UPS's cost is by quitting before they become eligible for benefits, by taking an incomplete, or failing a class. No benefits are paid for failed or incomplete classes. Students who drop out of school but continue to work for UPS also significantly lower UPS's cost.

To put UPS's costs in perspective, look at these figures. In a decade, it has spent no more than \$80 million on tuition and student loan redemption in over fifty hubs. By contrast, its 2006 deal with the state of Kentucky—for a 5,000-job expansion of just one hub—involved \$50 million in state support over ten years. Company officials are fairly

frank about UPS's dependency on cheap student labor, supported by massive taxpayer giveaways. "It would have been nearly impossible to find an additional 5,000 workers [for the expansion] without the resources of Metropolitan College," a public relations vice president told the Louisville business press (Karman and Adams). It has expanded earn and learn programs to fifty other metropolitan centers, to Canada, and to for-profit education vendors such as DeVry.

It's a lot less clear whether this is a good deal for students. "We've solved employee retention," Poling admits, "but we've got to work more on academic retention." Of the 10,000 students Poling's program claims to have "assisted" with their higher education since 1997, in a fall 2006 interview, he was able to produce evidence of just under 300 degrees earned: 111 associate's and 181 bachelor's degrees. Since both UPS and Metropolitan College refuse to provide public accountability for the academic persistence of undergraduate workers, it's hard to estimate what these numbers mean in comparison with more responsible and conventional education and financial aid circumstances. The most favorable construction of the evidence available for Metropolitan College shows an average entry of slightly more than 1,000 student workers annually. Based on two and one-half years of data after six years of program operation, according to Poling, the program between 2003 and 2006 showed approximate annual degree production of about 40 associates' and 75 bachelor's degrees. This approximates to a 12 percent rate of persistence to any kind of degree.

UPS's student employees in the Metropolitan College program are more likely to be retained as UPS employees than they are to be retained as college students. In May 2006, of the 3,000 or so Metropolitan College "students" working at UPS, only 1,263 were actually taking classes that semester. This means that during the spring term, almost 60 percent of the student workers in UPS's employ were not in school; "another 1700 or so," in Poling's words, "took the semester off" (Howington).

Of the minority actually taking classes, at least a quarter failed to complete the semester. UPS pays a bonus for completing semesters "unsuccessfully" (with withdrawals or failing grades) as well as "successfully." Counting the bonuses paid in recent years for "unsuccessful" semesters together with the successful ones, Poling suggested that during terms in which between 1,200 and 1,700 student workers were enrolled, between 900 and 1,100 students would complete at least one

class. These numbers appear to hang roughly together. If in any given year, the majority of UPS night-shift workers are “taking the semester off,” and 25 percent or more of those actually enrolled fail to complete even one class in the semester, this seems consistent with an eventual overall persistence to degree of 12 percent.

In plain fact, it would seem that UPS counts on its student workers failing or dropping out. Because of the high rate of failed classes, withdrawals, and dropping out, UPS ends up paying only a modest fraction of the education benefits it offers. If each of the 48,000 students who had passed through its earn and learn program as of 2005 collected the full UPS share of tuition benefits over a five-year period, it would have cost the company over \$720 million. In fact, it spent just 10 percent of that total—\$72 million—on tuition remission, or an average of only \$1,500 per student (the equivalent of just one semester’s maximum tuition benefit per participant). Similarly, the loan remission benefit (theoretically as much as \$8,000 after four years of employment) would total almost \$384 million. But as of 2005, UPS has had so far to pay off just \$21 million, an average of just \$438 per student worker, well under 10 percent of its liability if all of its student workers actually persisted to completion of a four-year degree (UPS, “Fact Sheet”).

In the absence of meaningful accountability by UPS and its partners, we can only raise questions about this arrangement, not answer them. Since the program has been in operation for ten years, there are plenty of data. These are questions that can be answered. And these are questions that parents, students, partner institutions, and host communities should demand be answered. Many of these are similar in form to questions I posed to UPS through its press representative and which it refused to answer:

1. On average, how long do student workers remain employed with UPS?
2. What percentage of student workers exiting UPS’s “earn and learn” programs remain enrolled in school?
3. What percentage of UPS student workers have additional employment?
4. What percentage of current or former UPS student workers earn associates’ degree within three years and bachelor’s degrees within six years?

5. Do these percentages vary by shift worked?
6. What is the total and average amount of loans taken by earn and learn students? How much of those loans have been paid off by UPS?
7. What is the grade-point average of students enrolled in UPS programs?
8. UPS advertises that students can earn up to \$25,000 in tuition and loan benefits. What is the average tuition and loan benefit actually paid per student?

One of the major unanswered questions is this one: Why haven't the partner institutions asked UPS for these answers already? Don't they have a responsibility to ask whether their students are being well served by these arrangements? If a promise to fund a citizen's higher education actually results in reduced likelihood of educational success, shouldn't the institution, the state, and the city revise or discontinue the arrangement?

One reason the University of Louisville hasn't asked these questions is because, in connection with its willingness to contract its students out to UPS, it collects tuition revenue and other subsidies, and the Metropolitan College partnership contributes heavily to new building plans across the campus, most notably erecting a series of new dormitories to house the UPS student workforce recruited from all over the state. Nor has it wanted to draw attention to the success rate of its own students. When the Metropolitan College program began in 1997–1998, the University of Louisville's six-year graduation rate was under 30 percent. This compares unfavorably with the institutions in its own benchmarking. The six-year graduation rate for Mississippi State is 58 percent; Florida State is 65 percent, and North Carolina State–Raleigh is 66 percent. A six-year graduation rate of around 30 percent means that if 2,000 undergraduates enter as first-year students, *close to 1,400 will not have graduated six years later.*

That figure is almost twice the number at many comparable institutions. Over ten years, a gap this size in academic persistence means that many thousands of individuals are not receiving degrees, in contrast to students in benchmark institutions. Over the past ten years, that graduation rate has crawled up to 33 percent, but even the improved number places the University of Louisville dead last among its own benchmark institutions, and dead last among thirty-eight comparator institutions

generated by the IPEDS (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System) database. Louisville and the state of Kentucky consistently rank near the bottom of educational attainments by a variety of indicators. Since the educational success rate of students at the institution and surrounding community was already so low, the success rates of UPS students flies under the radar.

One dean of students with whom I spoke claimed not to have studied the UPS students' success rate but shrugged off concerns with the impression that their attainments were "probably roughly comparable" to the low rate of other Louisville students. Using the measure of "year-to-year persistence," Poling was willing to compare his Metropolitan College student workers to other Louisville students, but not when it came to comparing persistence to degree.

Good for UPS and Who Else?

One of the reasons few hard questions have been asked of arrangements like Metropolitan College is that the superexploitation of undergraduate workers is not just a matter of UPS's individual dependency but a system of profound codependency, extending through the web of local, national, and even global economic relations.

As John McPhee's *New Yorker* profile of the Louisville hub makes clear, working for UPS at the Louisville main hub is really working for a lot of companies. A short distance from the sorting facility, UPS maintains millions of square feet of warehouse facilities, where its employees fill orders from online vendors for books, computers, underwear, and jet engine parts. When a Toshiba laptop breaks, Toshiba sends the repair order to UPS, who directs a driver to pick up the machine; from the local hub, it is flown in a UPS jet to an industrial park abutting the Louisville airport, where eighty UPS computer technicians repair Toshiba computers with Toshiba parts, returning the machines to their owners in about seventy-two hours. UPS is a major outsourcing contractor for fulfillment of products sold across the globe: the entire inventory of companies like Jockey is kept in UPS facilities in Louisville and handled exclusively by UPS employees from the point of manufacture to the consumer or retail outlet.

So the "good deal" that UPS is getting from the state and working students of Kentucky is also a good deal for all of the companies with

which it has outsourcing contracts and, ultimately, for all of its customers. Shipping from the Louisville Worldport is faster and cheaper than ever before. It's a good deal for the full-time Teamsters, who no longer have to feel pressure to negotiate better for a significant fraction of UPS's new employees.

Chris Sternberg, senior vice president of corporate communications at Papa John's International, is frank about the multilayered economic advantages of the Metropolitan College arrangement for local businesses:

Anytime new jobs are added to the Louisville economy, we are happy both from a community standpoint as well as for our business. When you have more people employed and the economy is thriving, we'll sell more pizzas. We are obviously pleased with the announcement. From an employment standpoint, many of our part-time workers also work part time at UPS, where they may work a four-hour shift at UPS and another four-hour shift at Papa John's. It's worked very well, and we like that shared employment arrangement. (quoted in Karman and Adams)

The local businesses associated with student consumption—such as pizza, fast food, banks, and auto dealers—benefit directly from this employment pattern: feeding workers, processing their loans and paychecks, and so on. The chairman of the largest auto group in Louisville was thrilled—student workers buy cars in order to commute between school and work. The local newspaper estimated that the 5,000-job expansion could mean as much as \$750 million annually to the local economy.

But as Sternberg makes clear, for certain businesses relying on service workers, the UPS arrangement provided a double benefit by drawing a super-cheap workforce that needed to supplement its four hours after midnight at UPS with another four hours before midnight in a pizza shop.

Internal Outsourcing and 10 Million “Students Who Work”

As it turns out, UPS 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? In the case of Louisville educators and UPS, the most common subjectivity produced appears to be that of failure—of persons who fail to persist, and therefore end up believing that they deserve their fate. “They all blame themselves,” confirmed every instructor with whom I spoke regarding UPS student workers. “The only ones who didn’t blame themselves were some of the high school students,” said Susan Erdmann. “Some of them blamed UPS, rightly so.” In general, student workers view themselves through a classic lens of modernity, as someone who is really someone and something very different than their embodied self at work: 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. Even in its early stages, Bartlett’s site is 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 to “build life-long coping skills”; one added the afterthought that, “hopefully, I will survive!” (“Work, Meet Education”; “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 forty-hour week’s wages, leaving just \$6 a week for housing, transportation, food, clothing, entertain-

ment, 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 Wal-Mart 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” (“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? 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, or operate cash registers. I’ll return to this point before concluding.

Over 70 percent of U.S. high school grads enter college, 67 percent in the fall immediately after high school. Fewer than half of these complete a four-year degree. Those who do average far more than four years to do it. About 40 percent of those with a baccalaureate 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.

Higher education is an industry, like others in the service economy, that is “structurally and substantially” reliant on youth labor (Tanock). Campuses of all kinds are critically dependent on a vast undergraduate workforce, who (as is in the fast-food industry) are desirable

not just because they are poorly paid but because they are disposable and “more easily controlled” (Schlosser). This is true regardless of whether campus workers are unionized or whether the school is located in a state with a relatively labor-friendly legislative environment. For an example of a school that has campus unions and a more responsible legal climate, we might take SUNY Oswego, Jerry Seinfeld’s alma mater. Oswego is a fairly modest employer of student labor, directly employing 2,000 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 workforce on campus, substantially outnumbering all other employment groups combined; taking full-time and part-time together, the campus only employs 1,500 nonstudent employees. Measured by full-time employee equivalent, it appears that student workers provide as much as half the labor time expended on campus (SUNY Oswego, “Fast Facts”).

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 (SUNY Oswego, “Student Employment”). 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.)

Student employment offices function 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 per hour (sometimes more and often less). The off-campus work includes farm labor, satellite installation, short-order cooking, commission sales, forklift operation, and 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 Monster-TRAK, 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 lucrative business of managing undergraduate temp labor for hundreds of campuses, including federal work-study positions on major public campuses (Cal Tech, University of Virginia, University of Wisconsin). At all of these campuses, students cannot get work—even work-study positions funded with public money and which represent themselves as a citizenship entitlement, that is, “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 United States, only 20 percent of undergraduates do not work at all. About 50 percent of all undergraduates work an average of twenty-five 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 thirty-nine hours a week. This means that about 10 or 12 million undergraduates are in the workforce at any given moment. Indeed, if you’re a U.S. citizen under age twenty-five, you are more likely to be working if you are a student than if you are not. Over 3 million persons aged twenty to twenty-four 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. In fact, however, those divisions in-

volve 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 go to school on a full-time basis (NCES, *Profile of Undergraduates*; NCES, *Work First, Study Second*).

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. Although I'm going to use an essay by Barbara Ehrenreich as an example, let me emphasize that I am not criticizing her but suggesting the pervasiveness of the intellectual and emotional hurdle represented by the legal, cognitive, and affective label of "student."

In fall 2004, Ehrenreich penned a column for the *Progressive* called "Class Struggle 101." It's about the exploitation of the higher education workforce, and it does an excellent job of making the necessary parallels to the wages, hypocrisy, and union-busting of Wal-Mart, while pointing out the good things that Harvard and Stanford undergraduates have done in support of what she calls "campus blue-collar workers." Throughout this piece, she uniformly identifies students and workers as two mutually exclusive groups, generally assigning social and political agency to "the students" and helplessness to "the workers." This is well intentioned but clearly not accurate, even on privileged campuses. At her Harvard example, for instance, labor militancy has a lot to do with the culture disseminated and maintained by 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 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,” 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 the left 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

According to one observer, 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 twenty-two hours a week throughout the year. (This might mean working fifteen hours a week while studying and forty hours a week during summers.) Today, the same expenses from a low-wage job require fifty-five hours a week fifty-two weeks a year.

At a private university, those figures in 1964 were thirty-six minimum-wage hours per week, which was relatively manageable for a married couple or a family of modest means and would have been possible even for a single person working the lowest possible wage for twenty hours a week during the school year and some overtime on vacations. Today, it would cost 136 hours per week for fifty-two weeks a year to “work your way through” a private university (Mortenson). In 2006, each year of private education amounted to the annual after-tax earnings of nearly four lowest-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 student labor: over the past thirty years, the price of student and faculty labor has been driven downward massively at exactly the same time that costs have soared.

For the 80 percent of students who are trying to work their way through, higher education and its promise of a future is increasingly a form of indenture, involving some combination of debt, overwork, and underinsurance. It means the pervasive shortchanging of health, family obligations, and, ironically, the curtailment even of learning and self-culture. More and more students are reaching the limits of endurance with the work that they do while enrolled. 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, *Financialization of Daily Life*) in what Jeff Williams has dubbed “the pedagogy of debt.” 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 consumer frame of analysis. 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* 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 the consumer perspective, the bargain has gotten worse for purchasers of credit hours, because there are many more years at low wages and fewer years at higher wages, plus there are 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, difference is that the U.S. worker with only a high school education or “some college” is paid astonishingly 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 100 percent of 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 is in no part an actual “raise” in the wages of the college educated.³

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-class and third-class specialness for some working lives, and provide the majority of working lives none 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 these things 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? With Dick Ohmann, Stanley Aronowitz, Cary Nelson, and others, I think the “crisis of higher education” asks us to do more than think about education, educators, and the educated. It challenges us to make equality a reality. It asks us to identify the agencies of inequality in our lives (including the ideologies and institutions of professionalism), 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 for 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 nonstudents 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. 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 nonstudent labor. And student workers, located, as I've said, in a kind of semiformal 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 3:00 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 Ohmann has commented 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 hyperexploited and insecure workers. And in the United States, there are always more than 10 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. “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 students, likely comprising all of the feelings of

the non-adult, of the temporary, of the mobile, of the single person. As one contributor to Bartlett's *Working Lives* site put it, it's "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. We could ask, for whom is this contingency a field of possibility? And for whom is contingency, in fact, a field of constraint?

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. So 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.