

Academe Online

Occupy and Escalate

Graduate students should occupy not just buildings but also disciplinary and professional organizations.

By Marc Bousquet

The academic year began with a bang last fall at the University of California. A series of bangs, actually, featuring a united front of students, staff, and faculty in a coordinated series of walkouts and strikes across the system's ten campuses. The target of their outrage was a series of draconian layoffs, wage cuts, and drastic tuition hikes (32 percent in 2009–10 alone) imposed by UC president Mark G. Yudof shortly after he suspended shared governance and assumed financial emergency powers in midsummer.

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With more than five thousand marchers packing into UC Berkeley's Sproul Plaza, the Bay Area featured the largest and loudest protests. Feelings were running so high that multiple bomb squads raced to the scene of what was eventually determined to be an electrical fire in a Volkswagen parked near Yudof's home.

The Bay Area also featured the action of greatest duration, a weeklong building occupation by several dozen undergraduates, unionized campus workers, and graduate students. Proceeding directly from the September 24 walkout rally, protesters peacefully occupied the Graduate Student Commons at the University of California, Santa Cruz, holding all-night dance parties, Twittering, writing manifestos, and issuing statements frankly acknowledging their intention to escalate the conflict: "Occupation is a tactic for escalating struggles," they said in a statement quickly posted to their [Web site](#). "We must face the fact that the time for pointless negotiations is over."

For the American Association of University Professors and all the institutions of the profession, this growing commitment by graduate students to confrontation, to imaginative use of social media, and to direct actions such as building occupations suggests not only a change in tactics but also a changing intellectual and political orientation—toward a more expansive critique of higher education's relationship to the economy and society. If the AAUP exists to preserve and shape the profession and its relationship to society now and in the future, what does it mean that the majority of the profession's members find it hard to envision a future that does not include an ambitious program of struggle?

While most of the mainstream media focused on the traditional demonstrations at Berkeley—the crowd in Sproul Plaza recalling for many the boots-on-the-ground activism of an earlier generation—news of the Santa Cruz occupation spread by way of independent media channels, helped along by the occupiers' innovative broad-spectrum information campaign, which featured regular updates on a Twitter page microblog; video posted to YouTube; an authorized group Weblog, Occupy California; and a critical-theoretical blog from an autonomous subgroup titled "We Want Everything."

As might be expected from a diverse group communicating across so many media platforms, the message was not always consistent, ranging from calls for revolutionary solidarity to Tweets guaranteeing that the protesters' parties would be "sick" (surfer-speak for "awesome"). The group's demands seemed to run the gamut, from lowering prices on textbooks to smashing capitalism. After the occupation ended, spokespeople acknowledged that "long, heated conversations" had been necessary to negotiate "a very narrow line" between a unified message and the inevitably diverse goals of the protesters.

Despite the variations in message, or perhaps because of them, the takeover captured the imagination of campus political groups, students, and workers across the globe, with messages of solidarity pouring in from Britain, South Africa, and Croatia, from campus bus drivers and the Students for a Democratic Society, from San Francisco State University, UC Irvine, Brandeis University, Columbia University, and the City University of New York.

California's statewide Defend Our Education coalition (uniting K–12 educators with staff and faculty from the University of California, California State University, and the California community college system) passed a unanimous resolution of support for the occupiers, as did the University of Maryland Student Power Action Mob, a coalition of groups supporting issues ranging from reproductive choice to a more rational drug policy, and the University of Connecticut Students Against the War.

The largest solidarity demonstration took place in lower Manhattan, home to New York University and the New School, where arrests, expulsions, and other disciplinary actions in response to building occupations the year before had left simmering resentment. A day after news of the UCSC occupation hit Indymedia and anarchist news sources, protesters from both lower-Manhattan campuses marched through Union Square behind posters and bedsheets painted with their own take on the UCSC manifesto: "Occupy Everything Right Now!" and "From Santa Cruz to NYC, We Want F—king Everything!"

In New Orleans, radical students responded to the demand for an expansive critique and a broadened front of action, connecting the dots between the California occupation and the G-20 summit. After gluing shut the ATMs and doors of three bank branches, they announced: “We closed down those banks, baby, in solidarity . . . with the occupiers at UC Santa Cruz and our comrades in Pittsburgh. We also did this for New Orleans, in the initial phase of our project to expel capital from our beautiful home.”

Lessons from the Occupation

Several aspects of the UCSC occupation are noteworthy. The graduate students and their allies accepted and promoted escalation of conflicts with authorities by three means: direct action, coalition, and wide-ranging critique. At Santa Cruz and all other UC campuses, graduate students and undergraduates engaged in academic employment (tutoring, research, teaching) have bargained collectively for a decade. But their UAW local played no direct role in the recent events.

Nonetheless, the figure of student labor pervades the occupation’s communications, especially the Web text that has captured the imagination of readers around the world, “[Communiqué from an Absent Future](#).” Its anonymous authors, part of the UCSC occupation, aim to initiate some actual thought about the role of higher education in the economy. “A university diploma is now worth no more than a share in General Motors,” they observe: “We work and we borrow in order to work and to borrow. And the jobs we work toward are the jobs we already have. Close to three-quarters of students work while in school, many full-time; for most, the level of employment we obtain while students is the same that awaits after graduation. Meanwhile, what we acquire isn’t education; it’s debt. We work to make money we have already spent, and our future labor has already been sold on the worst market around. . . . We power the diploma factory on the treadmills in the gym.”

Noting that public employees, the homeless, and the unemployed have been demonstrating across California, the occupiers argue that “all of our futures are linked” and that the struggle over higher education is “one among many, [so] our movement will have to join with these others, breaching the walls of the university compounds and spilling into the streets.”

In the big picture of unionism in the United States, of course, this kind of commitment has a distinguished precedent in the Industrial Workers of the World (see Joe Grim Feinberg’s piece in this issue) and the early years of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, although recent trends have been toward a narrower vision. And graduate employee unionism, now entering its fifth decade, has plenty of examples of units that focus on day-to-day, bread-and-butter representation and plenty more committed to justice beyond the contract.

Graduate student unionists across the United States have already broadly accepted the “continuous organizing” model of union operation, featuring a steady commitment to fostering solidarity and awareness through sociability and direct member involvement. These units throw regular parties and keep the membership participating and aware of themselves as workers in steady struggle with their employers for a more just workplace. At the various “hot spots” of union struggle across the country, whether private institutions such as New York University or public institutions such as the University of Minnesota, graduate student workers have developed increasingly creative modes of protest. They have formed broad coalitions with undergraduates, other campus workers, and other public employees, and they have waged campaigns on a base of issues that has expanded beyond wages and benefits. Graduate students are transforming the unions to which they belong.

What might this expanding vision mean for the American Association of University Professors in the long term?

On the one hand, the AAUP is not a trade union (though individual chapters have from time to time developed a business-unionist orientation), but it has successfully maintained a broad, professional vision and a clear understanding of the profession’s obligations to the larger society.

On the other hand, the AAUP was slow to acknowledge the deprofessionalization of faculty. And it has barely researched or commented on the fact that campuses—public and private—have accumulated buildings, grounds, endowments, and cash reserves while exploiting vast workforces of students who borrow, and whose parents borrow, to supplement the below-market wage universities pay. Nor has it developed a systematic critique of the relationship between higher education and inequality in the United States. There is work to be done.

The New Activism

The contrast between the imaginative action by students and the decades of foot-dragging on their future by most academic institutions suggests to me that the AAUP and the disciplinary associations could become the next target for the more radical students. For them, socially conscious unionism no longer represents the left wing of political possibility but a launching pad from which they can surpass the limits to the imagination of a previous generation.

We, the AAUP, are the low-hanging fruit for the rising generation of students and contingent faculty. We are a democratic association with simple procedures. Occupying the slate with insurgent graduate student candidates can be accomplished using a simple petition process. A few thousand votes—the graduate employees on two or three campuses—could shape the AAUP’s

governing Council in a year or two.

The same is true at most disciplinary associations, as we proved with the Modern Language Association Graduate Student Caucus more than a decade ago. Like the AAUP, disciplinary associations have a bullhorn regarding the profession and real purchase on the public sphere. They have staff and resources—often greater resources than the AAUP—as well as contacts with the press and politicians: the associations substantially leverage their own resources with nets of relationships with the richest campuses and wealthiest foundations.

What I am suggesting is that by joining and studying the petition process for officer candidates, a relatively small number of graduate students could begin a peaceful “occupation” of all the institutions of the profession—especially if they coordinated with students, staff, contingent faculty, and fellow travelers in the tenure stream. What would happen if the submerged 80 percent of the profession—graduate student employees and contingent faculty—occupied the governing positions of the AAUP and of disciplinary organizations like the American Historical Association, the American Philosophical Association, and the American Psychological Association? What if they similarly occupied the governments of college towns—Ithaca, Bloomington, and Ann Arbor? What issues would they engage? Where would they direct the funds? How would they employ staff time? What improprieties would they commit in public?

I, for one, would like to know.

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