

## BOOK REVIEW

# Low-wage labor and the future of higher education

*How The University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*, by Marc Bousquet (NYU Press, 2008)

Reviewed by **STANLEY ARONOWITZ**  
Graduate Center

In his first book 30 years ago, CUNY Professor David Nasaw argued that, from its origins in the late 19th century, the public education system in the United States has been oriented not chiefly to learning, but to the discipline of young children. Now Marc Bousquet joins a growing chorus of critics of higher education to claim that, far from being an ivory tower, universities are about business: training students for the workworld but also dispensing billions of dollars to politically-connected outside contractors who build facilities and provide services once done by university employees. Universities, he argues, are run along models borrowed from corporate capitalism.

Bousquet, a tenured associate professor at Santa Clara University and an alumnus of the CUNY English PhD program, has been a leading advocate for part-time academic labor unions since his graduate student years. Long before the spate of critical studies about universities that have appeared in the past eight or nine years, Bousquet argued that, contrary to its image of a cornucopia for faculty, higher education was increasingly precarious, contingent and low-paid, conditions suffered by much of US labor. Now he has put these insights in a sustained form and, along the way, takes aim at the optimists who mistakenly proclaimed that the 21st century would bring an outpouring of tenure-stream jobs in the humanities and the rest of the liberal arts for qualified PhD earners.

## NO FLOOD OF JOBS

Instead the retirement of a whole generation of academics from active teaching have not, in the main, produced full-time tenurable jobs. Nor has the new era of computer and other technologies resulted in a tendency toward the teacherless curriculum, as predicted by David Noble, whose *Digital Diploma Mills* is perhaps the most influential work of deconstruction of the notion that technology promises a new era in higher education.

Bousquet shows that, as tenured faculty leave the university, the administration replaces them with contingent, temporary and

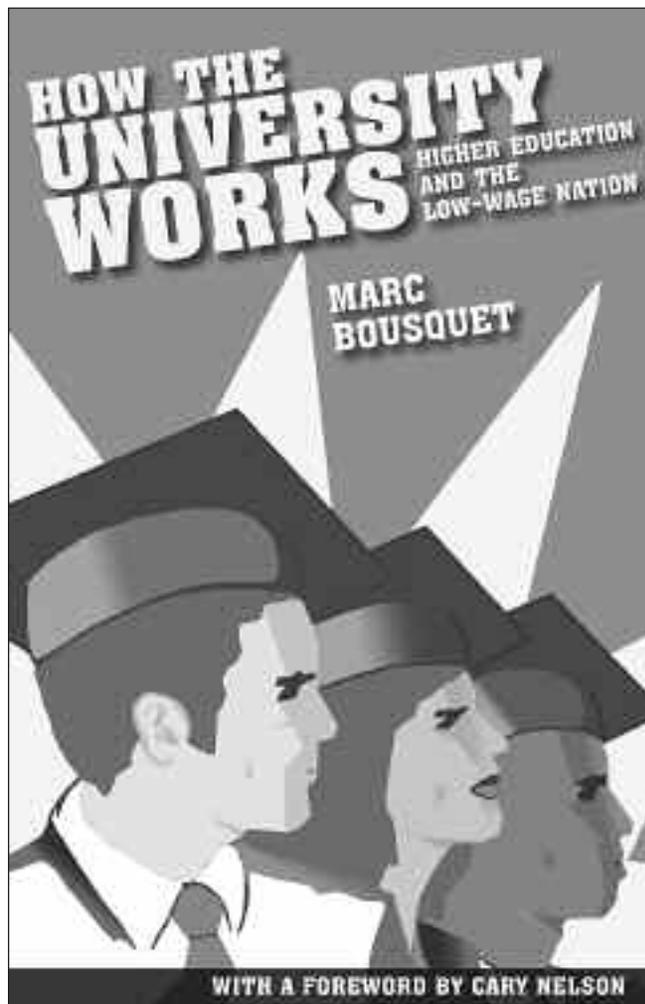
part-time teachers. And far from being professors-in-training, graduate teaching assistants are a necessary source of cheap labor, which accounts for universities' willingness to admit large numbers into PhD programs even when job prospects remain dim. Basing his conclusions on well-known statistics showing that part-timers, both in their absolute numbers and the number of courses they teach at the undergraduate level, have outdistanced the contribution of the tenured faculty, he believes that the cutting-edge agents of change for the present and future of higher education are no longer the full-timers, but that the baton has passed to precarious, contingent labor.

## CORPORATE MODEL

The reason for this turn of events over the last 30 years is, chiefly, that university management has adopted a corporate capitalist model of operations in which cost-containment and cost-cutting govern their perspectives on academic labor. Needless to say, in public universities and colleges this policy owes some of its justification to the reluctance of legislators and executive branch politicians to fund universities adequately. But he points out that spending in higher education has not necessarily been drastically reduced. Instead "campus administrators continue to build new stadiums, restaurants, fitness facilities, media rooms" and more. He suggests that "these huge new building projects [are] financed by thirty years of faculty downsizing. ..." In this context, distance learning may be understood, not as a way to innovate education, but as a way to cut costs. The predominant faculty in on-line schooling is part-time and low-paid. Like most adjuncts, these precarious workers enjoy few, if any of the amenities of tenure: academic freedom, health and pension benefits, real offices from which to perform research and advise students, and working conditions commensurate with their professional training.

In 1980, the Supreme Court's notorious *Yeshiva* decision halted the forward march of unionism among full-time faculty in private universities when, by a 5-4 decision, it found that professors in these institutions were managers and not entitled to protection under the National Labor Relations Act. But Bousquet notes that in the last 30 years,

## Cost cutting rules academia now



full-time faculty in public universities and colleges have flocked to unions. For example, 44% of full-timers in four-year public universities are covered by union contracts, and the proportion of unionized tenure-stream faculty in community colleges is similarly dense, at least in comparison to other sectors of the economy.

## HIERARCHY

But he is not sanguine about this apparent success. In his view, most professors have either bought into management's doctrines of Total Quality Management, which have centralized power at the top of the administrative hierarchy, or they have remained silent as the traditional value of shared governance is subverted by incorporating the tenured faculty into a largely

ephemeral "partnership" with management and its corporate allies. Bousquet argues that shared governance has meant that faculty identify with the institution rather than academic labor, especially those at the bottom of the hierarchy who have struggled to make their voices heard and their demands for equity met.

His evaluation of faculty unionism is, therefore, quite harsh. While he refutes writers like Harvard's Derek Bok and California's Clark Kerr, who view unions as unimportant when not dangerous to the academic enterprise, he is generally pessimistic regarding the question of whether the two major unions in higher education – AFT and NEA – possess the political will, let alone the vision, to embrace the cause of contingent labor. Based on a solid reading of recent history, he shows that faculty unionism remains parochial when not downright myopic concerning the needs

of the three million employees of higher education institutions. Moreover, unionism in higher education is divided by full and part-time faculty, research and teaching institutions, and different unions with different priorities.

In the squeeze, students are consistently short-changed by overstuffed classes and the plethora of contingent faculty who have little time to spare for them and worn down by the burdens of rising tuition and, in most instances, the need to engage in wage-labor to put themselves through school.

Bousquet bemoans the lack of solidarity among the rank and file of universities. In contrast, management has congealed into a new "caste" and has exhibited remarkable solidarity around its interests. As a result, despite heroic efforts by many teachers to buck the tide, the university has become a graveyard of genuine education.

It may be too much to ask a critic who paints this gloomy picture to suggest ways out of the quandary. Yet this book, whose indictment is persuasive and eloquently laid out, could have benefited from a speculative chapter that discussed strategies for change. I do not make this suggestion in order to undercut Bousquet's bold, realistic assessment. The problem is that absent a discourse of alternatives, its effect may be to reinforce the sense of hopelessness that already pervades the professoriate. So it is up to activists in university unions to take up the challenge posed by Bousquet's analysis – to develop new strategic thinking for academic labor.

## Clarion APRIL 2008

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