



## Campus Labor and the Corporate University: A LaborOnline Forum

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Clarence Lang, Forum Organizer: Since the late 1970s, neoliberalism has emerged as the main political-economic organizing principle in the United States and globally. Characterized by deregulation, privatization, and economic austerity, neoliberal policies have promoted the devaluation of labor and the withdrawal of the state from social welfare provision. Far from being removed from these developments, the academy has both echoed and influenced these changes. Consistent with the neoliberal turn, state legislators, university trustees and administrators have pursued a corporate business-inspired restructuring of academia, especially at public universities reeling from state-level budget cuts. Under the banner of “strategic planning,” proponents of fiscal retrenchment and institutional reorganization have placed a premium on, according to scholar Frank Donoghue, “efficiency, productivity, and usefulness,” with particularly dire implications for the humanities and liberal arts. Viewed in this manner, the current crisis of higher education has consisted of more than just declining state funding, skyrocketing tuition costs, diminished affordability, and uncertain career prospects for graduates. Equally as significant, the changing landscape of many university and college campuses reflects,

among other circumstances:

- the growth of casual academic labor and the drop in tenure-eligible faculty
- the denial of fair pay and benefits to graduate employees
- the application of Taylorist methods to teaching and curricula
- the threatened elimination of academic units
- the erosion of shared university governance, and the war of attrition on faculty autonomy, free speech, and control over intellectual production
- dwindling university support for research
- an expanding administrative bureaucracy
- a greater orientation toward competitive entrepreneurship, self-marketing, customer-service culture, and “branding.”

Other categories of campus-based labor have felt the impact of this restructuring, which increasingly is denying them a decent quality of life. A recent commentary in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* estimated that more than 700,000 employees at U.S. colleges – including landscaping crews, janitors, food service employees, and building facilities workers – do not earn living wages. Shared services centers and consolidation schemes jeopardize the livelihoods of office staff and information technology workers. For faculty, academic professionals, graduate assistants, and service employees alike, efforts to build unions or protect existing collective bargaining rights are met with resistance.

What does the surge of neoliberalism in higher education mean for faculty, graduate employees, and other forms of labor in the university setting? This was the key question explored in a roundtable session, “Campus Labor and the Corporate University,” that took place at the recent national conference of LAWCHA (“Rights, Solidarity, Justice,” June 6-8, New York City). Below, two of the participants from that conference roundtable – **Naomi R. Williams**, Graduate Student in History, and member of the Teaching Assistants’ Association (TAA) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and **James R. Barrett**, Professor of History at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and President of the Campus Faculty Association (CFA) – revisit themes from the session. Specifically, they respond to the following questions:

1. What opportunities, as well as obstacles, do you perceive in the particular area (faculty, graduate employee) you are organizing, or have organized?
2. What opportunities, as well as obstacles, do you perceive in organizing campus-based

labor across the diverse categories of faculty, graduate student, and service employee? That is, how does one proceed in the task of unionizing categories of people who often view their relationship to the university, and consequently their relationship to fellow employees, in dramatically different terms?

3. As difficult as it is to unionize university and college campuses, what are the prospects for linking these activities to organizing efforts beyond campus boundaries?
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## **NAOMI R. WILLIAMS**

### **What opportunities, as well as obstacles, do you perceive in the particular area (faculty, graduate student) you are organizing, or have organized?**

The most successful organizing tool we have used to organize graduate student workers in our efforts to rebuild our membership within the Teaching Assistants' Association (TAA) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has been peer-to-peer discussions. We have seen membership increase by 150 members (to a new high of 700 members, up from 550 after the 2011 legal assault on public employees) as department stewards pairs have done weekly office visits to talk with graduate employees in their offices to assess their needs and concerns, and to talk about the benefits of union membership. While not limited to graduate employees, these conversations between workers have produced better results than using paid staffers or organizers. They have created opportunities to maintain broad-based issue engagement within the union as well. As members and potential members bring up ideas or concerns that seem to have traction across disciplines, it is a great way to maintain the momentum of organizing by demonstrating the union's ability to address these concerns. For example, the university implemented new software, and problems resulted in healthcare deductions. The union was able to step in through the contract enforcement committee to resolve issues for all graduate employees and negotiate payment plans for those affected. Another opportunity among graduate student workers involves utilizing existing networks. Some student workers have extensive friend networks through online social media sites, which can help mobilize members for particular events. One caution is to recognize that it is not all-encompassing and does not replace other forms of communication with members. Obstacles include reaching members and potential members across disciplines. Our membership exists mainly in the social sciences and humanities. We have made some leeway in the hard sciences, but it requires a commitment from volunteers to continue to follow up on leads and demonstrate the benefits of union membership and worker solidarity to student workers with higher-than-average stipends, and department cultures that focus on research lab groups and not a community of graduate student workers beyond particular

subfields.

**What opportunities, as well as obstacles, do you perceive in organizing campus-based labor across the diverse categories of faculty, graduate student, and service employee? That is, how does one proceed in the task of unionizing categories of people who often view their relationship to the university, and consequently their relationship to fellow employees, in dramatically different terms?**

Worker education is the best opportunity to successfully organize the various segments of campus labor. We have four unions on campus. While there was occasional collaboration before the governor's assault on public workers, after the 2011 budget legislation, the campus unions started meeting monthly to discuss and share concerns, possible actions, and share research and strategic planning goals. The TAA representative would report back to the executive board as well as general membership to keep everyone informed and aware of workers' responses, concerns, and needs. These joint meetings and the follow-up intra-union discussion helped to bridge gaps in understandings about the diverse needs of campus workers, and created opportunities for support and the growth of a sense of solidarity. This was especially true for graduate student workers' understanding of university staff concerns. With the university seeking to rebuild its human resource model and use outside consultants to move toward a "business model" approach to HR, graduate student workers had the opportunity to discuss concerns with staff and to focus research to counter the university's position on things like merit pay, seniority, and job classifications. The joint public hearings between the AFSCME locals representing staff, TAA, and UFAS (faculty union) saw large turnouts and campus workers talking together and sharing concerns on an unprecedented scale. Maintaining these connections will go a long way as we all work to rebuild strong union representation on campus. A potential obstacle is of course hierarchy on campus. However, key faculty members have attended joint meetings and brought other sectors' concerns back to department and Faculty Senate meetings, and worked to build an inclusive atmosphere on campus. Ultimately, the best strategy is to continue open discussions between employment sectors, call on members to support other union activity, and formalizing a campus labor council will go a long way in cross-campus unionizing.

**As difficult as it is to unionize university and college campuses, what are the prospects for linking these activities to organizing efforts beyond campus boundaries?**

I think the prospects for linking campus and community organizing exist. In Madison, we have the Labor and Working-Class Studies Project, started in 2009, which exists to bridge

the campus, labor, and community groups. This project follows the Wisconsin Idea, which is the university's mission to connect the campus to the broader community. The UW School for Workers has been providing training for union members for over fifty years and also connects the university unions to other union members in the area. The TAA also actively participates in the local labor federation representing union members in three counties in southeastern Wisconsin. Maintaining these connections, becoming involved in local and regional campaigns that benefit all working people in Wisconsin, and seeking to build relationships across sectors will provide good prospects for organizing outside of campus boundaries. The TAA was able to use donations received during the state capital protests to offer grants to groups organizing on behalf of working people. This went a long way in building and expanding union-community collaboration in some local areas. The TAA has also been committed to supporting workers' struggles against local employers as with the Palermo employees currently striking for union recognition in Milwaukee.

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## **JAMES R. BARRETT**

For very understandable reasons, a lot of the discussion regarding the labor movement has been pretty pessimistic. But recent events on campus have created a good organizing environment, and, as the old Swedish socialist saying goes, "Dig where you stand". There has been a great deal of digging lately in my little part of the world – some of it with good results. Encouraged by the successful AFT-AAUP organizing drive among faculty at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), by our own extremely successful Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) here in Urbana, and most recently by the remarkable rank-and-file/community strike by the Chicago Teachers Union, faculty and other colleagues here in Urbana have gained the confidence to challenge the growing corporate atmosphere on campus. At Illinois (UIUC), most workers are under contract with the exception of the faculty and some of the Academic Professionals. (The latter represent a very flexible category of workers with advanced degrees who have increasingly taken on a lot of the work formerly done by faculty — teaching and research, as well as more technical tasks involving IT, editing, etc.)

There are just a couple of general points I wanted to make before tackling Clarence's questions:

Especially during the last three or four years, there has been a great welter of activity, much of it driven by corporate-style policies on the part of the administration and by the efforts of campus workers to restrain that process. We have just had a week-long strike by

service workers (SEIU) who have also been very close to striking at the expiration of their last two contracts. We also had a wonderfully planned and executed strike by our Graduate Employees Organization (AFT-IFT) in 2009, and a very near strike by GEO this past November.

On the negative side, the administration has become far more centralized across the three campuses (Urbana, Chicago, Springfield) and far more aggressive in their attitudes toward labor. Contracts often take a year or more to negotiate, and in a moment of financial constraint, scarce funds are going to union-busting law firms in Chicago to keep unions off campus and to tame those already present.

On the positive side, the university administration has lost just about all of these efforts. One reason for this on the Urbana campus is a considerable degree of solidarity between the unions. Besides our county AFL-CIO, for the past ten years we also had a Campus Labor Coalition where delegates from the various groups on campus, including the faculty, meet monthly and in emergency situations to compare notes and plan activities in support of one another. The recent SEIU strike this past semester and the near-strike by GEO at the end of last fall semester are examples. The Campus Faculty Association (CFA) pledged financial support for graduate employees and encouraged faculty to cancel classes or move them to pre-arranged sites just off campus, which were reserved and paid for by CFA. We also worked through departments to get expressions of support and promises not to retaliate against striking graduate employees. Our Undergraduate-Graduate Alliance coordinated support activity among students. The GEO won its main demand, which involved tuition and fee waivers.

In the case of the service workers, the CFA took our chancellor's suggestion to reach out to our community's poor, but in a way that was a bit different from what she had in mind. Observing that many of our colleagues' families were living at or near the poverty level as a result of low campus wages and layoffs, we organized a successful food drive and carried on a letter-writing campaign to educate the campus community about the situation of the service workers. The service workers won a decent contract, and in the process strengthened their own union and labor solidarity on the campus.

The CFA has been moving toward collective bargaining rights for about two years now with a joint campaign by the AFT-AAUP, and we expect this to culminate in the coming year. Given the research profile of the university, this would be a historic victory for labor if it works. The Illinois campus shows great potential, in part because of the sort of solidarity described above.

**What opportunities, as well as obstacles, do you perceive in the particular area you are organizing, or have organized?**

The corporate efforts of all sorts on campus are understandably seen as problems, but they also create opportunities for organizing. Our state pension and budget problems likewise have many faculty looking for a solution. The organizing situation in Illinois is facilitated to some degree by a state labor board in the area of education and by the card check process where a union can prove majority support through the circulation of authorization cards without a formal election. Labor traditions in the state also hold out the promise of support from other organizations around the state. On private university campuses still subject to the Yeshiva decision and in states where public university faculty face an even more difficult organizing situation than our own, union-oriented faculty can provide important support for other organizations on their campuses.

Given the fact that the rising number of contingent faculty is often represented as an obstacle, I should mention that at both UIC and UIUC, the organizing has involved both tenure track and non-tenure track colleagues and that response from the latter group has been strong.

I am not sure I would call it an obstacle, but I have been struck by how on a campus with many faculty who would consider themselves radicals or progressives, we see little activity from these folks. I am not sure what to make of this. The heavy lifting is usually done by more traditional liberal types and, not surprisingly, a disproportionate number of the activists are women. There is also an understandable generational divide, as younger faculty facing tenure decisions have less time to devote to the organizing.

**What opportunities, as well as obstacles, do you perceive in organizing campus-based labor across the diverse categories of faculty, graduate student, and service employee? That is, how does one proceed in the task of unionizing categories of people who often view their relationship to the university, and consequently their relationship to fellow employees, in dramatically different terms?**

Other campus workers always welcome the efforts of union faculty to help. I doubt that the potential for solidarity has been realized on many campuses, and I would encourage people to reach out to other campus unions. Even if your faculty is not in a position to organize at the moment, other unions need help in organizing, negotiations and strikes. There is plenty to do. You can tell from Naomi's description of events in Madison that graduate employee organizations in particular need the support of labor-oriented faculty, but service and clerical workers also welcome this kind of support. I would particularly encourage the idea



of campus labor councils or coalitions if you do not already have them. Faculty and graduate employees should be speaking with other workers on campus and coordinating activities. Are progressive faculty doing what they need to do to build a stronger movement?

**As difficult as it is to unionize university and college campuses, what are the prospects for linking these activities to organizing efforts beyond campus boundaries?**

Campus labor activists are also involved with our local Jobs with Justice (JwJ) chapter, which brings us into contact with other unions and also with communities of faith. This and related groups are working on immigrants' rights issues and union efforts in town. CFA is a constituent member of JwJ and US Labor Against the War. Several people from GEO and CFA are also active in CU Citizens for Social Justice, one of the few truly integrated organizations in town. There are no breaks at all that I can see between labor organizing on campus and becoming active in broader community issues.

## Author



Clarence Lang