UIC United Faculty on Front Lines of Crisis in Higher Ed

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University of Illinois-Chicago United Faculty (UICUF) have announced that they will launch a 2 day strike Feb 18 and 19. In the Fall, UICUF participated in what their union called a "historic vote." Indeed, it was. 79% of the tenure-track and 79% of non-tenure-track members of the University of Illinois Chicago United Faculty participated. When the polls closed, 95% had authorized the bargaining team to call a strike. And those ballots have effectively put UICUF Local 6456 on the front lines of the current crisis in higher education, economic justice, and democratic governance. This referendum signaled how important the labor movement has become to ensuring public universities, like UIC, live up to their egalitarian potential. The strike also signals the potential of full time faculty to support lecturers, who at UIC make $30,000 a year, lack job security and whose conditions affect the learning environment at the university.

After all, social democracy has been but one answer to the question: What are the uses of the university? Americans have been asking themselves that for decades, long before the Civil War, when President Abraham Lincoln signed into law the 1862 Land-Grant Colleges Act, which promised a parcel of land to provide, as the bill's author explained, a "college in every State upon a sure and perpetual foundation, accessible to all, but especially to the sons of toil." These institutions offered courses in agricultural sciences, mechanical arts, and military strategies, alongside the sort of traditional curriculum in the hard sciences and liberal arts.

UIC, it should be noted, was not Illinois's land-grant college. That was Urbana-Champaign, which opened its doors in 1867 as the Illinois Industrial University, a name that speaks to how it served rapidly growing Chicago, fast becoming the Second City because of manufacturing, transportation, and trade. And what of UIC in these years? We can trace part of today's expansive UIC back to colleges dedicated to training pharmacists, doctors, surgeons, and dentists – the sort of professionals needed to keep an industrial city healthy. These nineteenth-century schools were incorporated into the University of Illinois in 1913 – a good twenty years before state representative Richard Daley introduced a bill to provide

Chicagoans with their own undergraduate institution.

He wouldn't get it then in 1935, at a moment when Democrats across the country recognized the importance and potential of higher education. To be sure, New Dealers wanted to revive the American economy and hence advocated "vocational education in junior and State colleges" and "technological research in universities." But federal officials also considered public higher education a fulcrum to democratically reconstruct the entire nation because "The leadership of a region is dependent in no small way upon the products of its colleges and universities." As such, they emphasized "student and faculty self-government to foster a more responsible citizenry."

New Deal dreams did not immediately yield sprawling democratically-minded institutions. Democrats like Daley would not begin to realize this vision until after World War II, when veterans used the educational guarantees in the GI Bill of Rights to go to school – a novel idea for the many returning servicemen whose working-class, racial, and ethnic backgrounds all but guaranteed that they would not be matriculating at hidebound institutions like the University of Chicago or Northwestern. In Chicago, an average of 4,000 servicemen a semester enrolled in the "Harvard on the Rocks," a Navy Pier campus where former GIs could take two years of coursework and then transfer to Urbana.

The basic foundations of contemporary UIC took about a decade to take shape. In 1955, Daley (by then Chicago's mayor) pressured the University of Illinois to turn Navy Pier's Chicago Undergraduate Center into a four-year institution. In the years it took to pick a site and construct the campus, those nineteenth-century health colleges became the University of Illinois Medical Center, an institution that would be merged with UIC in 1982, just 17 years after the University of Illinois Chicago Circle opened in February 1965.

But that version of events leaves out two important questions: Just what were the uses of this new university and how much would students and faculty be able to govern it? The first question has an easy answer: UIC was a fledgling "multiversity," a term coined after World War II to describe the kind of mass state systems that University of California president Clark Kerr predicted would be centuries removed from the early European "academic cloister…with its intellectual oligarchy," meaning that multi-versities would differ from schools like Harvard, Yale, Oxford, and Cambridge. These new schools would actually be "universi-cities," which could absorb, harness the potential of, and serve the needs of undergraduates, graduate students, humanists, social scientists, engineers, professionals, administrators, farmers, industrialists, and policymakers. Crossing class, generational, and racial divides was vital in the early 1960s, when Kerr contended that universities sat "at the hinge of history" with a doorway open to the technologically-advanced future full of

promise, when Americans would double their income within a generation, work but thirty-two hours a week, and benefit from a more equitable distribution of wealth. Kerr essentially provided educators and policymakers with a blueprint for a new American Dream with the modern research university at its center. The taxes and votes that supported these schools were to ensure that markets and corporations be the servant rather than the master of the citizenry and its postsecondary education.

Yet students provided the muscle to force fledgling American multi-versities, like UIC, to realize their social democratic potential. The first to do so were those World War II veterans who took the right to an education outlined in the 1944 GI Bill and demanded actual seats in classrooms. They wanted access in the fullest sense of the word; many at the Navy Pier campus needed an opportunity close to home and work, not far away Urbana.

Likewise, UIC alumni and students later forced their university to fully serve Chicago. In the late 1960s, students and faculty pressured administrators to start Latin American and African American studies programs — in effect linking the courses offered in departments throughout the university into degree programs designed to empower graduates to assume leadership roles in their neighborhoods and workplaces. Some stayed in the Circle to help fellow Chicagoans fully utilize their new university. Two graduates, for example, eagerly joined the campus police force in 1972; they were the first women hired to physically protect UIC. And it should be noted that their employment happened only after local civil rights groups drew attention to biased hiring decisions that had kept women and minorities out of campus jobs.

Students and faculty also made UIC a place to discuss, debate, and plan for the realization of this city's potential. Members of the Art Department welcomed Lawndale children to UIC, where they learned scientific principles through drawing, sculpture, and photography — the kind of creative pedagogy missing in many Chicagoland public schools but desperately needed to stimulate the interest, creativity, and critical thinking that college admission officers look for (then and now). UIC also hosted free, public events designed to recognize and promote Chicago's diversity. The 1968 Black Arts Festival, for example, raised money to defray college costs for needy African American co-eds. The first Indian Days observance in 1973 was jointly sponsored by UIC's Native American Studies Program, the Field Museum, and the Newberry Library. Two years later, an "Organizing for Change" event brought local women's groups together. That same year Labor Studies professors reached out to women unionists to offer them a special program on "Working Women: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," which focused on issues like health and safety, labor law, bilingual organizing, and unionism done in the name of shopfloor democracy.

But classes were also being held. The first UIC students took their studies very seriously. Early surveys indicated that most undergraduates spent more than 17 hours a week studying and that was in addition to the 15 to 19 hours of classroom instruction. And those interviewed for this 1969 survey were eager for more — 69% planned to pursue graduate studies either immediately after graduation or to return to school once they spent a few years working. A sizable number of these co-eds wanted to come back to UIC, which had provided many of these undergraduates, like the "Harvard on the Rocks" enrollees before them, with a taste of what higher education could offer them.

That might be surprising because we often think of this era's college students as radicals, who practically spat when they discussed administrators like Kerr or big city bosses like Daley. UIC undergraduates had reason to detest their mayor, who did not hesitate to dispatch 12,000 police officers or call in 7,500 members of the Illinois National Guard to confront protestors at the 1968 Democratic convention. Many of those demonstrators were of course local students, who looked askance at Daley's claim that UIC's construction was his crowning achievement. Daley ruled Chicago with exactly the sort of coercion and patronage that disgusted students dedicated to the principles of participatory democracy and community empowerment. Daley also happily provided Republican businessmen with the sort of tax breaks and zoning deals that would remake the Loop into a high-end center of corporate investment and real estate development, largely at the expense of the working-class Chicagoans whose best hope for basic security, economic opportunity, and personal fulfillment rested then and now on public higher education.

Fifty years later, the American public university, that hallmark of America's democratic promise, is of course at a crossroads, looming ahead is an even more market-oriented university beholden to the whims of cost-cutting corporate benefactors. Indeed, University of Indiana officials have dismissed concerns about public schools' dependency on private enterprise, asserting: "Inherent in these major gifts is a deep pride and sense of ownership that these donors take." But there is another way forward toward a social-democratic multiversity responsive to the needs of students, faculty, and surrounding communities that is to say the public that actually owns these universities.

And that is why faculty unionization at UIC and across the country is so important, now that the US and its public higher education system sits once more "at the hinge of history." UIC's tenured, tenure-track, and non-tenure-track faculty have spent more than a year trying to bargain for a better deal for themselves, their students, and by extension surrounding neighborhoods. UICUF has noted that the university's finances are good and enrollment is up. Yet the number of high-paid administrators have increased, not the number of teachers or classes. As an AAUP expert pointed out: "Students are paying more and getting less."

And that's of principal concern to UICUF members who take seriously UIC's stated dedication to teaching, research, and service. The compensation demands, transportation subsidies, computer support, and infrastructure needs on the table right now are all vital to ensuring that UIC doesn't just keep serving Chicagoans adequately but preparing it to serve Chicago better than it ever has before.

UICUF hence has much to teach students before they graduate and look for work in the so-called real world. The conflict at UIC is real enough. Local 6456 members are defending their economic rights, the principles of civic participation, and the foundations of workplace democracy. Undergraduates are hence witnessing first hand the conflicts roiling workplaces around the country. That should surprise no one: contemporary universities do, after all, increasingly resemble corporations, especially those enterprises that spent decades undermining federal guarantees for individual opportunity, economic security, and democratic unionism.

To that end, it must be remembered that this current crisis in American public higher education and the larger Great Recession did not result from an absolute scarcity of money but rather from an unwillingness to safeguard, manage, and fund some of this country's most basic public goods. That is why faculty must embrace militancy and advocacy, the ingredients of the sort of self-governance and common ownership that New Dealers envisioned and that students and faculty nurtured in the 1960s. After all, a voice and a vote in university affairs does not lie in a faculty senate but in a faculty union, whose rights are protected by state and federal law and whose necessity is clear at a moment when public higher education is increasingly run for and like a business.

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