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Introduction: Striking Back

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A Tectonic Shift?

Last December, news of a system-wide strike at the University of California by teaching assistants seeking union recognition careened around the internet literally at the speed of light. Even the provisional success of this strike ("provisional" because it had only been suspended, not concluded, when administrators agreed to discuss recognition of graduate student unions) sent shock waves throughout the academic world on a scale not seen since Yale. Although these waves have not attained anything close to light speed, they have helped expose the fault lines between those who dominate the shaping of priorities in higher education and those responsible for doing much of the work of teaching. And, with luck and work, the shock waves propagated by the organizing effort and strike in California might even contribute toward transforming the terrain of higher education.

The set of essays collected here aims to contribute in its own small way to this goal of academic tectonic shift. "Striking Back: Academic Labor in Action" began as an emergency supplement in support of the UC strike--a consideration of its impact and potential repercussions--but it quickly widened in scope to document and reflect upon recent graduate student and adjunct faculty organizing and activism from New Haven and Boston to Binghamton and Iowa City. The essays collected here are not only a testament to the commitment and energy of activists who responded on such short notice to our invitation, but are also a sign of the diversity of approaches and styles (not to mention acronyms) in the academic labor movement: concise, hard-hitting reports on struggles for recognition at the University of California (Bacon) and Yale (Dugdale); detailed progress reports on union activity by COGS at the University of Iowa (Schmid), by GSEU at SUNY Binghamton (Kniffin), by ASEs throughout the University of California system (Singer), by GESO at Yale (Entin), and by a veritable alphabet soup of organizations in the Greater Boston area (Zabel and Brill); and, throughout, thoughtful reflections on the contexts for and future of such organizing and activism (most directly in Entin, Singer, Young, and Zehle).

A set of arguments familiar to many readers of *Workplace* links "Striking Back." In it, one can find critiques of the apprenticeship model of graduate education; critiques of the paternalistic rhetoric deployed by anti-union defenders of this model in the media and the courts; critiques of what Cynthia Young in this issue calls "the corporatist educational model"; cases for relying on collective representation and collective action rather than legal decisions by bodies like the NLRB and PERB; cases for recognizing the intimate relationship between the job crisis and the exploitation of casualized labor; cases for unions representing tenured and tenure-track faculty to actively support organizing by graduate and adjunct teachers (and suggestions on how to push them when such support is intermittent or nonexistent); and cases for making connections between academic labor, community activism, other academic organizations, the wider labor movement, and national and international movements among progressives and radicals. "Striking Back," that is, builds on the forum "Organizing Our Asses Off" from the inaugural issue of *Workplace* and supplements efforts by existing graduate student unions to explain who they are,

what they do, and why they do it.¹

David and Goliath?

Without going into a full-fledged summary of each of the following essays, I do want to underscore some of the features that make the kind of activism and organizing they document and discuss distinctive. One way to do this is to compare the priorities and emphases of the writers in "Striking Back" with the representation of graduate employee organizing in the February 1999 issue of *On Campus*, a publication of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

In "David Meets Goliath: Graduate Employee Organizing Comes of Age," *On Campus* managing editor Barbara McKenna paints a favorable portrait of AFT-affiliated locals and organizing committees that make up a coalition called AGEL.² To her audience of largely tenured and tenure-track faculty members of AFT, McKenna reports that "a more disciplined organizing effort" among graduate students has emerged in recent years, marked by such features as the development of a "self-sustaining leadership structure" and a commitment to ongoing, "face-to-face organizing" (6). And she ably summarizes the bread-and-butter goals of organizing drives currently underway at the University of Minnesota and Temple University--"the need for adequate wages and health care coverage, respect for the work [student employees] do, a voice in the academic decisions that affect their work and lives and a recognition of the realities Ph.D.s face in the academic marketplace" (6). All in all, McKenna's article may be a sign that some welcome support is forthcoming from a teachers' union that Gary Zabel and Harry Brill in their essay below suggest has been slow to make organizing of the most exploited teachers in academia a top priority.

Devoted readers of *Workplace*, though, will no doubt have already recognized certain analytical assumptions and rhetorical moves in "David Meets Goliath" that have long been the object of the GSC's critique. Take the article's subtitle, for instance ("Graduate Employee Organizing Comes of Age"), which may be a sarcastic response to the anti-union image of graduate students as spoiled children or rebellious adolescents--or it may simply take that image for granted as true of past (or non-AFT-affiliated?) campaigns. Compare McKenna's invocation of "the realities [of] the academic marketplace" to Marc Bousquet's critique of the assumptions underlying such a trope in his foreword to *Workplace* 1.1. Or consider that McKenna's take on "the realities of the cruel '90s" takes the form of a list--"state funding cutbacks, uncertain job prospects, vanishing tenured faculty lines, growing reliance on temporary faculty, and heavy dependence on teaching assistants to provide almost half of the undergraduate instruction going on at research universities" (6)--without any attempt to analyze how these elements relate to each other or to identify the forces and institutions working to turn them into (purportedly unchangeable) "realities."

Most tellingly, perhaps, "David Meets Goliath" presents a mainstreamed picture of graduate student organizing and activism. McKenna focuses less on what graduate student activists have done for themselves than on who they are, why they are organizing, and what they want; the effect is to emphasize wage and health care issues over any kind of larger progressive or radical vision. In contrast to Jonathan Singer's, Joseph Entin's, and Julie Schmid's emphases in their essays below on the principles and strategies informing graduate student activism, McKenna's article risks portraying graduate students as innocent victims in need of rescue by the better-situated faculty members of AFT.

Of course, McKenna's analytical and rhetorical strategies make some sense when we take into account the genre, likely audience assumptions, and medium of "David Meets Goliath"; no doubt they provide an effective shorthand for representing AFT-affiliated graduate student organizing in a positive light to a somewhat skeptical or largely indifferent audience in a print publication in which space is at a premium. Thus, my point is not to argue that McKenna's journalistic choices are a sign of nefarious intentions or

somehow compromise the good work her article can do in reaching those tenured and tenure-track faculty likely to be moved by subtle appeals to their paternalism. Rather, I want to suggest that the essays in "Striking Back" pick up where "David Meets Goliath" leaves off--they focus precisely on what graduate student and adjunct faculty organizing and activism can bring to the wider academic labor movement, they address the economic logic and political mobilization behind "the realities of the cruel '90s," and they report on and call for radical opposition and alternatives to what Antony Dugdale calls in his essay below "the reality of corporate governance."

Take an example that hits close to my institutional home, the recent actions of the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York (SUNY). Cynthia Young argues in this issue that the recent shift to a new funding model for SUNY (known first as RAM and now as BAP) and SUNY Binghamton's enthusiastic acquiescence to it "is only one instance of the numerous ways in which SUNY Binghamton is adjusting to the leaner and meaner realities of 21st century global capitalism." She emphasizes that "The problem is not simply that universities are being governed by corporations. They are increasingly transmuting themselves into mini corporations governed by the 'cost efficiency' logic that makes them compelling business partners." Young's essay points to a wider context in which it is possible to see the interests and concerns of full-time, part-time, and "student" teachers in higher education as fundamentally united. What makes the essays in "Striking Back" distinctive, then, is a point expressed most clearly below by Kevin Kniffin--a point that has relevance beyond the SUNY system--"The relationship of SUNY, in general, and Binghamton, in particular, is tied clearly with relationships between the powers-that-be in the worlds of government and capital. It is our job to make those relationships as clear as possible to as many people as possible."

Goliath may be a whole lot bigger than many of us had imagined. But David isn't alone.

Aftershocks and Backlashes

Soenke Zehle writes below: "Graduate student labor activism has become one of the most visible forms of resistance to the privatization and corporatization of public higher education as well as the increasing use of 'student labor' to meet the needs of the teaching machine." Of course, "most visible" does not mean "only," and highly visible resistance (say, the UC strike) often seems to occasion a backlash. The fiber-optic lines have been humming most recently with a March 17 press release by the California Faculty Association: "Cal State University Chancellor Charles Reed has unilaterally imposed a set of terms and conditions of employment on 20,000 faculty in spite of opposition by nearly every major constituent group at the university.... The CFA Board of Directors has authorized a strike vote to be held at its Spring Assembly, March 27-28, in Los Angeles. CFA chapters on the 22 CSU campuses will poll their members prior to the actual vote. Meanwhile, CFA is planning a variety of other job actions." Stay tuned--an emergency strike supplement may be in order, after all.³

By focusing on such sites as the University of California, Yale, SUNY Binghamton, the University of Iowa, and the University of Massachusetts-Boston, "Striking Back: Academic Labor in Action" aims to call attention to the fault lines underlying the academy today and the activity of graduate student and adjunct faculty organizers to put higher education on firmer foundations. At the most fundamental level, "Striking Back" is animated by Gary Zabel and Harry Brill's hope that the Boston-based adjunct activists involved in interlinked single-campus, municipal, and national organizing "may be in the process of helping to create a powerful social movement." We welcome comments, criticisms, and suggestions from our readers on our reflections on "Academic Labor in Action."⁴

Notes

1. Current information on the UC strike and the academic labor movement in California and the nation can

be found by following the many links on the Berkeley AGSE's web site at <http://www.laborcenter.org/agseuaw/unions.html>.

2. AGEL is a coalition of AFT-affiliated graduate employee unions at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, University of Kansas, University of Michigan, University of Oregon, University of Wisconsin-Madison, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and Wayne State University (McKenna 8).

3. For more details, see their web site at <http://www.calfac.org>.

4. Please feel free to email me at simon@fredonia.edu with responses of any kind to "Striking Back."

Works Cited

Bousquet, Marc. "Foreword: The Institution as False Horizon." *Workplace* 1.1 (February 1998).

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