

aging. In “the fight for America’s future,” they seemed to resolve, the unorganized are better suited as allies than as enemies.

## Between Classes: A Conference on Academic Labor

*Guy Baldwin*

New School for Social Research

“The university works because *we* work!” That was the refrain at a conference on the crises facing academic labor at New York University on November 16, 1996. Faculty, graduate students, and university staff convened to report on working conditions and propose solutions to their problems as laborers in American academia. Graduate students related their efforts on many campuses to build organizations to protect their jobs as research and teaching assistants. Support staff rallied around New York University’s clerical workers, whose campaign for a closed shop coincided with the conference. Adjunct faculty stressed their struggles to enter the university work force in better than casual subsistence conditions. Full-time faculty voiced concerns about threats to faculty unions, tenure, and full-time teaching positions in the university while supporting the efforts of students, adjuncts, and staff to join them in the ranks of recognized and respected university workers.

Despite the spirit of the participants, the picture presented at the conference was bleak. As the opening session affirmed, the American university is in crisis—and its workers are the first to experience its troubles. Speakers dismissed the notion that the university is a liberal bastion in a landscape of bleak workplace transformations. Instead, insisted Carol Knox (United Auto Workers), the university is “catching up” to other industries in threatening its workers’ compensation and job security. David Montgomery (Yale University) went further: He contended that universities are leaders in the casualization of professional work. Their administrators are ardent practitioners of the “lust for privatization,” responding to often-artificial budget crises not by defending needs but by whittling at jobs and academic programs. They measure success at the bottom line, not in the classroom. Juan Flores, director of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at the City University of New York, remembered that his job once involved “building community, directing research projects, and tying them to the community.” Now he mainly fights to defend diminishing resources and to distribute them as fairly as possible. He has become a “hatchet man” for the administration’s downsizing schemes, he complained. Constant cri-

sis sows discord among faculty fighting for resources, and “this diversion is deliberate.”

Speakers identified the split between public and private universities as a key feature of the divide-and-conquer process. Public universities are hit hardest by declining public investment in education; it is there that budgetary crises and privatization schemes are most corrosive. Meanwhile, private universities plead poverty to their employees even as tuition and endowments skyrocket and as universities indulge in the “edifice complex”—massive investments in facilities at the expense of the students, workers, and academic programs that will occupy them. Elite private universities collect star faculty, wooing them with inflated salaries paid for by reductions in compensation to others. All these divisions pose barriers to a unified response to crisis by academic labor. By widening the gap between elite campuses and the rest they also invite further retrenchment and provoke the “Taylorization” of the university.

Juan Flores and Alexandra Suh (Columbia University) focused on this last point. Interdisciplinary and nondepartmental programs like ethnic and gender studies are especially vulnerable to “bottom-line” transformations of the university—as are liberal arts departments and their protection of hiring lines in subdisciplines. (Labor historians will recognize instantly that they belong in this category.) Favored instead are professional and vocational curricula—the first to raise up new elites, and the second to impart “useful job skills” to workers. Both Flores and Suh lamented how these trends threaten communities (both on and off campus) that empower women and minority students, and often eliminate teaching jobs held by women and minority faculty. In these ways, they said, the curricular crisis is linked to the broader war against campus diversity policies and will likely affect minority admissions rates and academic success as well as future hiring practices.

The bulk of the day was devoted to a half-dozen workshops, most geared to organizing faculty, staff, and students to confront the crisis. A session on “Faculty Unions and Concerns” led by Ellen Schrecker (Yeshiva University) and Stanley Aronowitz (City University of New York) explored the mixed successes of faculty unions in recent years and their prospects for the future. Forty percent of American professors are unionized, but most of these teach at public universities. This, Shrecker noted, is a consequence of the Supreme Court’s 1980 “Yeshiva decision,” which defined faculty as managers rather than employees. Because of this, faculty unions at private universities no longer enjoy key federal labor protections, and many have been decertified. The faculty unions that remain on private campuses are cowed by the threat of a similar fate. Meanwhile, Aronowitz claimed, unions on public campuses are typically limited by legal and contractual constraints on strikes and “painfully long” arbitration and grievance procedures.

Nevertheless, faculty unions have been crucial defenders of faculty

employment conditions. They also educate their members to be more effective advocates in the business of university governance—for example, by showing professors how to read university budgets to find the “hidden money” they are not supposed to know about. Through seeking common ground with staff and student organizations, they have been successful in preventing administrators from “driving wedges” on campus; and they have fought peer review and merit pay proposals designed to divide teachers. Some faculty unions are also beginning to emphasize “program security” to protect members whose positions fail the revenue-generation test.

Workshop participants quickly identified one crucial failure, however. Faculty unions have had little effect on universities’ ever-greater use of untenured and part-time instructors and have largely failed to represent the corps of “permanent adjuncts” who now perform the least attractive teaching duties on virtually all campuses. Participants invoked the maxim that the key to organizing a segmented labor market is to organize the bottom and agreed that separate unions for part-timers may be better able to do this than those representing their full-time peers. “Full-time professors are good, moral people,” one participant explained, “but they’re ignorant about adjuncthood. ‘What do you mean you don’t have health benefits,’ they ask?” The workshop also discussed whether “serial adjuncts”—those who piece together jobs on several campuses—would be well served by instituting “hiring halls” to organize part-time faculty across metropolitan areas. (As *ILWCH* went to press, a group of New York City-area adjuncts launched an organization to investigate this option.)

The workshop concluded that organized faculty have additional obligations. As teachers, Ellen Schrecker observed, they have classroom opportunities to “reconstruct American political culture and demystify unions.” Their solidarity can also enhance the success of staff and graduate student unions, which were the subjects of two other workshops. The staff organizing workshop devoted most of its attention to efforts by New York University’s clerical workers to strengthen their union, particularly by fighting the open shop in which they now operate. The graduate students’ workshop also discussed efforts to organize at NYU but recognized that teaching and research assistants encounter very different conditions at different universities. Participants agreed that it is crucial to tailor organizing efforts to the needs and opportunities of specific campuses.

Discussion at workshops on ethnic and gender studies and on affirmative action was oriented toward strategies for defending these programs, but also more broadly toward clarifying their meanings and significance to the universities of the future. Both workshops confronted the “conceptual pollution” of such terms as “affirmative action” and “quotas” and the difficulty of positioning ethnic and gender studies programs favorably amid traditional disciplines and departments. Each workshop considered it paramount that these concepts be recaptured by their advocates and rehabilitated for university communities and the public. When the conferees reas-

sembled to hear workshop reports there was strong support for pursuing these strategies by linking them with employment issues—to bring the message of the conference, in other words, back to campuses elsewhere.

The conference ended with a plenary moderated by historian Robin D.G. Kelley (New York University) on responses to the crises of academic labor and strategies for addressing them. Although the university is forsaking its employees, Kelley reminded the audience, it remains fertile ground for movement organization and discussions of equality and justice. Even as the university descends to the bottom line, it “depends on the appearance of free and open discourse.” He suggested that organizers make the most of these resources.

This final session featured a memorable presentation by Kathy Newman, a graduate student at Yale University, who reported on graduate student labor organizations (they exist on seventeen US campuses) and on the Yale teaching assistants’ grade strike in the fall of 1995. “Organizing is fun because it actually works!” she insisted. Newman and the other Yale strikers relied on “patience, faith, and a sense of humor” in their campaign, which they suspended to protect leaders threatened by harsh university sanctions. (A week after the conference, the National Labor Relations Board issued a preliminary ruling charging Yale with unfair labor practices during the strike, implicitly recognizing that teaching assistants are protected by the National Labor Relations Act.)

As Newman spoke, word arrived that NYU’s president was about to make an unscheduled appearance at a nearby building. Conference participants joined a throng of clerical workers in a spontaneous demonstration there—a fitting end, perhaps, to a meeting stressing collaboration among academic laborers. But conferees must have brought home more problems than solutions. Earlier in the day David Montgomery charged the group with the task of creating “a new intellectual community to confront the free market mania that dominates the public discourse of our life.” Even in the limited context of the university, that task is surely formidable.