

## 7.

**Conclusion:****Notes Towards a Role for Student Labor Activists**

*Mom: We now join the freeway, which is already in progress!*

*Dad: Well—it looks like this wasn't an original idea.*

*-my parents, whenever we merge onto I-5 and  
find ourselves in the midst of a huge traffic jam*

It is dangerously easy for students to construct our role in campus staff workplace organizing as essential. After all, it is clear to us that, in some ways, we occupy positions of privilege in our institutions—that we have access to plentiful resources, including hegemonically potent academic discourses, copious disposable time and energy, and portions of the significant economic resources of our colleges—that we can take actions in utter safety that would be seriously risky for staff members to take. Nonetheless, to imagine ourselves indispensable to labor action is to forget not only the whole of labor history but the present state of worker-led movements as well. In countless places and times, marginalized workers have taken, and continue to take, risky political action on their own behalf—and sometimes they win. A foundational principle for any historically grounded ideology of student-worker solidarity must be that we are not necessary, although we may be useful. What then may be the implications of student interventions?

It will fall to others with more explicitly partisan projects to lay out proscriptive plans for student labor action, but in this thesis I have sought to outline some key elements of the social and political contexts in which such plans may be considered. A great weakness of students is the shortness of our view; we glimmer and vanish like lightning bugs while our elephantine institutions slowly trundle on their trajectories of

change. The long-term transformations I begin to explore in this project affect, and are affected by, our political work, and we must learn to seek out and be mindful of these dynamics even as we operate within the limits of our own timelines.

Students are an unusual, perhaps even a unique, constituency, ambiguous and sometimes contradictory in our relationship to the college. We are central to the institution's essential project, but simultaneously we exist outside the hierarchy through which its employees relate to one another. It is true that we wield great privilege, but we are inexperienced in the implications of its use and risk inadvertently re-inscribing it through its exercise.

Our very liminality makes us a potentially useful resource, for, as Mary Douglas suggests in *Purity and Danger*, actors positioned anomalously on the borders of categories can introduce new energy into the system. Various people said as much to me. Indeed, when I asked staff members about what roles students should play in campus labor movements, I was surprised to hear much less talk of privilege than I expected. A few people did mention the concrete resources that students could mobilize—free time, for instance, access to faculty members, and the attention the administration accords its customers—but just as often they talked about the personal qualities of students, about youthful idealism and optimism and energy. Students' freshness and inexperience with the institution can be an asset, more than one person told me, to those rendered cynical by years of disheartening realism. As Fred Rose writes in *Coalitions Across the Class Divide: Lessons from the Labor, Peace, and Environmental Movements*, effective coalitions depend upon building trust and building relationships, appreciating one another's perspectives and being willing to rethink our own views. (160-2) As long as

everyone approaches coalition work genuinely committed to according this kind of openness and respect, students and staff working together can complement one another's strengths precisely because they are different.

Yet the value of students' naïveté does not negate its potential harmfulness, and this seems likely to be a particular danger when students work on their own rather than in tandem with staff members who can bring a longer-term perspective to their collaborations. Students face a number of high-stakes choices in how they position themselves. For instance, the discourse that privileges students' educational experiences as the highest goal of the institution is potentially highly mobilizable, because it draws an administrative ear to students' voices; at the same time, however, buying into that discourse can be limiting in a number of ways. It acknowledges the administration, in the role of teachers, to be a final authority over students, in the role of learners; it embraces the student-centered, single-mission-oriented ideology which is one part of the trend of corporatization; and it tends to privilege a strain of information-focused politics to which academics have more or less exclusive access, a focus which in turn contributes to the hegemonies of rationality over passion, pragmatism over idealism, compromise over persistence, and the primacy of the budgetary bottom line.

Writing of the ideology of leftist activism in the 1960s United States, Wini Breines introduces the notion of "prefigurative politics."

The crux of prefigurative politics imposed substantial tasks, the central one being to create and sustain within the live practice of the movement, relationships and political forms that "prefigured" and embodied the desired society. (6)

In this conception, a broad, principled vision shapes not only the end goals of activism, but also the structure of the movement itself. Breines' words challenge those concerned

with building a democratic campus living wage movement to work out what the desired society will look like and then how to embody it in our organizing. Coalition politics can no longer be seen as simply one tactic that may or may not be most effective way to pursue the goal; the establishment of strong, democratic coalitions becomes, itself, an important part of the movement's work.

A first step for student activists, then, is to set out to be listeners first and always, to apply diligent care to working out what long-term dynamics are at stake and what it means to position ourselves in relation to these dynamics. At Pseudonym, one basic contention in which labor activists engage—wittingly or not—is the negotiation over what is the essence of the college, to what extent it will continue on a corporatizing trajectory, and what alternatives are available to it. In some sense this question is really about to whom the institution is accountable. In the corporate model, it is to its customers and shareholders—students (or their parents) and donors. In the alternate model I imagine in Chapter 2, it is to all the members of its local and national communities—including everyone who works at the college. It is not difficult to see how student activists, in deploying the advantages available to them in order to pursue immediately compelling ends, might—without really realizing or intending it—end up furthering the discourse that frames the interests of students as the institution's primary concern. Whether this is worth it is a matter for students to consider carefully.

Also at stake at Pseudonym are the various kinds of hierarchies at play in the college workplace, including the triangular negotiations among exempt staff, non-exempt staff, and faculty, as well as the collective relationship of these groups to the marginalized contract workers. In a clear sense, as well, student labor activism acts on

the field of the contention of competing discourses around fair compensation—the choice to deploy or not to deploy the concept of a living wage, for instance—but then, too, how to define that concept, whether to frame it around meeting needs or repairing historical injustices or respectfully compensating work, and also how to position our campaigns with respect to wage compression in particular and the issues of staff above the minimum wage categories in general. These choices have obvious implications for the immediate political feasibility of our work, but they also have the potential to more broadly affect the relationships among college constituencies and the evolving philosophical discourses of our colleges.

Finally, and perhaps most critically of all, student labor activists in all of our choices act out ideologies about the nature of democracy and empowerment in our colleges as both communities and workplaces. A fundamental question, perhaps in all organizing, but especially in organizing led by conscience constituents—or allies or solidarity activists or whatever we call ourselves—is how we seek to transform the relations of power in the institutions we act upon and within.

Student activists cannot help but engage with all of these dynamics as we devise our campaigns. As we enter the labor movements on our campuses—not start them, mind you, but join them, always—we would do well to acknowledge that, however invisible to us, these are *already in progress*, are *not our original idea*—for in every workplace people daily negotiate the dynamics of power, in every workplace they strategize individually or collaboratively to cope with and to shift these dynamics, and in every workplace, in large or small ways, people are already working to make change.