

Higher Education in Crisis?

Faculty Unions at the Crossroads: Why Playing Defense Is a Losing Strategy

New Labor Forum
22(1) 29-35
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DOI: 10.1177/1095796012471311
nlf.sagepub.com

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Keywords

universities, students, faculty, debt

Neoliberalism arrived late at colleges and universities, but now it is making up for lost time. The response by higher education unions—and by their faculty, staff, and graduate students—has been pathetic. The question is whether we, and our unions, will collectively wake up and offer a response commensurate with the shift taking place—as Chicago teachers began to do. To do so would require a mass movement, uniting students, faculty, staff, community, and debtors, and one that's willing and able to engage in massive disruptive actions. Nothing less will succeed. If we are not prepared to offer such a response—and so far we have not been—then we have consigned ourselves to managing the retreat from quality public education for all.

Although attacks on free speech, such as that on University of Wisconsin professor William Cronon,¹ are mounting, they pale alongside the political-economic transformations in the academy: reductions in public funding and associated increases in student tuition and fees, the rise of a publicly funded for-profit sector, and the expansion of contingent academic labor.

What Do Unions Do?

If the purpose of a union is to file grievances, negotiate contracts, protect the terms and conditions of employment, and increase members' pay and benefits, then for the last decade or more, higher education unions have been doing

an acceptable, if mediocre, job. But if the purpose of a union is for people to get together, collectively decide what matters to them, and put forward a vision of a different society and different values, then higher education unions are doing a lousy job. That is, higher education is being transformed and becoming privatized, and not only are we doing very little to oppose it, but also, most of our members do not understand what's happening, we have not made connections to our natural allies, and we fail to see that the larger public blames us for decisions others are making.

Higher education is becoming privatized, and most of our members do not understand what is happening.

Too often, our unions think only in terms of what is (or seems) politically possible. Guided by surveys of what supposedly has public support, framed by hired (or in-house) experts, unions take the current political landscape for granted and try to maneuver for small victories within it. The union's victory is a well-managed

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