

Resolving the Contradictions of Academic Unionism

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Economic crises are never just economic—they call into question the legitimacy of all major social institutions and the governing value system that unifies them into a hegemonic way of life. That is why crises are always moments of possibility for systemic change—the contradiction between the ruling value system and people's life-requirements is exposed, opening a shared space for critical, democratic reflection on alternatives to a failing status quo. If democratic mobilization is to be defeated and the crisis resolved on the ruling class's terms, new ways of running existing institutions must be devised. Neoliberalism was the ruling class's solution to the stagflation crisis of the 1970s, but it itself went into crisis along with the financial collapse it engendered in 2008.¹ We remain in an unsettled period, with the credibility of neo-liberalism compromised but its influence not yet overcome. While there was a rhetorical turn in some policy quarters toward Keynesian macroeconomic policies, across most of the advanced capitalist world neo-liberal austerity has been the dominant response to the crisis. The austerity agenda not only reduces government spending on social services and public institutions (but not the military or police), it also subjects public institutions to the pressures of market competition, pressures which are forcing damaging institutional changes on some of the most important amongst them. My focus in this essay will be the damage the austerity agenda is causing to public universities and how faculty unions can play a leadership role in building a broad-based social movement against austerity and in support of the democratic and critical power of higher education.

There are two reasons why I chose to focus on public universities. First, they are the primary site of my scholactivism. They are the primary site for my scholactivism not only because I am a Professor of Philosophy at a mid-sized public university in Windsor, Ontario, but also because public universities across North America and the United Kingdom have become the primary targets for austerity-driven, neoliberal re-engineering. Thus, the second reason to focus on public universities is that the justification for attacks on them reveals general political and economic truths about the values and aims of the neoliberal agenda that any effective fight-back must understand. Faculty unions, whose members have the time and institutional space to think critically about the social causes of the forces reshaping their work lives, and with (in the case of full time tenured faculty) job security unparalleled in the broader public and private sector, should be capable of translating their members' interest in protecting their own conditions of work into the first line of defence against austerity in universities. From this institutional basis, they should also be capable of leading a wider social movement against austerity and neo-liberalism. Translating objective potential into political reality will require faculty unions to overcome three contradictions.

The basis of the first contradiction is the mandate of the unions themselves, and the way in which this mandate is differently understood in the political consciousness of its members. On the one hand, the faculty union exists to protect the narrow interests of its members in their working conditions, while on the other, as a *union* of faculty, it expresses the common position of faculty on matters of shared concern regarding the budgetary priorities and the principles steering the governance of the institution. If members look to the union only as an organization devoted to defending the craft privileges of highly specialized academic labourers, it cannot realize its deeper democratic potential. If it cannot realise its deeper democratic potential, then it will prove unable to defend even the narrowest conception of individual privileges, because the forces that are working to undermine the privileges of academic labour are external to the institution, generated by the current state of capitalist social and economic forces.

Resolving the first contradiction in favour of the democratic potential implicit in the union will require that a second contradiction, between academic unions and students and other campus workers, be simultaneously resolved. The “business union” attitudes which would constrain the union to collective bargaining in support of maximized earnings and job security for already tenured professors will tend to blind the union to the interests of students and campus workers.² However, support from students and campus workers is essential, even to winning the struggles to protect salaries and working conditions. Therefore, if the union is to protect its members’ interest it must understand the interest its members share with students and other campus workers. That is, the union’s ability to be an effective bargaining agent for its members depends, in this context, on its success in mobilising and leading a campus-wide struggle against the destructive effects the austerity agenda is having on the university’s mission to educate, create, and criticise established institutions and knowledge-formation.

However, the resources needed by academics to do their jobs properly and freely, the resources that students need to be able to afford their education, and those resources that other campus workers need to prevent their work from being contracted out are controlled by the government. Consequently, the policies governments pursue are dominated by the interests of private businesses, and those private businesses are bent on subjecting the academic freedom that defines universities as uniquely valuable public institutions to the discipline of competitive labour and commodity markets. The success of even a unified campus struggle against austerity will require the construction of a broad based social movement. The degree of job security and financial wherewithal of full-time tenured faculty, combined with a political consciousness that makes the links between attacks on faculty labour with attacks on workers generally, means that faculty unions are well-positioned to lead the required mobilisation. Once again, narrow business union attitudes and a self-defeating focus on working conditions and remuneration are the main impediments to realizing this potential.

I: A Note on My Own Scholactivism

The political and philosophical principles that I believe can resolve these contradictions in ways that allow faculty unions to realise their democratic potential are drawn from my work in social philosophy, on the one hand, and my fifteen years as an activist in my own faculty union, the Windsor University Faculty Association (WUFA). Philosophically, I have been engaged in a long-term re-thinking of the ethical foundations of the critique of capitalism and the justifying principles of a future socialist society, as well as the appropriate political means of struggling for

socialism in the twenty-first century. The first element of the project involves extending John McMurtry's life-value onto-axiology to the understanding of the ethical foundations of the critique of capitalism and the struggle for socialism.³ Briefly, I maintain that the problem of which class rules society is secondary to the issue of what value system governs society. Exchanging bourgeois for working rule cannot on its own ensure that a socialist society which be ecologically sound or use the earth's resources and social institutions in ways which are "life-valuable."⁴ Life-value is distinct from use-value with which it is often conflated in formulations like: socialism will prioritise use-value over exchange value. Take a simple example: PCB's have a use-value, but their production is unlikely to be a socialist priority, because they have been proven to be life-destructive.⁵ Marx's aphorism: "from each according to the abilities, to each according to their needs" implied the principle that socialism prioritises *life-value* over exchange value, but it was left to McMurtry to systematically work out the implied value framework.

Discovering the life-value foundation of the struggle for socialism also enables activists to re-think the political means of struggle for it. If we think of socialism as a democratic life-economy in which decisions between economic alternatives are made according to which amongst the set of possibilities satisfies the most human needs and enables the greatest range of life-capacities *consistent with the ecological conditions for the extension of the human project into an open-ended future*, then it becomes clear that the struggle for socialism is not a zero sum game, but is always already underway. Past struggles matter, in the sense that there can be zones in capitalist society that are (relatively) free from the discipline of market forces. While it is true that public institutions have a reproductive role in capitalist society, it is also true that they are not the private property of the owning class.⁶ Their function is thus contradictory. On the one hand, public schools, hospitals, government institutions and so forth have an ideological function in legitimating the existing relations of power. On the other hand, public institutions constitute a "civil commons" created by the struggles of people over time to re-direct social wealth from private appropriation and accumulation to collective provision of fundamental needs.⁷

Public institutions are not islands of socialism in a capitalist sea, but they *are* spaces carved out by previous struggles in which the logic of life-need satisfaction prevails (or ought to prevail) over the logic of money-value accumulation. They are plateaus of political achievement, which provide a place to stand while the next campaign is being planned. Public institutions like universities, public health care systems, publically funded art galleries, and community spaces are all examples of non-commodified provisions of human need-satisfiers (at least in principle). When I realized that public institutions are these plateaus of achievement, my own political energies become primarily devoted to protecting them, and extending their counter-logic of meeting needs (for health care, education, etc.) without regard to the ability to pay as far as possible at any given moment in the on-going struggle against the life-destructive effects of the capitalist money-value system. Since it is just this life-valuable principle of public provision that neoliberalism and its austerity agenda are attacking, my energies, as part of what I regard as a longterm struggle for socialism, have been devoted to trying (with other like-minded activists) to turn my union from a business union focus on collective bargaining in our own narrow interest, towards a democratic organization aiming to protect the life-value of the university: its provision of space and time for free critical thought (scientific, philosophical, and political in the broadest sense) and creative practice.

The austerity agenda is attacking this time and space that is essential to the life-value of public universities (for academics, students, and society as a whole). The same top-down management style, fiscal discipline, and shift towards temporary, precarious labour that rules in the private sector is being imposed on professors, teachers, doctors, and nurses (where public health care exists) and public servants, all justified in the name of ending the purportedly unaffordable privileges of public sector work. Public universities are ground zero for the struggle to subordinate the entire public sector more fully to market forces and market discipline.⁸ As Terry Eagleton argues (referring to Britain, but the situation is similar in public universities in Canada and the United States), “instead of government by academics, there is rule by hierarchy, a good deal of Byzantine bureaucracy, junior professors who are little more than dogsbodies, and vice-chancellors who behave as if though they are running General Motors. Senior professors are senior managers, and the air is thick with talk of auditing and accountancy.”⁹ Underlying these changes is not only the demand that public universities be more fiscally responsible, but that they fundamentally change their mission, from cultivating the intellectual and creative capacities of students as an intrinsic individual and public good, to (in the words of Scott Walker, notorious governor of Wisconsin), meeting “the state’s workforce needs.”¹⁰ At least Walker’s instrumentalism needs no ideological decoding.

But it does demand that academics organize to reclaim the university as a space of critical academic freedom, guided by the vocation to *understand* the natural and social worlds of human experience, expose the contradictions between existing social structures and universal life-requirements, and cultivate the intelligence of students for the sake of solving the pressing social problems of our era. I want to argue that despite the contradictions I will analyse, academic unions are well-placed to lead the fight, not only against “academic capitalism,” but the broader austerity agenda.¹¹

As will become clear, the results of this fight, thus far, are ambiguous, at best. Nevertheless, I have discovered some objective grounds for believing that academic unions can be pushed beyond their limits as bargaining agents focussed exclusively on improving salaries and benefits for full time tenure-track and tenured academics, towards becoming democratic organizations leading a society-wide movement against the austerity agenda. What follows is not a personal ethnography but a political-philosophical argument that draws upon my experience as a union activist as evidence in support of my claims. Although I concentrate on the Canadian context, I believe that my conclusions will be readily applicable (with due alteration of details) to the context of American and United Kingdom public universities, where the same austerity agenda is having the same (or worse) effects. My claims about the life-value of universities also apply to private universities, but since faculty are not, to my knowledge, organized at the major private research universities in the U.S., I do not include them in my political arguments. In the interests of brevity and logical coherence I will not, save where absolutely necessary, demonstrate the concrete ways in which my arguments can be applied in the U.S. or the UK. I share freely what I have learned and leave it to those who understand their own context better than I to apply whatever aspects of my argument they find useful.

II: The Contradictions of Academic Union Consciousness

The first, (and most serious, since it effects the political orientation and potential of the academic union as a whole) contradiction prevalent in academic unions is that between, on the

one hand, union consciousness as membership in a bargaining unit with *obligations to its members*; and, on the other, union consciousness as membership in a democratic organization in which members have obligations to protect and defend the teaching and research mission of the university as universal life-values.¹² This contradiction goes back to the 1970s, when academics began to debate whether or not to turn their staff associations into full-fledged unions. As Craig Heron explains, opponents of full-fledged unionization were eventually won over by the argument (which, as we will see, needs repeating today) that they “failed to recognize the fragile status of professorial autonomy and the profound changes that were sweeping through the university system. Their status as professionals had always been vulnerable, and in practice, the terms of their employment had been at the whim of senior administrators for decades.”¹³ That is, the consciousness of academics as independent professionals was blinding them to the reality that their institutions were not really governed by collegial, democratic decision-making, but administrative power. It was only *after* academic associations became unions that collegial self-governance became more pronounced, as a result of unionised struggles.

Nevertheless, it remains the case today that the first impediment to resolving this contradiction in favour of consciousness of the union as a democratic voice for the defence of the vocation of the university is the self-understanding of academics as individual professionals, and academic freedom as an abstract individual right which the union must protect. This attitude is typically a business union attitude. As I noted above, business unionism sees unions as bargaining organizations, staffed by (more or less professional) bargainers whose role is to protect the abstract individual interests of dues paying members. By criticising business unionism I do not mean to suggest that nothing of importance can happen in collective bargaining. Collective bargaining need not be dominated by the narrow monetary interests of the best-paid members. Collective bargaining can be politicised: it can (and has, in Windsor and elsewhere) won victories around employment equity in hiring, equal benefits for same sex spouses, and job security for long-serving contract academic staff. My concerns are not so much about the importance of bargaining as they are about an underlying attitude of passivity amongst the majority of the members when the union is treated as *nothing but* a bargaining agent.

I was confronted head on with this attitude in 2013, when I was member of WUFA’s “Mobilizing the Membership” committee. The committee visited each academic unit on the campus to argue that WUFA should and could be the collective voice of faculty on all matters relating to the governance of the institution and the public policy affecting the university’s mandate, its resources, and its mission. With few exceptions, we were met with a typical business union attitude: “You guys (and women) wanted this job, you were elected to do it, so do it, protect my interests and otherwise leave me alone.” Until a crisis struck a few months later, the committee was unsuccessful in its plans to mobilise and activate the membership.

The reason why we were unsuccessful was the general attitude amongst academics, noted above, that they are not really workers (in a clichéd nineteenth century sense of ‘workers’) but independent professionals who just happen to work in an institution that sometimes treats them as employees. In order to ensure that being treated as an employee does not interfere with the research (and, less often, teaching) that motivates them as professionals, most are willing to pay union dues for the sake of the protection that having a collective agreement provides. But their support for the union rarely goes beyond passive purchase of what they regard as a service to protect their craft privilege as highly specialised workers whose product is in social demand and

whose talents are not fungible or easily replaced. My point here is not that it is not an important goal for the union to protect the time and space for academic research and teaching (usually, Collective Agreements offer the only formal protection for academic freedom that there is), but rather that the value of the protection of this time and space must be politicised, presented to the community of academics, the wider university, and the public, as a shared good which makes an irreplaceable contribution to democratic social life. As a politicised value, academic freedom is not an individual privilege of academics thinking of themselves as more important than everyone else, but a social value which imposes upon academics an obligation to create work—whether natural or social scientific, technological, humanistic, medical, or artistic— which satisfies real human needs and/or exposes and contests structural impediments to human need satisfaction.¹⁴ When the union thinks of itself as protecting academic freedom in the latter sense, it establishes an organic connection between the privileges of individual academic workers (the time and space for self-directed activity rarely experienced by other workers in a capitalist economy) and the collective good of an institution that can produce non-dogmatic criticism of existing social structures needed if a democratic society is to solve its problems. The academic union, as a defender of the time and space for free academic work thus positions itself as a defender of a key life-value of a democratic society. It is thus better able to respond to the argument that an austerity economy can no longer afford that time and space for academic with the response that democracy *requires it*.

Nevertheless, as my experience with the “Mobilising the Membership” committee proved, this contradiction cannot be overcome by philosophical argument alone. If the union is to become a democratic political movement, members must be convinced by political arguments that demonstrate a connection between changes to the institution which threaten individual members’ academic freedom, and the austerity agenda’s pressure on public institutions of all sorts to become “fiscally responsible” and “professionally managed.” Unless that argument is successfully made, academic labour threatens to be undermined by the same de-skilling that undermined craft unions at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁵ The analogy is no stretch—neoliberal critics of the traditional structures of university governance and academic labour have themselves drawn the parallel, and look to contract academic staff and on-line education as similar means by which the craft privileges of academics can be undermined and their labour subordinated to the discipline of the capitalist market.¹⁶

Underlying this critique of academic labour is the same view of education as Scott Walker—that its entire value is monetary, a value which is held back by archaic academics retaining rights to research and teach according to interest rather than labour-market demand. Unless this underlying principle is challenged, there is no hope for individual academics to hold out against the social and economic forces currently restructuring public universities. As I noted above, tenure is in danger of disappearing from American universities (Canadian universities are not far behind and it has already been abolished for new hires in the United Kingdom), and without tenure there is no real academic freedom. There is simply no other organization capable of protecting the time and space for free academic research and teaching than the academic union. If it is capable of inserting itself as a collective voice for faculty in the governance of the institution, then it will be capable of protecting tenure, academic freedom, and other elements of academic labour essential to both its value to individual academics and society as a whole. If, on the contrary, they continue to behave as business unions focussed only on the narrow protection of craft privilege, they will be overwhelmed and undermined, because, incapable of creating the

campus-based and society-wide alliances, they will need to win even the most narrowly circumscribed struggles against austerity.

The most immediate way in which academic unions can resist the restructuring with which universities are currently threatened is to defend the unity of teaching and research and tenure track positions. Too often academic unions are tempted to protect the interests of existing tenured teachers and researchers and ignore the overall implications for the future of the institutions by allowing teaching only, non-tenured positions. Whether contract academic staff are in the academic union (as is the case with WUFA), or in a different bargaining unit, the position of the academic union needs to be consistent (if the austerity agenda is to be resisted): the life-value of university education requires academic freedom, academic freedom requires the unity of research and teaching (so that what is being taught is not only textbook ideas but the processes by which existing knowledge is criticised and new knowledge created), the unity of teaching and research demands investment in tenure-track positions, and that investment in tenure track positions means that universities continue to be governed by the vocation of cultivating the intellectual and creative capacities of students—not the accumulation of money-value. Full time and part time faculty fighting together can achieve this goal. Take, for example, the University of California system, as Herbert Pimlot notes

in 1999, the leadership of the California Faculty Association (CFA) representing faculty in the California State University (CSU) system transformed the way the CFA operated and worked to support contract faculty. It put substantial resources under the control of lecturers and enhanced the formal organizational position of contract faculty. This combination has seen substantial gains in working conditions and compensation. In June this year (2014), the CSU got 700 new tenure-track positions. Success is possible.¹⁷

As abstract principles these arguments are easy to articulate. They are much more difficult to realise in practice, but not, as the University of California example shows, impossible—if the union makes the right political arguments to its full time members. Many tenured professors would be happy to be unburdened of the demands of undergraduate teaching and can be easily persuaded of the wisdom of teaching-only positions. Moreover, tenured faculty often fail to recognise any identity of interest with contract academic staff, even when (as is the case in WUFA) they are in the same bargaining unit. Administration can easily exploit these divisions to gain the upper hand in bargaining, as the University of Windsor administration did, in both 2011 and 2014. While the details are not of general interest, what is politically significant is the way in which business union's attitude undergirded the problematic position some full-time faculty took, and the way in which these positions ended up weakening everyone, tenure-track faculty included. In the case of WUFA, the union was nearly split two years ago when a group of full-time faculty mobilised against the current structure, arguing that contract academic staff's interests (in making their employment situation less precarious, and at the very least better paid) were dominating the union, even though the tenured faculty paid most of the dues. In other words, the argument was that WUFA was not providing value for their dollars. Fortunately, a split was avoided (in fact, the crisis served as an occasion for a much needed internal debate and change of leadership), but it seriously weakened the union going into the most recent round of negotiations, in which WUFA was forced into some damaging concessions to an administration which played the austerity card with great skill. Had the union been more united we still might

have lost, (the administration deployed tactics unheard of in the university sector in Canada, and there was little public sympathy for our demands, given that Windsor has the highest unemployment rates and poverty rates in the country). By focussing narrowly on their own pecuniary interests, the critical faction in WUFA helped undermine our ability to negotiate in support even of those narrow interests, much less effectively call into question and resist the broader austerity agenda. I will return in the third section to the problem of how academic unions—often, especially in traditional working class cities like Windsor, regarded with some degree of suspicion—can make effective links with social movements and other unions in the fight against austerity. At this point, let me sum up the current argument and move on to consider the relationship between academic unions, students, and other campus workers.

Since it is unreasonable to expect all members of a bargaining unit to share an anti-capitalist, or even an anti-austerity agenda, success in building union solidarity depends upon demonstrating the connection between austerity and threats to conditions of academic labour that all (or the overwhelming majority of academics) do support—security of employment, academic freedom, salaries, adequate time for research—not for each as abstract individual rights to be exercised without regard for their social life-value, but as collective enabling conditions that allow us to fulfill the mandate of the university as a source of understanding, criticism, and creative practice. In other words, the key is to link solidarity to successful bargaining and successful bargaining to the need to contest the socio-economic context and dynamics that are threatening these conditions of labour. People’s political consciousness is not fixed—if they come to see that the rights they hold as individually important can only be protected by collective struggle against austerity, they can change their position. The University of California example is proof that academic unions can break out of the business union mentality and insert themselves as a democratic voice supporting the future health of the university as a life-valuable public institution. Bargaining for the future of the university is a first step beyond narrow pecuniary interests towards assuming leadership in a campus, and then society wide, anti-austerity movement. In the next section I examine the contradictions between academic unions, students, and other campus workers, and the general means of their resolution.

III: Students, Campus Workers, and the Construction of Campus Solidarity

Students would seem to be the natural allies of faculty in struggle against administrations, but actually building this natural alliance once again depends on the extent to which the academic union can overcome business union attitudes. The primary impediment to faculty-student solidarity is the problem of rising tuition fees. It is very easy to present rising tuition fees as a consequence of faculty salary demands.¹⁸ If students accept this argument, they will be tempted to look at faculty as indifferent to their needs and rising levels of indebtedness, (and will also be more likely to criticise the quality of education).¹⁹ They will become more susceptible to a consumerist mentality to their own education (a mentality which precisely parallels the business union mentality discussed above). For both, fees paid (tuition or union dues) create entitlements to quality service. Both are passive attitudes: instead of seeing unions as an opportunity for political work and education as enabling the capacities for critical thought and creativity, the business unionist and the consumerist student expect to be served—and complain if they are not. If faculty reject a business union mentality and start to look more carefully at the political economy of public education in the age of austerity they can come to better understand the causes of tuition hikes. Once faculty understand that the same causes that threaten their working

conditions are causing tuition hikes, the objective foundation for building solidarity becomes clear: both students and faculty have an interest in constructing a movement which increases public funding and ensures that administrators are using that funding to invest in the full time tenure track faculty best capable of delivering an excellent education. This point means not only that faculty with the right academic pedigree are hired, but that a diverse faculty capable of speaking effectively to racially, sexually, socio-economically diverse student bodies are hired.

In our most recent round of negotiations WUFA ultimately failed to build strong visible support amongst the students for our position. The reasons why are of general significance. The main body charged with building support for campus wide political actions is the Solidarity Committee. On it sit representatives of all the campus unions, as well as the presidents of the three student governments (the undergraduate, graduate, and part-time students' associations). During the negotiations the Solidarity Committee met often and was a highly charged space for sharp political argument. While most of the arguments concerned the tactics and goals of the administration and how we could effectively respond to them, an increasingly sharp critique of WUFA also evolved. From the student's perspective, WUFA was too much concerned with its own narrow bargaining position and not nearly enough with developing a general critique of the administration's priorities as these affected everyone, not only WUFA's members' monetary interests. As Chair of this Committee, I bore the brunt of these critiques. While I agreed with their position in the abstract, I was limited in my capacity to respond by decisions around tactics the entire union executive had made. I was thus forced to rebuff their demands that we release the details of our financial analysis because the Negotiating Team did not want to be seen to be bargaining in public and through the media. Our decision to opt for a conservative strategy ultimately alienated the most politically active students.²⁰

The general principle to be drawn from this experience is that students need to be actively cultivated as political equals. What this principle means concretely is that faculty associations have to work hard to educate students about why there is no causal relationship between their salaries and tuition hikes. Faculty unions then need to put this argument to work in support of students when they organize against tuition and fee hikes. This support should not be *ad hoc*, but organically connected to a critique of the political economy of public institutions in the age of austerity. Students and faculty need to build an internally coherent critique of the way in which business pressure has squeezed government funding of public universities, narrowing their mandate and displacing more costs on to students. Students get a worse education for more money, not because faculty are greedy, but because there is a conscious neoliberal assault against the autonomy of universities. Students are central to this strategy: the more they have to pay, the easier it is to encourage a consumerist mentality in them, the easier it is to use this consumerist mentality as the basis of a critique of faculty indifference to their needs. If faculty spend the time and energy necessary to explain the real causes of tuition hikes, *and actively participate in struggles against them*, the neoliberal strategy can be rolled back. The onus is on faculty to earn the support of students.

A similar problem can arise between the faculty union and other campus workers. In the case of Windsor, other campus workers (especially food services) have been facing lay-offs. To justify the layoffs, administrators will always point to rising costs and institutional priorities. Unless the faculty association actively combats this argument and supports its position with demonstrable and verifiable facts, campus workers—always more vulnerable and more poorly

paid than full time faculty—can be persuaded that faculty demands are (at least part of) the cause of lay offs. As with our relationship with students, WUFA mishandled our communications with other campus unions. They still turned out in admirable levels to support our demonstrations and picket lines, but behind the scenes there was justifiable criticism of WUFA's refusal to fully disclose our financial analysis. Once again, we appeared to be only concerned with our own monetary issues at a time when more vulnerable workers' jobs were at stake. The campus unions looked to us for leadership in a general struggle against the administration, but our own political weakness at this point meant that we did not have the confidence as a collective to build the sort of broad-based and open-ended fightback that would have been needed.

However, an alternative political potential existed. As with our internal relationships and our relationship with the students, the key to realizing this alternative possibility lies in how we understand the university. From the business union perspective the university exists to serve our interest as researchers and teachers, and the union exists to protect those interests for each individual as abstract rights. From the perspective of the life-value of the institution the university exists to enable the growth of critical and creative intelligence. In order to fulfill this mission it requires the work of everyone—academics, students, and the entire cohort of campus support workers. From this perspective, solidarity with campus workers is not an act of *noblesse oblige* but a requirement of understanding and valuing our own position as academics—i.e., as teachers and researchers that depend upon the university being governed by its life-value mandate for the sake of everyone's well-being. When this mandate is submerged by its instrumental money-value to the capitalist economy, not only campus workers suffer (from lay offs and precarious working conditions), and not only students suffer (in the form of higher tuition and debt loads), but also our own even narrow interests as individual researchers and teachers. Course offerings are narrowed, classes get larger, and only commodifiable research is supported. As Pimlott again notes, when we fail to fight together, everyone suffers:

it's not just contract faculty who are feeling the strain of precarious employment. With fewer permanent faculty, those who remain face growing workload pressures. According to a 2012 OCUFA survey of faculty, 73 percent said workloads had increased over the previous five years (10 per cent disagreed), another 42 percent believe that the quality of undergraduate education had declined (28 percent disagreed), and 63 percent said class sizes increased in the same period (versus 17 percent who disagreed)."²¹

In short, the neoliberal austerity agenda threatens the public university at its very core. In order to resist it, we need to work together, not on the basis of moralistic platitudes, but on the basis of an objective common interest in the university serving its democratic purpose.

Although we failed to fully build the needed campus coalition in the last round of bargaining, there is evidence to support my argument that such a coalition is possible, and rooted in an objective common interest. In 2013 CUPE Local 1393 at the University of Windsor was forced into a five-week strike by an administration looking to dramatically weaken job security language. WUFA members provided excellent strike support, walking the picket line, cancelling classes, making donations, but also making the political links I made above. While support was not universal, a majority of WUFA members could see that the real problem, on

this campus and across the public university system of Ontario, was a determined drive by government and administrations to re-make the public university in the image of a private business. The strike was not an unambiguous victory, but the most damaging administrative demands were successfully resisted. Determination and clear political arguments were dialectically related—clarity about the causes of the strike fed the determination needed to win it, the determination needed to win it pushed CUPE members to understand the causes. In its wake, the provincial leadership of CUPE launched a province wide WTF (Where's the Funds) campaign to critically examine university finances.²² The model was developed from the OCUFA project to teach faculty unions how to read financial statements as a means of contesting the rhetoric of budget cuts and deficits that I noted above. The political struggles that have occurred in Windsor over the past two years reveal that there can be a contradiction between the academic union and both students and other campus workers. They also reveal that the objective basis for a resolution of the contradiction exists—academics need to understand their work as academics as part of the larger institution, and the larger institution as part of a society governed by a money-value system indifferent to education and academic freedom save as they can be made to serve labour and commodity markets. The tentative steps towards bargaining as a democratic intervention into the governance of the institution (making demands about institutional priorities, not just salaries and benefits for full time faculty) have the potential to benefit students and other academic workers as well. To be sure, the faculty union can learn from the struggles of other campus workers and students. Given our greater job security and economic power, the faculty union is in the best position to lead those struggles. By “lead” I do not mean “dominate,” but rather use our superior bargaining position to change the structures of governance and institutional priorities to ensure that students’ and other campus workers’ interests are satisfied as best they can. However, even unified campus-wide strikes will be insufficient to the goal of protecting the university from the austerity agenda. Ultimately, a society wide anti-austerity movement must be built. Academic unions are objectively well-positioned to lead this movement. I will conclude with a defence of this (perhaps) counter-intuitive claim.

IV: Academic Unions and the Construction of an Anti-Austerity Movement

While not suffering to the same degree as their Greek counterparts, American and Canadian workers have been hit hard by the political economy of austerity. Yet nothing like Syriza has yet emerged to contest it. While a party called the “Union of Radical Left Forces” is not on the immediate horizon, the time remains ripe for a broad-based anti-austerity movement. As David Harvey argues in his most recent book,

the stealing back of privileges once acquired (such as pension rights, health care, free education and adequate services that underpin a satisfactory social wage) has become a blatant form of dispossession rationalised under neoliberalism and now reinforced through a politics of austerity ministered in the name of fiscal rectitude. Organising against this accumulation by dispossession (the formation of an anti-austerity movement...) and the pursuit of demands for cheaper and more effective housing, education, health care, and social services are, therefore,... important to the class struggle.”²³

While few academics even identify themselves as working class, academic unions are objectively well-positioned to lead this anti-austerity movement. What is lacking is the subjective element—the political consciousness and courage to lead it.

In many respects, public universities are ground zero for the politics of austerity. Educational workers are at one and the same time identified as a glaring example of spoiled elitists consuming massive amounts of public funds to do what they want, while workers in the private sector have responsibly made concessions and reduced their expectations in light of “fiscal realities.” At the same time, these same educational workers are constructed as essential to the future health of the capitalist economy. If higher education is rhetorically constructed as essential to labour market success, then the demonized educational workers who provide it become, paradoxically, essential, even as their conditions of work are being attacked. Yet this paradox is the pivot on which academic unions can turn in resistance: we have a ready-made audience in the broader workforce for our arguments that cuts to education not only hurt our conditions of work, but the future of the younger generation. A union of 1000 people (WUFA) has an audience of about 14,000 students and their parents, many of whom are private sector unionized workers. For every one WUFA member there are thus approximately fifteen other people whose interests are being harmed by austerity, and who should thus be receptive to the argument that it must be resisted.

But why should we look to academic unions for *leadership* of this movement? The first reason is that, as I just noted, the essential role we play in educational institutions, and the essential role educational institutions are said to play in the economic health of the nation, gives us a rhetorical opening to turn the neo-liberal critique of public universities against itself. If it is the case that universities are so socially important, then it is self-undermining to cut funding to them. The second reason is that, unlike many private sector workers, if we go on strike, it is impossible to replace us with scabs. Moreover, full time faculty have the financial wherewithal to engage in relatively lengthy strikes, without the danger of being legislated back to work (as elementary and secondary school teachers run the risk of).²⁴ Third, academic unions have an organic connection to the broader labour movement. Our students are mostly young people and those young people mostly have parents who are concerned about their children’s future. Those parents are (in the case of public universities in Ontario) mostly working class people, and many of them are unionized. Unionized or not, if they are working class people, their lives are being negatively affected by the austerity agenda, and probably looking for some group to articulate and organize a coherent anti-austerity movement. A wholesale critique can be unfolded from an understanding of what is happening to universities.

The restructuring of universities is not only an attack on their institutional autonomy from the state and business interests, it is an attack on social freedom generally. By “social freedom” I mean the capacity of the members of a democratic society to reason together about social problems and make structural changes in accordance with collective decisions that serve the common life-interest. By making public universities less accessible and more deeply subservient to labour and commodity markets, working people, especially, are being deprived of the benefits of university education. The primary benefit is *not* a better chance of getting a high paying job, but development of the intellectual and creative capacities to demand more out of life than a job—good or bad—can provide. If that capacity fails to be systematically cultivated, then the development of articulate dissatisfaction with the status quo out of which democratic

demands for structural change is impeded. What is academic work other than the cultivation of the capacity for articulate dissatisfaction? To study anything at a postsecondary level is to study what has not yet been worked out and settled. University education is education not primarily about what has been learned but what the living problems are. This point applies across the board, to all disciplines. If students are learning anything in university, they should be learning that human knowledge is an on-going and unsettled exercise. Another way of putting that point is that there are always problems that remain to be solved, no authority has the final word, and there is always more to learn, and improvements to be made in any process. If we identify our labour as academics as serving this vocation of expanding and deepening the scope of human understanding, and we organize to protect it, then we are not protecting our own pecuniary interest, but rather the shared life-interest of social freedom. We thus at the same time expose neo-liberal dogmatists as the enemies of social freedom.

We must seize the objective possibilities sustained by the social value of educational institutions and the relative structural security of our work so as to support political argument within academic unions that can link protection of our individual working conditions with an anti-austerity movement. All the elements of the needed argument are ready in hand: our conditions of work (both our remuneration and our academic freedom) are under attack because neo-liberalism is trying to subordinate all public institutions to market discipline. The primary means by which it is pursuing this goal is through reduction of public funding and the implementation of user pay systems. This strategy has the dual effect of putting pressure on administrations to find cost savings, and encouraging a consumer mentality in students. If we are to protect our working conditions we need to ally with students, this means that we must overcome business union attitudes in our ranks if we are to be credible critics of consumer attitudes in students. If we can overcome business union attitudes in our ranks and build campus wide coalitions against administrative schemes to narrow the scope of university education, while increasing fees and reducing labour costs, we will soon discover—together—that administrations in the abstract are not the problem. Rather, the (immediate) problem is the changes to funding models implemented by neo-liberal ideologues, changes which have gone hand in hand with changes to tax policy that have starved public institutions of funds. In order to protect the interests of academics, students, and campus workers, we will need to contest and reverse these changes to tax policy. That cannot be accomplished without a broader-based and more ambitious social movement. If that can be successfully built, then the ultimate level of the problem—the capitalist money-value system—might be exposed to general critique and transformation. What is certain is that the North American world will not go from passivity to revolution; there must be mediating movements, and anti-austerity is the mediation that best fits this historical moment.

Notes

¹ For a more detailed examination of the relationship between neoliberalism and the crisis of the 1970s, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (New York: Oxford), 2005, pp.9-31. For a discussion of the role neo-liberalism played in preparing the conditions that led to the economic crisis of 2008 see Greg Albo, Sam Gindin, and Leo Panitch, *Into and Out of Crisis: The Global Financial Meltdown and Left Alternatives*, (Oakland: PM Press), 2010, pp. 27-42.

² My use of the term “business unionism” adopts David Camifield’s definition: “Business unionism has a narrow focus on collective bargaining for members of the union and adopts a

generally cooperative approach to dealing with employers." David Camfield, *Canadian Labour in Crisis*, (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing), 2011, p.50.

³ The canonical statement of life-value onto-axiology is: John McMurtry, *Philosophy And World Problems: What Is Good? What Is Bad? - The Value Of All Values Through Time, Place And Theories*, Volumes 1 and 2, (Oxford: EOLSS Publishers), 2011.

⁴ The fundamental political and economic arguments are spelled out in, Jeff Noonan, *Democratic Society and Human Needs*, (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press), 2006. The deeper philosophical-ethical foundations are explicated in Jeff Noonan, *Materialist Ethics and Life Value* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press), 2012.

⁵ I provide a full discussion of this difference between use value and life value in Jeff Noonan, "Use-Value, Life Value, and the Future of Socialism," *Rethinking Marxism*, 23(1), 2011, pp. 117-134.

⁶ I discuss the ways in which public institutions prefigure certain essential aspects of socialist economic relations in Jeff Noonan, "Preservative Struggles in the Age of Austerity," *Philosophers for Change*, <http://philosophers-forchange.org/2014/12/02/preservative-struggles-in-the-age-of-austerity/> (Accessed, May 12th, 2015).

⁷ "Civil commons" is John McMurtry's term for all social and cultural institutions that satisfy human life-requirements with unpriced, non-commodified goods and services. In principle, public institutions meet the definition of civil commons; in practice, their ability to provide unpriced need-satisfiers has been under attack. See Jon MvMurtry, *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism, Second Edition*, London: Pluto Press), 2013, p. 237.

⁸ The destruction of even the principle of collegial self-government in favour of top-down hierarchical decision making and the imposition of quantified performance metrics on universities has probably gone furthest in the United Kingdom, but it is certainly well-advanced in the United States and Canada as well. As pioneers in the struggle against "the new managerialism," United Kingdom academics have produced some of the best analysis and critique. See Rosemary Deem, Sam Hilyard, and Mike Reed, *Knowledge, Higher Education, and the New Managerialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. As vexing as the negotiation of the renewed emphasis on hierarchy is, the most damaging effect of the austerity agenda on public institutions is the all-out assault on tenure and the increasing reliance on precarious contract labour. In the United Kingdom, tenure for new hires was abolished in 1988. In the United States, three-quarters of new hires are nontrack, with only 30 per cent of employed academics enjoying tenure or on the tenure track. Adrianna Kezar and Sean Gerkhe, "Why are we Hiring so Many Non-Tenure Track Faculty?" *Association of American Colleges and Universities*, <https://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/2014/winter/kezar> (Accessed, June 10th, 2015). In Canada, approximately half of all undergraduate courses are taught by non-tenured contract academic staff. Ira Basen, "Most University Undergrads Now Taught by Poorly Paid Part-Time Staff," <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/most-university-undergrads-now-taught-by-poorly-paid-part-timers-1.2756024>(accessed, April 8th, 2015).

⁹ Terry Eagleton, "The Slow Death of the University" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Slow-Death-of-the-228991/> (accessed, March 17th, 2015).

¹⁰ Quoted in Henry A. Giroux, "Domestic Terrorism, Youth, and the Politics of Disposability," *Philosophers for Change*, <http://philosophersforchange.org/2015/04/28/domestic-terrorism-youth-and-the-politics-of-disposability/> (Accessed, May 3rd, 2015).

¹¹ The term academic capitalism was coined by Sheilagh Slaughter and Gary Rhoades. They use it to indicate what they regard as a radical shift in the priorities of American universities, from education for the public good to capital accumulation. Their arguments are, I would argue, applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to Canadian and United Kingdom public universities. See Sheilagh Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 2004.

¹² I provide a more detailed explanation of what I mean by the life-value of education in Jeff Noonan and Mireille Coral, "The Tyranny of Work: Employability and the Neo-Liberal Assault on Education," *Neo-Liberalism and the Degradation of Education: Alternate Routes* 2015, Carlo Fanelli and Bryan Evans., eds, (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press), 2015, pp. 53-58. The claims regarding education follow from the general principles of my reconstruction of the ethical foundations of the critique of capitalism that I discussed, briefly, above. In all cases of human goods in a capitalist society, we can distinguish between their life-value (the way the good satisfies a fundamental requirement of human being or consists in the realization and enjoyment of a fundamental life-capacity), and their money-value as commodities for sale on the market. The problem of capitalism is that it confuses life-values with money-values and is blind to the damage this confusion causes to eco-systems, societies, and human individuals. (accessed, June 11, 2015.)

¹³ Craig Heron, "From Deference to Defiance: the Evolution of Faculty Associations in Ontario," *Academic Matters*, June 11, 2015. <http://academicmatters.ca/2015/06/from-deference-to-defiance-the-evolution-of-ontario-faculty-associations/>

¹⁴ I provide a more detailed argument in favour of this life-value understanding of academic freedom in: Jeff Noonan, "Thought-time, Money-time, and the Temporal Conditions of Academic Freedom," *Time and Society*, Vol. 24 no. 1, March, 2015, pp. 109-128.

¹⁵ On the undermining of craft unions by de-skilling labour, see Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The DE-Skilling of Work in the twentieth Century*, (New York: Monthly Review Press), 1998, pp. 92-94. On de-skilling and consequences for craft unions

¹⁶ See William F. Massy and Robert Zemsky "Using Information Technology to Enhance Academic Productivity," 1995. (<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/html/nli0004.html>) (Accessed, February 21st, 2015).

¹⁷ Herbert Pimlott, "Solidarity in the Ivory Tower," *Academic Matters*, <http://www.academicmatters.ca/2014/10/solidarity-in-the-ivory-tower/#sthash.Mq454CNz.dpuf> (Accessed, June 2nd, 2015).

¹⁸ That this linkage is false can be demonstrated by examining university financial statements. In the case of Windsor, while the administration has raised tuition to the maximum allowable each year, salary costs as a percentage of operating revenue continues to decline. At least in Canada, the financial statements of public universities are publically available. Faculty Associations across the province, led by the Ontario Confederation of faculty Associations

(OCUFA) have begun a systematic, yearly review of university financial statements precisely to provide empirical evidence in support of the position that universities are not facing structural deficits, that salary demands are not behind tuition increases, and that whatever fiscal challenges public universities face are the result of long term underfunding and out of control capital spending (aided and abetted by the same governments that are reducing grants for operating costs).

¹⁹ According to the Canadian Federation of Students, the average student debt in Ontario after a four year university program is \$28 000, the highest in the country. See Canadian Federation of Students, "A Generation in Debt," <http://cfs-fcee.ca/the-issues/student-debt/> (Accessed, June 12th, 2015).

²⁰ I do not want to appear that I was chomping at the bit to take a more radical position than I did. It was my assessment that after two years of bruising internal debate, WUFA was not prepared for a long strike. I thus urged a cautious approach to job action (we ended up striking for one and a half days). However, I did genuinely agree that we should have released our financial analysis, but in the end was bound by organizational discipline to accept the decision of the Negotiating Team not to do so.

²¹ Pimlott, *op. cit.*, <http://academicmatters.ca/2014/10/solidarity-in-the-ivory-tower/#sthash.J2w27PXb.dpuf> (Accessed, June 22nd, 2015).

²² The development of the campaign can be tracked by visiting its website: <http://cupe.on.ca/campaigns/wtf-wheres-the-funding/> (Accessed, June 12th, 2015).

²³ Harvey, David. *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*. New York: Oxford, 2014, pp. 67-8.

²⁴ A recent round of strikes by secondary school teachers in Ontario was just ended by back to work legislation. Elementary school teachers are continuing a work to rule campaign. In other areas, notably, Chicago, in 2013, it was public school teachers taking the lead. There is a natural basis for unity here, but again, it requires political work to cultivate it. See Noonan, Jeff. "Protecting Education from Schooling," <http://rankandfile.ca/2015/05/12/protecting-education-from-schooling/> (Accessed, June 15th, 2015).



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