

# Intergroup Solidarity and Collaboration in Higher Education Organizing and Bargaining in the United States

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## **Abstract**

For too long in higher education, different worker groups have conceived of themselves as separated by distinct, even competing interests. The isolation between groups reduces communication, fosters unawareness of common interests, and hinders their ability to effectively collaborate in solidarity, as does the divided and largely independent structure of the unions and bargaining units representing them. Without greater collaboration and solidarity, members of the higher education community are less able to resist the harmful trends that have been transforming the sector over the previous decades, subjecting them to increasingly similar working conditions and distancing higher education from its student learning, community service, and research missions.

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**Abstract, cont.**

We propose a combination of elements from anarcho-syndicalist and social justice organizing approaches, centering intergroup solidarity and a flexible commitment to shared missions, as ways for higher education workers to build greater power and have a greater influence on the transformations occurring across higher education.

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**F**aculty on a college campus show up for a rally of custodial workers trying to obtain health benefits. Staff sign a petition that adjunct workers at their university should be provided a living wage and more job security. Administrative and clerical staff form an alliance with faculty to block a move by the administration to outsource residence halls and its staff to a hotel operation.

For too long in higher education, different worker groups have conceived of themselves as separated by distinct, even competing interests and priorities. For unionized higher education workers, this division has manifested most visibly in union and bargaining unit structures. The isolation of different types of higher education workers reduces communication, fosters unawareness of common interests, and hinders the ability to effectively collaborate in solidarity, as does the divided and largely independent structure of the unions and bargaining units representing these different worker groups. Existing unions can play a crucial part in breaking down these silos by creating spaces of conversation across historically separated groups of unionized workers and engaging openly and inclusively with those workers who have not considered unionization or who have been disinterested in unionization for various reasons. Higher education workers themselves can break down these silos by developing communication channels between them and devising strategies for action that will serve their mutual interests and the missions of the higher education enterprise. The more various groups of higher education workers perceive their aligned interests as increasingly exploited workers, and the more unions and their membership develop organizing structures that foster inter-group communication, mutual awareness, and the flexibility to mobilize collaboratively, the more power they will build.

In this article we explore the need for the various members of campus communities and organized labor to both see themselves and organize as allies. Although broad dimensions of our argument are certainly relevant to international organized labor and the higher education sectors of other countries, we focus on the United States context due to national history, cultural factors, and the legal environment that have contributed to present conditions in the United States. Without collaborating in solidarity across different worker and other constituent groups, members of the higher education community may not be able to

resist the harmful trends that have been transforming the sector over the previous decades. Neo-liberal trends like shifting towards increasingly exploitative employment and labor management practices, eroding worker involvement in governance, and lowering the quality of working conditions have been undermining the ability of higher education to serve its students, perform community service, and achieve its research missions (Kezar et al. 76). Today, workers across different groups in higher education face more similar conditions than in past times. Most workers at non-executive levels face job insecurity, shrinking wages, a lack of benefits, de-skilling and de-professionalization, as well as mounting accountability pressures. With these shared conditions in mind, we hope to encourage increased dialogue and action toward more intentionally collaborative approaches to organizing and bargaining that center intergroup solidarity and a flexible commitment to shared missions that contribute to collective wellbeing and efficacy.

Our overarching argument is that a combination of factors within and outside of the higher education sector has resulted in many higher education worker groups conceptualizing of their interests as distinct from one another, which has contributed to an isolation between them that has undermined their interests. Instead, we argue for, and highlight the advantages of, solidarity and collaboration across different unions and groups of workers, borrowing from anarcho-syndicalist organizing approaches and social-justice unionism values. We first review some key historical guideposts that illustrate how workers have tended to be divided in the United States due to a combination of external forces and internal biases and errors of strategy. We then center the bureaucratic paradigm of unionism that has been most influential in the United States since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and describe some dimensions of the culture of higher education that have contributed to divisions between higher education workers. Following that, we outline some of the employment trends in higher education that necessitate approaches to organizing that center intergroup solidarity and social-justice values. We then introduce anarcho-syndicalism and social-justice unionism as a framework for organizing higher education workers in the future, and, following that, we highlight some important examples of organizing practices in higher education that embody the advantages of anarcho-syndicalist solidarity and social-justice values. We conclude with a call for unions and higher education workers to follow these examples of intergroup solidarity and centering social justice, lest they suffer losses similar to those that have befallen the United States union movement in decades past.

### **A Selected History of External Influences and Internal Decisions That Gave Undermined the Power of Organized Labor in the United States**

If unions and higher education workers are to continue regaining power in the future, they must overcome the external influences and internal divisions of the past that have weakened them. The history of United States

unionism includes a series of fissures that have prevented greater collaboration between different groups of workers. At the same time, it includes great efforts to counteract such division that have yet to be fully actualized. Some of these fissures have been brought on by external forces that have an interest in minimizing the power of workers, such as influences from government entities like states and the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), as well as influences from employers.

*The National Labor Relations Act*

Catalyzed by the extreme economic conditions of the Great Depression, the 1930s saw a period of robust activism and organizing that brought about the 1935 National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and a significant expansion in union membership (Turner and Hurd 13). The NLRA established the NLRB, a federal entity established to oversee, protect and encourage organizing for most union members. However, the NLRA also contained provisions excluding agricultural and domestic workers—groups largely made up of people of color—from protections around fair working conditions and the right to unionize (Rosenfeld 101). This provision represents one among many significant instances of concession between the federal government and industries interested in preventing unionization that have weakened worker power overall.

The NLRB also has the authority to determine whether workers in industries still allowed to unionize share in the same community of interest and are allowed to unionize together. The concept of community of interest refers to whether a group of workers share similar interests as a result of factors related to their specific work roles, such that they are members of a community. NLRB rulings on community of interest has determined whether a particular group of workers would be allowed to form a union or bargaining unit together. Community of interest rulings have often divided different groups, even groups who have self-identified as being in community together. The NLRB, functioning in a paternalistic way, has thus undermined the power of workers by making decisions they are entirely capable of making themselves. For example, the NLRB in 1973 ruled that part-time and full-time faculty at private institutions did not share a community of interest, barring them from organizing together at that time despite their efforts and desire to do so (DeCew 82).

The NLRA, in an effort to prevent unions from becoming dominated by the very employers and managers they organized to build collective power against, also reduced the number of union members by excluding workers categorized as managers or supervisors (Lichtenstein, *State of the Union* 118). Similar to determinations related to community of interest, the exclusion of supervisors and managers from union membership was done in paternalistic and loosely-defined ways that allowed for the exclusion of workers from union membership who would not necessarily have been harmful to union efforts, including those whose functions were barely managerial or who were not really operating in a

supervisory manner at all. This meant that employers were able to exclude workers from collective bargaining by persuading the NLRB that they were supervisors (Shelton 19).

In some ways the designation of supervisors can be viewed as a precursor to the strategy of misclassifying workers as independent contractors, a common practice today, because both strategies define specific groups of workers in ways that exclude them from the protections of union membership. Beyond excluding workers from the right to unionize, the definition of the supervisor role also created a conceptual differentiation between workers that many internalized, coming to view themselves as supervisors with interests aligned with the employer and against others who remained defined as workers, despite their similar conditions in actuality. In higher education, this manifested problematically with the *Yeshiva* ruling in 1980 that defined faculty as managers who were thus unable to unionize (Lichtenstein, *State of the Union* 176).

Defining and excluding supervisors and managers created a hierarchy, positioning the workers defined as supervisors above the workers who remained defined solely as workers. This division allowed employers to increase the number of workers who would be more likely to support the employer in the event of a dispute and diminish the number of workers who could organize against the employer. Employers and workers continue to battle over whether certain roles are considered “supervisor” roles. A few private universities have contended that even contingent faculty are supervisors and therefore cannot form unions despite their will and effort to do so. In 2014, in the case of Pacific Lutheran University, the NLRB ruled that non-tenure-track faculty were not managerial employees because they did not have a majority influence on university governance, and therefore had the right to form a union (Jaschik). The NLRB ruled similarly in 2017 when University of Southern California (USC) made the same argument in refusal to negotiate with a union of contingent faculty, ordering the university to negotiate with the union (Flaherty, “NLRB Orders USC to Negotiate with Adjunct Union”). However, USC appealed the decision, and in 2019 the D.C. appeals court ruled that contingent faculty at USC were managerial workers because they were included in governance alongside tenured and tenure-track faculty, despite making up a minority of faculty (Flaherty, “Federal Appellate Court Decision Could Make It Harder for Adjuncts to Form Unions”).

Union rules for workers at public sector organizations, including public colleges and universities, are governed by the individual states instead of the NLRB as a result of the 1947 revision of the NLRA, named the Taft-Hartley Act. States are thus able to undermine union power and inclusivity in a few ways. Some states have passed right-to-work legislation that undermines the ability of unions to collect dues from their members and from non-union workers who benefit from union-negotiated

working conditions (Shelton 19). Right-to-work legislation also allows individual workers in unionized fields and at unionized employers to opt out of belonging to a union at all, even as they benefit from the union's negotiations with the employer, which makes it more likely for union numbers to shrink (Shelton 19). Right-to-work legislation is passed with anti-union, partisan intentions, and thus right-to-work laws are typically accompanied by marketing campaigns that attempt to persuade workers that union membership is against their interests.

### *Social Biases and Discrimination*

Unions and other participants in the labor movement have also undermined labor power themselves by holding widespread social prejudices that lead them to discriminate. Many research projects chronicled in books and articles have detailed how unions did not organize all workers, and often these choices were made along the lines of traditional power differences that divided society (Rosenfeld 134). For example, Rosenfeld notes that “the history of the American labor movement is at once a story of inclusion and upward assimilation of previously marginalized groups, and of virulent racism and xenophobic tendencies” (134). Sexism and classism have also undermined organizing and labor power in the United States.

American unions were shaped by socially-influenced divides that would have lasting consequences. Many unions sought to preserve a commitment to their existing white, male rank-and-file. For example, around the turn of the century some industrial unions enacted violence against black workers because they (wrongly) perceived black workers to be strikebreakers (Rosenfeld 101). Later, to control access to the labor market, others resisted desegregation and affirmative action orders (Isaac and Christiansen 722) or discriminated against women<sup>14</sup> (Cunnison and Stageman 87). At first, unions argued against women working at all, and later unions were resistant to organizing in labor sectors largely comprised of women (Turner and Hurd 15). Once they included women in earnest, they failed to prioritize women's issues. Union leaders have even exhibited attitudes against the worker groups that have been traditionally lower-paid and less empowered yet make up a substantial part of their own bargaining units, reflecting a class bias regarding different worker groups (Ahlquist and Levi 77).

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<sup>14</sup> Women still hold fewer leadership roles within unions and remain largely unorganized in entire sectors like finance and retail (Bronfenbrenner 445), though there is more proportionality in academic women union membership. Academia already leads other industries in terms of women in union roles.

### *Bureaucratic Unionism*

With the weakening of labor power and anti-leftist, pressures in the political context of anticommunism (Turner et al. 15), many unions shifted their strategies in a more conservative direction that led to fragmentation. Some union leaders, such as reformists in the AFL, felt threatened by the increasing socialist sentiments among the working class and sought to protect themselves by focusing instead on cultivating their relationships with the federal government through the NLRB and with employers (Ness 260). Bureaucratic unionism, also referred to as business unionism, eschewed the more socially-oriented priorities centered around class solidarity and pursuing the public good, arguing that unions should only focus on the economic dimensions of the employer-employee relationship (Turner et al. 22). Bargaining units eroded from comprising entire industries, to particular companies, to particular facilities within companies, to particular worker groups within facilities (Moody 92). These shrinkages weakened the bargaining positions of workers and resulted in a change in the character of union membership, and the loss of cohesion between workers (Katz 11).

Bureaucratic unions shifted their organizational structures and procedures to be more formal, pursuing survival through efficiency as they became more organizationally similar to the employers they negotiated with. They narrowed the scope of issues they organized around, limiting themselves to negotiating contracts, benefits, grievance procedures, and the inclusion of union voice in employer decision-making (Clawson and Clawson 110). Bureaucratic unions hired additional administrative staff, and many adopted rigid procedures for addressing grievances that effectively muted the voices of members by limiting the types of grievances that could be brought forth and limiting the range of options for how to deal with grievances available to union members (Clawson and Clawson 110). They required that members pursue grievances in a quasi-judicial and individualistic process so that the union could evaluate and respond to grievance issues one-by-one. This trend had the effect of strengthening the union's position as mediator between employer and employee, while limiting the individual worker's ability to collaborate with others and take other forms of active involvement in addressing their concerns (Clawson and Clawson 100).

Bureaucratic unionism had a more conservative character and encouraged members to distance themselves from the broader labor struggles and other social struggles taking place among their peers within the union, outside the union but within the same industry, or among those outside one's industry but impacted by similar challenges due to commonalities of race, gender, class, etc. (Turner and Hurd 22). Instead, bureaucratic unions committed to deepening the competitive dimensions of the capitalist economy preferred by the federal government and employers (Lichtenstein, *A Contest of Ideas: Capital, Politics, and Labor* 85). Under bureaucratic union culture, groups that could have been allies

instead competed with one another for the same scarce resources—helping employers cheapen the value of labor. With divided bargaining units decreasing in power, bargaining took on a markedly concessionary character that resulted in reductions in material conditions over time (Moody 17).

Divisions in bargaining units and divisions in who is represented by unions contributed to inequities in compensation and working conditions, further weakening workers overall. Rosenfeld notes gender disparities in changes to private sector union and nonunion worker pay, explained by shifts in the sectors where union women were employed versus stability in the primarily blue-collar jobs held by union men (81). While the compensation gap between union and non-union men remained relatively stable from 1973 to 2009, the compensation gap between union and non-union women increased significantly over that time (Rosenfeld 81). Non-union women in particular industries were more vulnerable to shifts in the nature of work due to the generally reduced presence of unions in those fields, including as one dimension a reduction in connections with other unions and units. Bureaucratic unionism functioned to undermine union power by not acting in accordance with the strategic interests of workers or society more broadly, which ultimately weakened the labor movement.

### **Characteristics of the Culture of Higher Education in the United States That Have Undermined Worker Power**

Labor power in the higher education sector has been hindered not only by external influences from labor more broadly, but also from characteristics of the structure of higher education that have played out over its history. Higher education workers face divisions due to the hierarchical nature of the structure of higher education, both in hierarchies between different groups of workers and in the stratification of different types of higher education institutions. For example, the ideology of professionalism among many faculty informs a view that they are inherently a more important part of the institution than clerical staff or custodial staff and were not in need of unions (Hutcheson 14). In labor organizing in academia, this has manifested in many faculty choosing to opt out of joining unions at all (DeCew 189). In terms of different kinds of institutions, the members of many self-identified elite institutions view themselves and their institutions as inherently better than other types of institutions that do not conceptualize of themselves as elite. In this case, the elitist views of members of those institutions lead them to choose not to view themselves as in solidarity with workers at other institutions.

Relatedly, workers have also been divided in higher education due to their own perceived conflicts of interest. Historically, the influence of trade unionism has weakened worker power on campus by constructing higher education workers as though they cannot truly unionize. Broadly speaking, the trade union elements of the United States labor movement



believed that only “craft, industrial, and transportation workers can be real unionists” (DeCew 175). Many higher education faculty were hostile to the idea of unionization due to an association between unions and radicalism, fearing their identification as enemies of their employers, the government, or both. This was particularly an issue for members of the newly-developed AAUP during the 1910s who hoped to be identified as professionals, intellectuals, and elites rather than workers (Cain, “The First Attempts to Unionize the Faculty” 884). Opposed to organizing faculty as workers, the AAUP instead emphasized the professionalism of faculty. In response to the high-profile firings of two faculty members due to their institution’s disagreement with the nature of their scholarship, the AAUP developed the concept of academic freedom to advocate for the independence of faculty scholarship from control by their employing universities (Schrecker 21). The fear of being identified with left orientations was particularly heightened as a result of McCarthyism (Schrecker 9) and influenced attitudes towards involvement with organized labor.

Higher education workers are also stratified into different positions across identity factors like race, gender, and class. For those workers represented by unions, each group tends to be represented by different unions and different bargaining units because unionization options are limited by community of interest, as previously discussed. This translates into different pay, benefits, and working conditions for each group, in correspondence with their social positions. For example, tenured and tenure-track faculty are largely white men from affluent backgrounds; professional staff members and contingent faculty are typically women and people of color due to the historical feminization and racialization of clerical, instructional, and lower-level administrative roles; and custodial and service staff have largely been men and women of color due to the racialization of custodial and service roles (Kezar et al. 31–33).

Labor power has also been weakened by the decreasing presence of full-time and tenured faculty on campus. In the last three decades, percentages of faculty on and off the tenure-track have inverted; while 70% of faculty were ‘tenurable’ in 1975, forty years later 70% were non-tenure track, contingent appointments without job stability. Since many of the contingent faculty are part-time, or else full-time carrying very heavy workloads (often twice that of tenure-track faculty), organizing and collective identity construction is challenging as they often also have other jobs outside academe or work at multiple institutions. One of the biggest side effects of these divisions is the invisibility of more marginalized worker groups, like non-tenure-track faculty and custodial staff, compared to more empowered workers.

For graduate employees, power dynamics and the nature of graduate-worker mentoring also have undermined their power as a worker group and the solidarity they would benefit from with other worker groups such as faculty. The power dynamics between faculty and graduate

employees can have a divisive effect on solidarity between the two groups, despite the collaborative nature of their working relationships (Kezar et al. 60–67). The informal nature of graduate-worker mentoring also means that graduate workers may have wildly varying experiences with their faculty supervisors (Kezar et al. 60–67). The fact that graduate employees are often accountable to a single faculty member means their faculty mentors may have absolute control over their work. The informal nature of graduate-worker mentoring combined with their lower status in the hierarchy of workers means that graduate workers often do not have predictable principles to rely on when self-advocating, which can make it easier for them to be exploited (Cain, “Campus Unions” 129).

While the above discussion articulates challenges the culture of faculty has posed for unionization efforts in the higher education sector, faculty and academic worker activity has not been without efforts to resist anti-union culture and build worker power. The first faculty union was organized at Howard University in 1918 (Cain, “The First Attempts to Unionize the Faculty” 886; Cain, “Campus Unions” 8). From the first unionization efforts in higher education during the late 1910s and 1920s, which were associated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), higher education faculty have had contested discussions about the nature of their work, how they should be characterized in the context of labor, and whether or not they should unionize (Cain, “The First Attempts to Unionize the Faculty” 883). Universities had developed into modern organizational forms by 1920, and it was amidst this transformation that faculty had increasingly taken interest in forming union power (Cain, “The First Attempts to Unionize the Faculty” 880). The association between shifting demands on workers, organizational transformations, and efforts by workers to challenge and influence these developments through union power should sound familiar to those who have been paying attention to activism among higher education workers over the previous few decades. The next section outlines some of the recent shifts in working conditions that contribute to the increased awareness and need for unionization among workers in higher education.

### **How All Higher Education Workers are Much More Alike Today**

As noted earlier, higher education workers have organized into separate groups (e.g., tenured faculty, contingent faculty, professional staff, classified staff) that create and reinforce divisions between workers in the same way that worker groups have fragmented in the broader union movement in the United States (Rosenfeld 29). Yet working conditions have declined for the vast majority of higher education workers such that their shared interests are more visible than at any previous point (Kezar et al. 36). This shared experience provides an opportunity for greater inter-group solidarity and collaboration. Higher education has experienced significant employment changes over the previous decades with working conditions becoming more similar across positions. While shifts in faculty

labor conditions have garnered the most attention, all labor in higher education is changing due to similar trends (Kezar et al. 36). Postdocs, graduate students, and all staff (including groundskeepers, custodians, facilities managers, executive assistants, and all other types of staff) have seen shifts in their working conditions as a result of the spread of neoliberal ideology and principles under academic capitalism (Bader; Camacho and Rhoads 296; Jaeger and Dinin 205; L. K. Johnsrud 112; L. K. Johnsrud 115; Kezar et al. 36; Kezar and DePaola 74; Magolda 128; Rosser 118).

Neoliberalism is a way of thinking that privileges individual responsibility over collective wellbeing and private enterprises over public goods. According to neoliberal ideology, workers are entrepreneurs who compete for resources in a market, rather than human beings interacting in public spaces governed by shared values. The import of neoliberal ideology into higher education has brought about a paradigm of academic capitalism, which converts the products of research and scholarship into commodities to be monetized; students into consumers; and colleges into corporations (Slaughter and Rhoades 13). Neoliberalism has thus replaced an emphasis on collectivism and the public good with an emphasis on individual competition and entrepreneurialism, converting higher education workers from people with shared interests to a motley collection of individuals who compete with one another for scarce resources. Thus, it is no wonder that union organizing in higher education has been undermined and worker power and solidarity suppressed.

As a result of the current paradigm of academic capitalism, all workers in higher education increasingly share the same conditions. Universities reduce their obligation to employees and make them easier to shed during lean times by rendering them increasingly contingent, stop providing benefits to workers while they are employed. Thus, they avoid concerns and planning over the sustainability of their operations by removing staffing concerns from the equation. Workers are then increasingly pushed to be entrepreneurial as they are made responsible for reproducing their own jobs, for example, by securing funding to pay their own salaries while the university takes a portion of grants and other sources of funding they secure. And while employees are responsible for generating revenue to justify their own employment, the compensation and benefits they receive have been reduced or stagnated, failing to keep up with inflation. Additionally, workers in all parts of higher education have seen increases in their workload and pressure to produce more than what is possible within the boundaries of a normal workday, leading to workers consistently spending additional, uncompensated hours working.

Advancement and promotion processes and norms have also shifted in a negative direction, with fewer roles leading through natural patterns of advancement—instead we see a growing number of dead-end jobs where the only opportunities for advancement and promotion come at the expense of workers changing jobs or changing employers. Many

areas of work, including work done by faculty, educational support professionals, professional staff, and contingent staff, have been outsourced completely to private institutions that typically provide lower wages and little or none of the traditional benefits that higher education institutions historically provided in terms of sick pay or vacation. For example, this has occurred as higher education institutions have outsourced the functions of teaching and grading, food service, bookstores, groundskeeping, admissions, financial aid, housing, information technology, and human resources (Kezar et al. 20–22).

Outsourcing leaves more and more college workers at a further distance from the university, where the university can conveniently compensate them like temps while demanding higher levels of productivity. While the role of professor used to involve multiple activities, including advising, teaching, grading, and research, contemporary faculty roles have been de-professionalized through an “unbundling” such that different functions are performed by different types of workers, assembly-line style (Baldwin and Chronister 32; Gehrke and Kezar 94). The “unbundling” of faculty roles has been well-documented, but de-professionalization and “unbundling” have affected other types of college workers as well. For faculty, as well as other de-professionalized college workers, the simplification of their work has resulted in their inhabiting lower-status social positions within academia, doing work that does not require professional-level skills or training, with reduced compensation and benefits to match (Baldwin and Chronister 32; Gehrke and Kezar 94).

Trends that one might believe unthinkable begin to pop up. For example, 20 years ago no one could imagine that faculty would be outsourced and hired by a temporary agency, but that is exactly what has occurred at several community colleges in the state of Michigan (Flaherty, “Colleges Assign Adjunct Hiring to a Third Party”). Outsourcing contingent faculty hiring to private temporary agencies allows the public institutions to avoid contributing to retirement funds, salary increases, and paying for other benefits, given that private companies are governed by different rules than public institutions (Flaherty, “Colleges Assign Adjunct Hiring to a Third Party”). More and more, previously unthinkable employment approaches such as this are gaining traction, and, without swift action, more and more workers are likely to find themselves in similar situations. Existing unions seeking to preserve benefits for their existing members will not succeed in preventing broader shifts from impacting their fields, and narrow efforts at self-preservation will not stem the tide of transformation being wrought on higher education, and the broad network of industries that interact with colleges and universities.

Amidst these changes, higher education workers face the choice of building collective power and using it to bring about fairer and more sustainable employment practices or reconciling to navigate the landscape as individuals, with each one hoping they are lucky enough to gain a

position less vulnerable than those of their peers. With the former, higher education workers stand a chance of not only regaining fairer employment conditions for themselves, but also restoring the democratic values of the public good on which higher education was once predicated, with effects extending far beyond their own contracts and benefits packages. With the latter, higher education workers stand to see the working conditions in all positions slowly erode as they are pushed harder and harder to compete with one another for an ever-shrinking pool of resources increasingly appropriated by executive leaders and others who increasingly view themselves as college shareholders.

### **Anarcho-Syndicalism and Social Movement Unionism: A Flexible Model for Collective Regard, Organization, and Action Across Heterogeneous Groups of Higher Education Workers**

#### *Anarcho-Syndicalism*

The above section outlines some of the ways that workers in higher education face increasingly problematic conditions that both interfere with their ability to perform their job duties and reduce their quality of life. While each group of workers is distinct, higher education labor needs a model that can simultaneously honor the uniqueness of different groups of workers, allowing them to convene around micro-level affinities and interests, while maintaining a broader collective regard for and responsiveness to all workers. While the term ‘faction’ is often employed to designate divisive subgroupings of people, anarcho-syndicalism structures factions of workers strategically and unites them in syndicates such that they are able to function both as subgroups and a larger unit (Rocker 68). Strategies that pull worker groups together in solidarity serve to counterbalance the structures of work in higher education that separate and weaken worker groups (Rhoades and Torres-Olave 411). The inclusion of factions is particularly useful in a higher education context where not only have various groups of workers organized around functional commonalities, such as custodial staff and groundskeeping staff, but communities across groups have also organized around identity-based affinities such as race, gender, sexuality, national origin, language, disability, and other dimensions. In an anarcho-syndicalist framework, these micro-level factions are able to come together under more collectively-focused, macro-level syndicates in ways that enrich the lives of higher education constituents by attending to the specificities of their lives while also maintaining broad collective power to fight against the sources of their exploitation which, despite the variety of workers in higher education, come from the same source (Rocker 69).

Anarcho-syndicalism refers to a framework for organizing groups of workers that develops without the requirement of government support or the goodwill of employers (Rocker 76). The independence of worker organization from government and employer support in this model makes

it particularly advantageous in the context of the history outlined above, which is rife with examples of government and employer interference in the development of worker power. The weakened state of labor in the United States stands as evidence that governmental interventions such as the establishment of the NLRB and employer actions, like refusing to negotiate a contract, have prevented organized workers in different contexts from achieving their goals.

Anarcho-syndicalism offers redress to this situation. It is a flexible framework that allows for the structures in which workers organize themselves to change in response to changing conditions. This flexibility is strategically useful because building labor power entails a struggle between workers and the state and employers. Implicit in this struggle is the fact that the tactics employed by the state and by employers are constantly shifting as conditions change. Thus, labor strategies shift with shifting conditions as well. Anarcho-syndicalism is a realist framework for organizing because it doesn't postulate an "absolute truth, or in definite finite goals for human development, but in an unlimited perfectibility of social arrangements and human living conditions, which are always straining after higher forms of expression" (Rocker 30).

#### *Social-Justice Unionism*

Social-justice unionism and anarcho-syndicalism are compatible organizing philosophies, and it is this combination that we propose as a framework for addressing the challenges facing higher education workers today. Social-justice unionism is an organizing philosophy that goes beyond the narrow concerns of business unionism. Where business unionism is focused on the wellbeing of the individual members of a bargaining unit, social-justice unionism is concerned with the wellbeing of all workers, as well as the broader impact that the employer has in the community in which it is situated (Ikebe and Holstrom-Smith 42–43). While many unions in the U.S. followed business unionism values in a way that weakened their position overall, some unions in the U.S. have a history of social activism, expanding the bounds of their concern to encompass a wider community. This is reflected in the slogan shared by the International Longshore Workers Union (ILWU) and Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and often quoted by organizers in higher education: "an injury to one is an injury to all" (Ahlquist and Levi 92).

Social-justice unionism not only contributes to the social good by influencing positive social change but also strengthens the unions against existential threats from employers. San Francisco-based ILWU and New York-based International Longshoremen's Association and Teamsters collaborated in a campaign to form a wall-to-wall contract by organizing port drivers who were being grossly underpaid at several ports (Ahlquist and Levi 97). The ILWU history also includes organizing collaboration with warehouse and cannery workers, and workers in Hawai'i in general trades, the production of sugar and pineapple, as well as the hospitality and

tourism industry (Ahlquist and Levi 97). Workers in these industries were well-aware of the racialized nature of inequality and saw similarities with the ways workers in Hawai'i were exploited compared to their white peers on the West Coast (Jung 178). The 1905 founding of the IWW was specifically purposed with "organizing immigrants, laborers, and migrants in whom the AFL had little interest" (Ganz 27). The ILWU and IWW expressed a commitment to racial justice, activated members by providing a vehicle for member activism, and fortified the union's purpose and relevance along the way.

Though the history is complicated, social-justice priorities were exemplified by elements of the Council of Industrial Organizations (CIO) (Zieger 184). In particular, the CIO used social-justice unionism to oppose the bureaucratic unionism reflected by the AFL. The CIO explicitly rejected racism, although they failed to participate actively in the civil rights movement. The CIO encouraged civic participation and encouraged members to educate themselves about politics and those running for various offices. Not only that, but the CIO was interested in addressing broad issues associated with the distribution of wealth and the nature of work in our economic system and thus directly concerned with economic policy (Zieger 184). Social-justice priorities are also exemplified, although imperfectly, in some of the priorities of the United Auto Workers (UAW) under Walter Reuther who sought to limit the power of corporations and increase the power of workers as it pertains to the nexus between industry and society (Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* 144). For example, Reuther supported pay equity for women during the Second World War, although his negotiating efforts failed to overcome the gendered nature of worker compensation (Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* 200). The AFT also embodied social-justice elements in their opposition to military recruitment in schools and in their collaborations with international peace organizations (Murphy 155).

Because social-justice unionism is concerned with ethics and justice, in addition to compensation, it involves more democratic internal structures compared to the hierarchical internal structures associated with bureaucratic unionism (Ikebe and Holstrom-Smith 42). Anarcho-syndicalism provides an intelligible multi-level structure to organize multiple groups and also provides a broad emphasis on autonomous organizing and self-government among workers. Social-justice unionism explicitly states key values that can inform the activities of higher education workers. Additionally, social-justice unionism enables workers to organize alongside other groups that may not be explicitly conceptualized as workers but are organized activist groups nonetheless such as including tenant unions. The combination of social-justice unionism principles and the expansive and autonomous organizing practices of anarcho-syndicalism offers strategies for higher education organizers to address the exploitation of workers, as well as the broader relationship of workers to social issues.

More collaborative approaches to organizing breed advantages like formalized rules protecting different types of workers, a wider array of alliances within the political space, and a cohesive and multifaceted voice (Johnston 78-79). Unions gain bargaining power when representing a more complete set of workers at a particular site (Moody 17). Collaborative strategy presents the key to smaller and less well-resourced unions continuing to achieve their goals (Ganz 10). Collaborating with workers in other units and unions is a key strategic innovation. Working with different groups to pursue particular goals also creates a more diverse array of strategies and tactics available to deploy from a wider range of positions with different abilities. Collective bargaining that involves multiple groups on campus means groups can amplify each other's voices, and the unity of different groups gives them greater leverage (Rathke and Rogers 44-47). The critical mass developed by pooling resources allows unions to take on larger-scale challenges that extend beyond the bounds of narrow self-interests (Rogers 377). Larger bargaining units have been associated with union members having larger cost-of-living adjustments, indicating better compensation and working conditions (Hendricks and Kahn 459). Academic unions can take advantage of non-competitive university conditions to organize all workers across campus. Organizing comprehensively across campuses improves union power to take on new organizing strategies (Lafer 29).

If workers in higher education are to counteract the aforementioned trends—shifts that continue to erode their job security and positions—then they will need to take organizing approaches that incorporate a greater collective regard and that are inclusive of higher education workers at all levels. Higher education workers and organizers will need to move beyond the narrow boundaries that have often divided different worker groups and pitted them against one another. They will need to eschew individualist and narrow, interest-based concerns in favor of a broader sense of community and a deeper commitment to establishing democracy in the workplace. Luckily, there are some key examples of intergroup solidarity in organizing that we can learn from. In fact, contemporary organizers in higher education have been pursuing principles and strategies that center social justice and this broader commitment.

### **Illustrative Examples of Intergroup Solidarity Among Higher Education Workers**

Academic unions are in particularly strong positions to grow bargaining units and union strength through organizing due to the non-competitive nature of the higher education industry. Despite continued contestation by some universities, faculty, administrators, and the NLRB, increasing unionization among graduate students at private universities points to this fact. Their ability to organize successfully may be partially explained by their lack of threat by competition, in addition to their broad embracing of



a wider collective and social activism focus. Other higher education workers have also exhibited success as a result of employing strategies compatible with anarcho-syndicalism and embodying values compatible with the social-justice unionism paradigm. In the following section we outline some examples of intergroup solidarity and collaboration between groups of higher education workers that also embody social-justice values.

*Solidarity Between Clerical and Library Workers and Faculty*

In 1979, tenured and tenure-track faculty went on strike in alliance with clerical workers at Boston University (BU) (Zabel 690). John Silber was president of BU at the time and pursued a stream of actions that were informed on the one hand by a right-wing political ideology (Zabel 690) and on the other by the desire to financially enrich himself and his friends (692). Politically, he pursued the ouster of left-leaning faculty (or simply faculty who disagreed with him), instigating sit-down, anti-war protests and then inviting the Boston police to use excessive force in breaking them up, while also using university funds to mount an aggressive, anti-union legal campaign. In an effort to ransack the university, Silber and his board made problematic real estate deals using university funds, pushed university contracts that enriched himself and his friends who held stock in those companies, and increased his compensation such that he was the highest-paid university president at the time of his retirement.

These political and financial moves were particularly problematic in the context of worker compensation at BU, which was exceedingly low. These local conditions, combined with a broader atmosphere of education on worker activism, led to unionization among faculty with the AAUP and among clerical workers and librarians with District 65 of the Distributive Workers of America. Yet when the Silber administration refused to negotiate with the faculty union, the clerical and library workers joined the strike as well. Working together, the two groups were able to force the administration to recognize their respective unions and negotiate with them. However, it is important to note that the faculty union accepted a provision against sympathy strikes before their contract was ratified. Thus, the clause against sympathy strikes pushed “all but a handful” (Zabel 696) of faculty to return to work before the clerical and library workers ratified their contract, which was a failure of complete solidarity between the two groups. This example shows the power of solidarity between worker groups while cautioning us to consider and protect against the multitudinous ways that leadership of higher education institutions can introduce rifts between groups that limit worker power.

*Social-Justice Unionism and Intergroup Solidarity among Workers in the University of California System*

Graduate workers at UC Berkeley, as members of UAW Local 2865, provide an example of the intergroup solidarity that characterizes the reemergence of social-justice unionism in higher education organizing.

Their example also demonstrates the kinds of wins and successes that communication and collaboration between worker groups make possible, even during this period in union history where unions have been weakened.

UAW local 2865 made an explicit shift in strategy from business unionism and its focus on narrow economic demands to a social-justice unionism approach focused on “anti-oppression demands” and direct action instead of “closed-door negotiations with management” (Ikebe and Holstrom-Smith 47). They provided an excellent example of effective cross-unit organizing and broader action as they went on strike with the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3299 service workers over intimidation practices in the University of California (UC) system (Wen). They were also joined by the California Nurses Association and UC Santa Cruz’s Skilled Crafts Unit (Burns). The graduate students cancelled their classes and turned out to protest in solidarity, which sent a message to the UC that intimidation practices leveraged against the service workers, or any workers, would not be tolerated (Burns; Wen). In keeping with their social-justice focus, the graduate students were also clear that they intended to send a message to the undergraduate students in their classes about the importance of the work done by service workers at the university (Wen). Indeed, service workers are a part of the campus community just as faculty and students are, though they are increasingly treated as unimportant as their jobs are outsourced and working conditions diminished in an attempt at cost savings (Magolda 47).

UAW Local 2865 pursued democratic union values instead of business ones, not only forming a different type of union organization that extends radically beyond business unionism but has also paid off in terms of contracts. Under their previous (2011-13) contract, UAW Local 2865 members were only able to negotiate a 6 percent wage increase over 3 years (which is less than the rate of inflation) and slight increases in childcare reimbursement. But after shifting to a more social movement strategy prior to negotiating the (2014-18) contract, they were able to win a 16 percent wage increase over 4 years, more teaching opportunities for undocumented students, all-gender bathrooms, reduced class sizes, and more family leave (Ikebe and Holstrom-Smith 47). The strike also addressed unsafe labor conditions for service workers (Guzman), and successfully gained better working conditions for UCSW workers by threatening an escalation to a system-wide strike (Burns; The AFSCME 3299 Bargaining Team).

Through information-sharing, organizing, solidarity, and advocacy, these service workers, graduate students, and medical workers have demonstrated the importance of cross-group solidarity for the future of academic organizing and organizing more broadly. These recent expressions of intergroup solidarity between AFSCME and UAW members in higher education are continuations of the history of social-

justice unionism pursued by both unions. Both unions were influential advocates during the civil rights era (Turner and Hurd 15).

*Tenured and Tenure-Track Faculty Solidarity with Contingent Faculty*

The faculty unions at the State University of New York system and the City University of New York system provide another example of intergroup solidarity that increases impact through collaborative action. In this case, unions made up largely of tenured and tenure-track faculty have made it an explicit goal to improve working conditions for their contingent faculty colleagues, a group rendered deeply vulnerable due to the contingent nature of their employment. NEA New York affiliates, New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), and United University Professions (UUP) are pursuing minimum per-course pay for contingent faculty because they recognize that the interests of all faculty are tied to the interests of contingent faculty (NYSUT Communications). Tenured and tenure-track faculty members of United Faculty, the AFT, and the AAUP-affiliated faculty union at the University of Illinois at Chicago, also expressed intergroup solidarity by striking after 18 months of failed negotiations. Similar to the strike in New York, tenured and tenure-track faculty joined non-tenure-track faculty in striking to increase minimum salaries for full-time, non-tenure-track faculty (Flaherty, “U. of Illinois at Chicago Faculty Strike for First Contract”). They cited the discrepancies between the amount of money each course offering brings to the university and the amount of pay each lecturer received to explain why they are asking for higher non-tenure-track faculty salaries (Rajwani). As contingency expands in other higher education work roles as well, extending this logic to other classes of contingent workers would further bolster equity on campus.

*Professional Association Solidarity with Organized Labor*

Professional associations are another type of organization that represents the interests of workers, although they have historically functioned somewhat differently than unions. Collaboration between unions and professional associations could empower workers and allow unions and professional associations to have magnified influence in pursuing goals they share, such as ensuring that higher education operates as a force for equity in society and serves the public good. As workers become increasingly exploited in higher education, contemporary professional associations are increasingly concerning themselves with the issues of working conditions and compensation that have been the traditional purview of unions—not only for the employee groups that professional associations represent, like faculty, but also for workers like custodial staff who the professional associations have not traditionally represented.

The California Conference of the AAUP represents one recent example of this broader regard. The AAUP has long been an advocate for university faculty as one of the longest-standing professional associations

in the country. But recently, the California Conference of the AAUP issued a statement in full support of union members in the Union of Professional and Technical Employees (UPTE) and the AFSCME as they engaged in a contentious bargaining process with the UC system (Private Email Communication, May 27, 2019). They further stated that they stand in solidarity with all university workers at all levels, noting that all university workers contribute to making the university function.

#### *Wall-to-Wall at University of Mississippi*

Education workers at the University of Mississippi have not only formed the first higher education union in the state of Mississippi but also have succeeded at following a wall-to-wall strategy to be inclusive of all workers, not only workers of particular types (Pratt). Not only are they going wall-to-wall, but they also explicitly state that their goal is to pursue social and economic justice not only for union members but also in the communities in which the university is situated and the communities to which the wide range of workers belong (Pratt). Committed to social-justice values, these new union members are explicitly concerned with counteracting the ways that social problems like racism, sexism, and classism in the broader society create inequalities between union members.

#### *The Metro Strategy*

This is a cross-institutional organizing strategy that identifies the community of workers as all faculty within a particular metropolitan area (Miller; Rhoades, “Bargaining Quality in Part-Time Faculty Working Conditions: Beyond Just-in-Time Employment and Just-at-Will Non-Renewal” 11). This strategy is particularly effective for contingent faculty and other types of contingent workers because it follows the distribution and flows of contingent workers, rather than starting with the individual university and inevitably leaving many workers at other institutions out (Berry and Worthen 436–38). A metro strategy defines the community of workers in a broader sense and thus relies on the development of a stronger sense of group identity than organizing approaches that focus on organizing workers of a particular group at a particular workplace (Worthen 422–23). The metro strategy increases the mass of workers who are organized, so they can negotiate with multiple employers and have an impact that goes beyond an individual site. Organizers following a metro strategy have made big gains in Boston, Los Angeles, Oakland, Seattle, St. Louis, and Washington D.C. For example, in the last decade SEIU has unionized 38 new bargaining units of contingent faculty and graduate workers (Rhoades, “Bread and Roses, and Quality Too?” 646). These contracts have brought about stronger contract provisions compared to contracts negotiated by unions that have followed a different organizing strategy (Rhoades, “Bread and Roses, and Quality Too?” 664). Following a metro strategy involves organizing beyond the boundaries of individual

workplaces to achieve a critical mass of members, so that workers will have the power to make conditions and practices more worker-friendly at multiple sites. This strategy disrupts efforts to divide workers into weaker, smaller groups, and holds the promise of having a much broader impact on the higher education enterprise than business unionism.

### **Conclusion**

In the context of attacks on progressive policies and a keen focus on undermining unions through state-level political action, unions must take broader local action if they are to stand a chance of transforming in order to survive the onslaught (Lafer 29). With growing globalization comes increased potential divisions between corporations and universities, whose partnerships have grown significantly with time and whose interests are increasingly separated from people living in the U.S. as their own structures globalize (Lafer 29). In the context of growing disinvestment in higher education, taking control is an important response, and unions are at the forefront of bringing such responses into action. Organizing under principles that conceptualize the worker community across units, work roles, and the entire university stands as a strong way to meet the demand for new strategies presented by the contemporary problems facing academic labor. Higher education workers will need to take approaches to organizing and collective bargaining that center intergroup solidarity and collaboration if they are to counteract the trends that lead to increasingly exploited workers and that are transforming higher education into an unrecognizable enterprise focused on generating profit rather than ensuring the public good.

The changes that have taken place in higher education increasingly suggest there is a very common interest across different workers. We want to suggest that unions identify, document, and make visible these common interests—increasing job insecurity, outsourcing, reduction or stagnation in wages, eradication of benefits, and other key areas that connect different working groups. Groups that see their aligned interests and support each other will create much more pressure on administrations. Currently, with different unions representing different workers, too many institutions of higher education have the advantage of academic workers by making isolated deals, not sharing information widely, and acting with little transparency. If unions communicated more fully with varied academic labor stakeholders, they could share data, push for similar strategies, and devise more complex strategies involving members from multiple different positions.

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