

Solidarity Forever

Cogs in the Classroom Factory: The Changing Identity of Academic Labor

edited by Deborah M. Herman and Julie M. Schmid,
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Reviewed by Alan G. Heffner

C*ogs in the Classroom Factory* will be of interest to those in academe, particularly those at large universities, who are interested in organizing their ranks to achieve greater rights, benefits, and democracy in the workplace—graduate employees, adjunct faculty, tenured and not-yet-tenured full-time faculty, and union organizers. This is both a strength and weakness of the book in that as an edited book it may not completely satisfy any one group.

The “COGS” in the title of the book comes from the editors’ experiences with the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE) Local 896-COGS (Campaign to Organize Graduate Students) at the University of Iowa. While this is not the sole focus of the book, many of the chapters recount efforts to organize graduate employees in several state university systems, including Iowa, California, and Florida.

The reader at first may have difficulty getting through the many legal and labor relations issues discussed in various chapters, but I found many of the chapters dealing with the conflicted identities of faculty and graduate employees quite interesting. Also, numerous articles recently have appeared in the academic and general press regarding the organizing attempts of students, adjunct faculty, maintenance workers, and other university employees at institutions such as Yale, Miami University of Ohio, and Long Island University’s C.W. Post Campus. Clearly, the book touches on many organizing issues in academe, and helps put the academic labor movement in perspective.

Although an edited book with chapters primarily addressing faculty

and graduate employees in large university systems, several other themes run throughout the book—the erosion of tenure in higher education, the “false consciousness” of faculty and graduate employees, legal obstacles to organizing faculty and graduate employees, unintended consequences of unionization, and a rise in worker consciousness among graduate employees and contingent faculty. The “factory” in the title suggests that the academy is increasingly becoming more like a factory, whose workers have many labor issues in common but are frequently not aware of their commonality.

My favorite chapters dealing more specifically with faculty issues are: “The Changing Identity of Academic Labor” by Julie M. Schmid and Deborah M. Herman; “Above and Below: Mapping Social Positions within the Academy” by Wesley Shumar and Jonathan T. Church; “Dueling Identities and Faculty Unions: A Canadian Case Study” by Mike Burke and Joanne Naiman; and “The Politics of Constructing Dissent: The Rhetorical Construction of Faculty Union Membership” by Darla S. Williams.

Schmid and Herman, the book’s editors, argue in their introductory chapter, “The Changing Identity of Academic Labor” that academe has become increasingly “corporatized”—more bureaucratic with more rules, policies, and hierarchy; having an increased number of administrators in proportion to full-time, tenure-track faculty positions; and more dependent on research funding from corporations and corporate agendas. This increased corporatization has brought increased oversight and interference in academic decision-making by outside agencies, corporate donors, politically appointed boards, state and federal agencies and their budget analysts. Also in this process of “corporatization,” faculty have lost much of their authority and traditional prerogatives to make academic decisions.

Accompanying this corporatization is what Schmid and Herman refer to as the “casualization” of higher education—an increased use of part-time, adjunct faculty and the “outsourcing” of teaching to these “contingent” faculty. The effect is a gradual erosion of tenure, and under the rationale of “financial exigency,” an outright elimination of tenure at some institutions. The authors at times equate the attack on tenure as an attack on academic freedom. Granted, adjunct and nontenured full-time faculty are less likely to express unpopular and controversial views in the classroom than tenured faculty, but, in my opinion, it is debatable as to whether or not tenure always equals academic freedom.

If, as several of the chapters and the popular press suggest, there is an increase in unionization among graduate students and other “contingent academic workers” (read “adjuncts”), why have not more full-time faculty joined their movement for better working conditions, benefits, and higher pay? The answer, it would seem, according to the authors of the chapters that most directly discuss faculty, is that tenured and tenure-

track faculty have a false consciousness, and lack a worker “mind set,” such that they do not identify with their struggling colleagues—graduate employees and part-time faculty.

One of the better discussions of this argument is in “Dueling Identities and Faculty Unions” by Mike Burke and Joanne Naiman wherein they discuss unionization activities and faculty restructuring at Ryerson Polytechnic University in Toronto, Canada. Burke and Naiman argue that there is a natural tension in the academic workplace between two contradictory models, a “competitive model” and a “collective model.” In the competitive model faculty are more like independent entrepreneurs competing against each other for tenure, position, pay, and other benefits. The collective model emphasizes the similarities among higher education workers, where gains in working conditions are achieved through collective action. A collective model would certainly facilitate attempts at organizing, but higher education administrators often promote the competitive model to divide and conquer employees. The authors also argue that faculty themselves, particularly those already in the top tier, are often complicit in promoting the competitive model to obtain greater pay packages for themselves at the expense of junior and nontenured faculty. A similar conflicted identity can be found among graduate employees. Many graduate employees identify more with their faculty mentors than with a union and the working class. They see themselves as “soon-to-be-professors” with no need for organizing.


As previously noted, many of the chapters in this book detail attempts by graduate employees in several states to organize and work with local unions, as well as the obstacles to their efforts to organize. For those readers with a primary interest in attempts to organize graduate employees, as opposed to organizing faculty, I recommend the following chapters: “Pyrrhic Victory at UC Santa Barbara: The Struggle for Labor’s New Identity” by Richard Sullivan; “Unfinished Chapters: Institutional Alliances and Changing Identities in a Graduate Employee Union” by James Thompson; and “Shutting Down the Academic Factory: Developing Worker Identity in Graduate Employee Unions” by Eric Dirnbach and Susan Chimonas.

Graduate employees, too, often have negative views of unions, and in some instances, see unions as a form of communism. The structure and organization of unions themselves often discourage the organization of graduate employees. For example, many unions, like the large, “corporatized” university, have become hierarchical and bureaucratic, with rigid rules and organizing tactics antithetical to many graduate students. Richard Sullivan’s “Pyrrhic Victory at UC Santa Barbara” articulates this in his discussion of the “business unionism” model versus the “social movement unionism” model. The more traditional business unionism model

emphasizes paying union dues in exchange for things like better health benefits and higher wages obtained through union-negotiated contracts, lengthy legal wrangling in the courts, and other political activity. The social movement unionism model focuses on achieving worker empowerment, decentralized decision-making and authority at the local level, and more spontaneous, militant tactics to achieve quicker results.

Other obstacles to organizing graduate students include the high turnover among graduate employees (they graduate and move on). Also, organizing activities are often dependent on voluntary, unpaid participation from a group already poorly paid and with little free time to participate in union activities. The legal system, too, presents obstacles to organizing as noted in “Pyrrhic Victory at UC Santa Barbara” and “Unfinished Chapters.” State right-to-work laws prevent unions from collecting fees from those who benefit from a union-negotiated contract but don’t join the union, thus limiting the funds available to already poorly funded graduate employees for union activity. Also, many states prohibit public employees from striking or engaging in slowdowns or sickouts.

Cogs in the Classroom Factory alternates between accounts of attempts to organize graduate employees in several states and describing the conflicted identities of graduate employees and faculty. In some respects, this book would actually be better as two books—one dealing with the movement to organize graduate employees, and one dealing with the assault on tenure-track positions through the increased use of contingent, non-tenure faculty. But it is one book, so the reader will need to pick and choose those chapters most relevant to their own situation and interests.

Although two major groups addressed in this book—faculty and graduate employees—are distinct in many ways, common themes do link many of the chapters. The afterword by Carl Rosen, “Classroom, Lab, Factory Floor: Common Labor Struggles,” although rather strident and anticapitalist, provides a good summary of the many issues raised in the book. Rosen reviews the obstacles to organizing academic workers presented in the book, but argues that despite these many obstacles—particularly the “false consciousness” of many in academe—the increased corporatization of academe and the continued assaults on tenure are creating, little-by-little, a “working-class consciousness in academia.” Eventually, we may realize that we are all cogs in the factory with common interests. 

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