COMMENTARY

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY GOLD RUSH: THE PLUNDER OF PUBLIC ASSETS AND A RADICALLY RESTRUCTURED TEACHING LABOR FORCE

Michael Fabricant

Introduction

Over the past two decades, propulsive scorch and burn policy directed at health care, K-12 schooling, and higher education has intensified. The language of the new reformers emphasizes market efficiencies, reduction of labor costs, diminished union power, creating accountability mechanisms that quantify the value of workers, and reducing public financing of services. The buzz words, depending on the sector of the welfare state, are familiar, *do more with less*, *create alternatives such as charter schools and HMO's to unresponsive*, *unproductive and wasteful public bureaucracies*, *roll back the power of unions indifferent at best and hostile at worst to the communities they serve*, *and promote justice by offering the poorest communities of color alternatives to failed public institutions*. Clearly, some of these arguments and images resonate with our experience inside fiscally starved and degraded public institutions.

From public hospitals with overcrowded emergency rooms to middle-school classrooms with 45 or more students, to public universities with part-time faculty cobbling together a living by teaching eight classes at six different sites, the narrative of public institutions as part horror show and part failed romance of the past grows. Public institutions are with ever-greater indignation, named by policy makers as toxic dumping grounds with diminished social value. Questions rarely if ever asked include the following: *what factors have contributed to this distorted perception of a downward spiral created by neoliberal capitalists and their compliant government supporters? Who benefits and who loses within a radically reformed welfare state?* And finally, *how does present discourse regarding reasons for failure and reform solution cohere into a single although complex narrative?*

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We are living in an era of sustained, unrelenting attack on all things public. This is a global phenomenon. The state for all of its failings, and it has too many to fully recount or discuss here, represents an especially important site of collective struggle. To begin with, the redistribution of private sector resources has, in large part, been directed by state apparatus. Additionally, the financing, quality, and kind of services provided have been shaped by government policy making. Finally, deliberations regarding entitlements in health care, income, and education have largely occurred within the commons. That said, I am not naïve about how such decisions are made. Policy making has never been a simple consequence of rational analysis or good intentions. To the contrary, policies benefiting working people have largely been a product of class struggle. The site of that struggle has increasingly been the state, and the demand has been for improved services and enlarged entitlements.

What has changed is not the locus or the aspiration of class struggle, but rather the disarray of grassroots movements, and the ever-greater organizational reach and economic financing of the organizations/movements of dominant economic and political interests. That increasingly unbalanced relationship has a number of implications: (1) the economic and political agenda of dominant interests, or our adversaries, is more likely to prevail; (2) the redistribution of resources downward through progressive taxation will slow; and (3) collective apparatus like the state, which absorbs private sector resources and provides conduits for redistribution, will be restructured through austerity policies.

Critically, all of these outcomes have been a dominant part of policy making over the past two decades. Equally important, the intensifying fiscal crisis offers rationale for austerity policy as the only choice. In effect, austerity policy has become a naturalized public landscape of a contracting private economy with no freedom of latitude for policy makers to do anything but diminish and restructure the state. It is within this context that policy makers have promulgated a series of initiatives intended to not only starve but also capitalize public services. What does this mean? In part it means that a free market ideology produced by zealots dominates policy decision making. Most critically, it has profound economic meaning. In the present fiscal and political moment, public services are ever more likely to become centers of profit-making. From charter schools to profit-making hospitals to Phoenix University, the evidence is clear. As historic rates of profit are more difficult to achieve outside of ever-riskier speculative bubbles, the gaze of private entrepreneurs searching for new zones of opportunity has increasingly focused on the public purse. Public education in the U.S. alone represents 600 billion dollars of potential revenue.

Profit-making, however, is limited not only to the wholesale transformation of public institutions into market corporations, but also the opportunities for profit-making within non-profit and public institutions. Profit-making ventures of public institutions today include but are not limited to virtual learning, medical technology, patent development and product creation, engineering of uniform web-based massive online open courses (MOOCs) curricula, high-stakes testing, and data collection on accountability. Importantly, all of these

initiatives do not occur in a void, but rather in a context of diminished government fiscal support, ideological attack on all things public, and a willful resistance to redistributive forms of taxation. This last point is especially important.

A choice has been made in the U.S., in parts of Europe, and in Asia to reduce and limit the tax burden on the very wealthy. The trade-off has been an increasingly underfinanced and ever more vulnerable commons or welfare state. In sum, this vulnerability is linked to the redistribution of increasing proportions of public resources away from the commons and to dominant economic interests through both reduced rates of taxation and capital for profit-making ventures. Simultaneously, citizens seeking services from starved public institutions have increasingly complex health and learning needs. The labor force that is left behind in these public institutions is expected to shoulder more and more responsibility for less and less pay, professional development, and hope of making a difference. It is within this context that part-time faculty enters the terrain of public higher education. They are the very cheap labor force necessary to sustain starved public institutions.

A Brief History of Part-Time Faculty Labor in Three Stages

This discussion will focus on the City University of New York (CUNY). The experience of CUNY, situated within a global city, is representative of trends within public higher education both nationally and internationally. Before the 1975 fiscal crisis in New York City, the number of part-time faculty at CUNY was relatively small. These instructors largely filled niche positions, either teaching courses that required a very specialized expertise not otherwise available, or providing, as a distinguished writer, artist, or practitioner, a perspective critical to disciplinary discourse. Individually and collectively, these faculty were often not eligible for permanence of position because of the absence of academic credentials and outside commitments. Clearly, these needs continue to exist and drive a share of the demand for part-time faculty labor. Importantly, however, the rapid expansion of part-time faculty labor during the past forty years cannot be ascribed to this rather narrow set of needs and demands.

The second stage in the evolution of the part-time faculty labor force coincides with the growing fiscal crisis of public universities. As we all know, the explosion of part-time faculty is, in large part, an accommodation to the starvation of public higher education. This accommodation, of course, results in an intensified exploitation of instructional labor through lower hourly pay, few if any benefits and little job security, as contrasted with full-time faculty. For CUNY, this intensified exploitation has resulted in a 60 percent growth of part-time faculty during the past thirteen years. Presently, part-time faculty is teaching over 50 percent of the courses at CUNY. Importantly, the exploitation of part-time faculty labor has been accompanied by rapid increases in tuition, often for very poor students of color. At CUNY, tuition accounted for 5 percent and 22 percent, respectively, of the operating budget in 1991 at senior and community colleges. Importantly, this was sixteen years after the fiscal crisis. By

2011, it represented 47 percent of the total revenue at senior colleges and 42 percent at community colleges. This increased tuition is being extracted from students whose family income is near or under the poverty line. In 2011, for example, 54 percent of CUNY student family income was under $30,000. The toxic inequality seeping ever deeper into CUNY soil is, therefore, being produced by both the low wages of part-time faculty and the increased tuition charged to relatively poor students. This experience is not specific to CUNY but rather replicated in California, Texas, London, Athens, and Madrid. Critically, this intensification of ever-more exploitive revenue streams is occurring at the same time as precipitous declines in public investment in higher education and ever-more regressive tax policies are implemented. And so what we have in higher education is an institution trying to stay afloat on the backs of poor students, and an exploited, ever-poorer, part-time labor force.

This effort to extract ever-greater value from cheapened forms of academic labor, however, is in the very earliest stages of a third movement. This third movement will increasingly deploy part-time faculty labor in profit-making sites. The ascent of virtual learning and the consequent packaging, as well as the transmission of courses to ever-larger audiences through MOOCs, represents a next stage of development for higher education. It also represents a potentially substantial source of new revenue.

5 The recent tumult at the University of Virginia was, in large part, a consequence of a board—administration rift about how quickly to enter this emergent market and at what cost to faculty job security. As *The New York Times* recently reported, *Stanford, Princeton, Penn and the University of Michigan are joining forces with the for-profit venture Coursera to rapidly expand the number of online course offerings*. This new medium is moving forward with astonishing rapidity. Clearly, this trend is accompanied by the emergence of for-profit universities, most notably Phoenix, Kaplan, and Strayer. As the number of MOOCs increase at public institutions, there is likely to be a corresponding expansion of non-unionized, less regulated, quasi-public arms of the university to maximize revenue gain from this block of courses. This third movement will, therefore, place an increasing number of part-time faculty outside the formal university, join their work ever more explicitly to profit-making, and structure teaching around standardized MOOC curricula. In turn, this third movement will join the phenomenon of cheapened academic labor ever more tightly to cheapened forms of classroom instruction. In sum, virtual learning in starved public universities is likely to produce greater concentrations of part-time faculty laboring under the degraded conditions of standardized curricula, increases in class size, and diminished time to initiate or sustain contact with students.

How Do We Change the Working and Instructional Conditions of Public Higher Education?

The conundrum facing us is especially vexing. How do we amass the power necessary to change public higher education's practices and policies? Perhaps

the single most important issue facing public higher education is the cheapening of its labor force and the reduced quality of classroom instruction. These issues are distinct but overlapping. The reduced quality of instruction is affected by many factors, including degraded facilities, over-registered classes, a dearth of supports outside the classroom, and overworked full- and especially part-time faculty. That said, how do we create a way forward in the midst of this crisis for academic labor and our students?

There are no prescriptions or blueprints for change. I do believe, however, that to chart a direction, we must struggle with the following organizing dilemmas. My modest intention is to identify and explicate four dilemmas:

1. *How can part-time faculty create alliances with full faculty when their interests appear to be so disparate?* Let me begin by noting that moral invective, exhortation, and/or critique will not be effective in either the short or long term, even if other movements have faced these same challenges. Relationships have to be built, deepened, and extended over the long term on the basis of shared interest. Developing internalized understandings of mutual fate braided to diminished job security, declining pay, increases in workload, disappearing autonomy in the classroom, as well as the erosion of rights will not be easy. These issues must be tested through an organizing strategy working to build bonds of solidarity across the particular needs of both part- and full-time faculty. Some part of the conversation must recognize both the differences and similarities of the circumstance of full- and part-time faculty. And yet the joined fates of both groups must be a central part of the conversation. Falling wages, diminished job security, and expansive classes of both full- and part-time faculty will continue as long as management can exploit ever more vulnerable and cheapened forms of labor. Critical to this organizing work is learning how to engage across experience, configuring the structure of the organizing conversation, internalizing the importance of listening, anticipating impediments, and constructing a shared agenda for change. At this particular moment, the importance and complexity of learning how to organize, and how to build collectivity across divides of class and social experience, cannot be overstated.
2. *How can collectivity be built by part-time faculty given the press of individual survival needs?* Clearly, to build alliances with full-time faculty or any other group, part-time faculty must bring an independent political muscle to campaigns. We know that this is often difficult given the intensifying frenetic need for many part-time faculty to cobble together a living. How does one find the time to build political power in the midst of running from course to course trying to scrape the money together to meet housing, food or health needs, a lack of job security, and the energy often devoted to building alliances with authority figures managing course distribution? These issues are real and powerfully undermining to building a collective part-time faculty power. No matter the obstacle, however, the project remains essential. It also is no more daunting to build a collective part-time

faculty power than it was for laborers in the nineteenth century or African-Americans in the South to build bases of power and become agents for change. To be successful, organizing must be at the center of some part of our work and private lives. The structure of that organizing, as in the twentieth-century South and nineteenth-century urban factory, focused on building robust relationships. That is also the lesson, for example, of the Highlands model of organizing. How can such relationship be built given the press of time? In what ways does the disappearance of a shared place of community or factory work site and their replacement with flight through space to survive change the ways we must think about building part-time faculty power? What issues are most likely to create an arc of growing participation and alliance? How do we build an alliance between full-time faculty who are frequently detached from the struggle for job security and a living wage and part-timers? How do we create a union agenda for change with demonstrable intermediate steps promoting greater opportunity for more immediate, tangible success? What is our union vision for the university, our labor, and students? These are but a few of the questions that will have to be addressed during our long march through institutions of public higher education.

3. How do we address the fundamental contradiction between the part-time faculty person moving through space to earn a living and the need for the locus of place to anchor effective organizing campaigns? This is an essential contradiction not easy to resolve in the development of part-time faculty campaigns. The most effective historic organizing campaigns have collectivized the oppression of individuals in the shared place of work or physical community. Building experiences that promote understanding of a shared or collective experience of oppression is at the core of organizing. It ultimately culminates in change campaigns and acts of solidarity. How can we produce such collectivity, however, when the experience of part-time academic labor is frequently space- not place-based? A part-time faculty person is often moving nimbly through space, or from one campus to another, and from day courses to night courses, to survive. Their work relationships are fluid and rapidly remade on the basis of survival needs. The lack of benefits and relatively low wages may also cause part-time workers to supplement wages outside the university. This mosaic of multiple work sites hurtles workers through various kinds of space to survive. Time is ever more precious, and the pressure to keep moving both literally and metaphorically is intensifying. Clearly embodied, place-based organizing is less likely to work with part-time academic labor. How then do we use new forms of technology to engage part-time workers, collectivize their experience virtually, and build toward strategically selected events that demand part-time faculty physical presence? The issues of place, space, cynicism about the prospects of collectivity or unions, the scarcity of time, and the daunting forces arrayed against part-time and full-time academic labor are persistent. The question, however, if we intend to continue to enlarge this struggle, is how do we

create a better fit between organizing tactics and strategy and the dramatically changed circumstance of labor?

4. How do we build alliances outside the university in a moment where every other part of the non-profit and public sector world is burdened with the intensifying conditions of austerity policy? Across the globe, austerity policies are creating a tightening vise-like grip, deforming services such as higher education, and creating the potential for ever greater electoral backlash. Simultaneously, labor inside and outside the public sphere is more expendable and cheapened. To understand that these forces produce more insecure, cheap part-time and full-time labor in every sector of the economy is not sufficient. It is also necessary to build an overarching agenda and strategy for change in a moment where almost every sector of the workforce and its leaders are hunkering down in fear and defensive maneuvering. OWS pointed us in the right direction. Inequality and the redistribution of concentrated private dollars into job creation and livable wages through the commons must be at the heart of our shared agenda. Greater investment in health care, education, infrastructure construction, and the development of green industries through redistributive tax policies must be the central struggle across the globe. In the absence of such redistribution and investment in the economy, labor in and outside the academy will continue to be marginalized, and the present crisis of diminished demand and expansive debt will only intensify. The organizing work locally, nationally, and globally must emphasize not only banner of progressive taxation but as well the particular ways in which it can benefit the 99 percent.

This is not an exhaustive listing of organizing dilemma. No simple answer exists in relationship to building part-time faculty power. There must be many organizing conversations between full- and part-time faculty to build a web of relationships and identify which issues represent best beginning points for launching a campaign. Full- and part-time academics and sanitation workers, people of color and white folks, public workers, and those we serve must cohere into a single fighting force. What is arrayed against us nationally and globally is unprecedented in scope and power. Our position may be just, but our power is at its lowest ebb in decades.

That contradiction haunts us every day. And, as most of us recognize, it is power, not principles, that wins campaigns and advances a progressive agenda. Our political project must, in large part, involve enlarging informal and formal activist networks, thus bolstering our sectarian union fight, while searching for ways to enlarge campaigns into a social movement. This can be done by joining with other workers not out of an abstract solidarity but a deeply felt understanding that job insecurity, declining wages, cannibalization of public services, and heightened vulnerability are a widely shared experience. The attack is not simply on the academy or even the public sphere, it is on every worker. The intention is to extract ever more work for less and less wages. It is also to radically roll back and restructure the insurance of public services. If we respond simply on the

basis of sectarian interest-group need, we are likely to wander in this social wilderness with less and less sustenance. Our work is to move back and forth between fighting where we stand, for example, to enhance benefits and wages for part-time labor to the larger struggle for redistributive policies that grow jobs, essential services, and economic development. The attack to radically restructure every aspect of social and economic life across the globe is unprecedented in its scope and ambition. To be successful, we will have to respond in kind by creating new and often uncomfortable political/social formations and power. To aspire to anything less effectively capitulates all we value to concentrated wealth and an ever more barbaric marketplace.

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