

**TURNING COFFEE INTO UNIONS:
MATHEMATICIANS AND COLLECTIVE BARGAINING**

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In memory of Lauren Berlant

*We will get nowhere without a wholesome group consciousness.
Our worst troubles as a profession arise from unwarranted assumptions
of superiority on the one hand coupled with a too ready acquiescence
on the other.*

— Guido Marx, in a 1914 letter to John Dewey (see [10, 21])

I am easily embarrassed and rather uncoordinated, so dancing in public is very much not my thing. Yet, just over a year ago as I write this, I found myself doing the Hokey Pokey while walking in a circle on the University of Chicago’s main quad. The context is that I was part of a group keeping its spirits up after several hours in the rain, during a three-day industrial action by Graduate Students United (GSU), the university’s democratically elected but so-far unrecognized graduate student worker union. I was there as one of many supportive faculty members, and also in my role as president of the University of Chicago Advocacy Chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP).

I mention this incident in part to lay my cards on the table from the get-go. This is not an academic paper, but an activist’s meditation (and exhortation) on academic unionization and modes of resistance to the range of phenomena that are often referred to as “academic corporatization”, particularly focused on the perspective of mathematicians and mathematics departments in the United States.¹ It is largely based on my talk at the workshop “A Conversation on Professional

I thank Emily Riehl for inviting me to the workshop at which I gave the talk on which this essay is based, and thank her and the other participants for making it a delightful and deeply thought-provoking experience. I also thank Larisa Reznik for reading a draft of this essay and making many extended comments, which greatly helped me shape several sections, and to Yali Amit, Damir Dzhafarov, and Emily Riehl for their careful reading and comments on a later version. I have had the privilege to be part of a Critical University Studies reading group with several brilliant colleagues who have almost infinitely more knowledge and experience than me in this and related areas, and from whom I have learned a great deal. I am grateful for their willingness to accept a mathematician among their number. Several of the texts I cite in this essay are ones I learned about from them. I am equally grateful for the many illuminating conversations I have had with fellow workers associated with the University of Chicago Advocacy Chapter of the AAUP, the UChicago Labor Council, and other organizations connected with the Labor Council, such as Graduate Students United and UChicago Faculty Forward.

For nonmathematicians: the title comes from Alfréd Rényi’s “A mathematician is a device for turning coffee into theorems.”

¹Or really, to be fully honest, on that of those at institutions somewhat like mine, only because that is what I know best. I will use the University of Chicago as a running example, but hope there are things here that speak to a broader context, and to academic workers other than mathematicians.

Norms in Mathematics”, organized by Emily Riehl at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, Sept. 20–22, 2019. At the same time, it is being written during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, as college and university workers are facing layoffs, cuts to benefits, health risks created by working conditions in which they have had little or no say, and a number of other issues that, while brought about in part by extraordinary circumstances, should remind us of the precarity and dependence so many of these workers face even at the best of times. It is also being written during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, which have highlighted just how much work there is to do in achieving even a modicum of equity and justice in the United States and throughout the world, and how much the structural flaws of large institutions can stand in the way of this work. Colleges and universities are very much among such institutions, their stated commitments notwithstanding, and their flaws cash out in many ways, one of which is an entrenched opposition to power-sharing in general, and unionization in particular. I want to make a case to mathematicians in the academy that we should not succumb to this antidemocratic mode of thinking ourselves, and indeed should actively fight it, for our sake, that of our community, and that of those who make a community so highly dependent on complex social structures possible.

I believe in a fully unionized academy: faculty, student workers, other academic staff, and of course nonacademic staff who are as much a part of the endeavor as we are.² I believe in solidarity among these groups and across institutions. I believe in all of this happening as part of a broad labor movement whose revitalization in this country is long overdue. And I believe in this 21st century labor movement as part of the even broader struggle for social, racial, economic, and environmental justice. This is a struggle with many goals, which we should never allow to be pitted against each other or put into competition. They should form a “sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference nowhere” (see [7]). But the work itself does need solid centers. It needs robust instruments of resistance, collective action, power-sharing, and democratization. My excitement about the potential that labor unions have to play this kind of role within a context of cooperation and solidarity, to the benefit of all of us, is what animates this essay.

Before going into a discussion of what there is to be gained, and what losses there are to be avoided, by collective bargaining in the academy, let me mention some of the barriers and opposition it has faced. Both legal blocks and internal resistance by academics themselves stem at least in part from misperceptions about the organization and impact of academic institutions. Much has been written and said about these issues, but as a first step toward understanding just how distorted is the picture of such institutions as largely faculty-led, and committed to the careful stewardship of limited resources for the greater common good, I highly recommend watching the recent panel [30] on “Austerity, Racial Capitalism, and Universities”,³ which also discusses the role of both academic and nonacademic unions in exceptionally thoughtful ways.

²It is an unfortunate flaw in even some of the better writing on collective action in the academy to leave out the importance of solidarity between academic and nonacademic workers at colleges and universities.

³This panel, held by Scholars for Social Justice, was moderated by Sarah Haley, and featured Davarian Baldwin, Frank Deale, Destin Jenkins, and Barbara Vereen.

Academic unionization at private institutions in the United States has a complicated history in labor law.⁴ Consider graduate student worker unionization. The make-up of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB)—an independent federal agency tasked with safeguarding employees’ rights to organize and determine whether to form unions, and to address unfair labor practice issues in the private sector—changes with appointments made by different presidents, and thus so do its interpretations of the law. In 2004, in a case involving Brown University [37], the NLRB sided with the argument universities usually make that graduate student workers should not be considered employees under the terms of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). In 2016, the NLRB reversed this decision in a case involving Columbia University [38], saying that the Brown case “deprived an entire category of workers of the protections of the Act without a convincing justification.” This development led to several union elections, followed by challenges by universities. When it became clear that Trump administration appointees to the NLRB were going to use these cases to overthrow the Columbia decision and set precedent, these unions dropped their cases, and have since then sought voluntary recognition, in some cases successfully, for example at Brown, Georgetown, and Harvard, where union members recently ratified contracts [28, 29, 37]. (More recently, the NLRB declared its intention to reverse the Columbia decision via rulemaking rather than in connection with a particular case.⁵)

There is no doubt that at universities that are at least minimally functional, the work that graduate students do as instructors, teaching assistants, and research assistants is frequently beneficial to their training. (I often learn a great deal from my teaching too. I think many of us are familiar with the idea of learning a subject by teaching it, for instance.) However, that fact in no way means that what they do is not at the same time labor that is absolutely essential to the functioning of these universities. My own department’s teaching program could not function in any form even remotely resembling its current one without relying on graduate student labor. Indeed, a student who comes in completely decided to go into industry and never teach after obtaining their PhD will have to teach just as much as any other student in the department. This is in no way to minimize the work that my colleagues who run our undergraduate program do to help prepare and support our graduate student instructors. Many employers offer extensive training and support to workers in demanding positions. Many employees take advantage of this training to move to better positions with other employers. These facts in no way make these employees nonworkers. I have had several graduate students as College Fellows, a position that entails being a teaching assistant in a training context, which among other things asks instructors to act as teaching mentors to their fellows. I hope that these fellows have gotten something from the experience that was of help when they started teaching their own classes. However, what I know for absolutely certain is just how much they have helped me in running my courses. I find absolutely ludicrous any suggestion that, because they were students, they were not at the same time workers, whose labor contributed to the university’s operation in the same way that mine does. And this is not even to speak of the students who teach their own courses.

⁴The legal issues at public institutions are significantly different. Particular legal issues also pertain to religiously-affiliated institutions.

⁵Added in proof: The NLRB has since abandoned this proposed rulemaking.

Graduate student workers' limited-term employment is also no argument against their unionization. Indeed, quite the contrary. In "STEM is Overrated" [25], when discussing Louis Hyman's *Temp: How American Work, American Business, and the American Dream Became Temporary* [12], Caitlin Zaloom writes that,

[b]eginning in the 1970s, corporate heads and their consultants began to look for short-term profits, cutting their commitments to their employees. Workers who might stay for years or decades required promotions and benefits and were protected by unions. Disposing of expensive workers became a key to meeting profit targets. In their place, corporations began to rely on short-term employees who would stay for the job at hand and then leave.

The unionization of temporary workers is thus a key part of the contemporary labor movement, and without it, the NLRA will be weakened to something well short of its intent "to protect the rights of employees and employers, to encourage collective bargaining, and to curtail certain private sector labor and management practices, which can harm the general welfare of workers, businesses and the U.S. economy." [31]

Tenured and tenure-track faculty are in an even more difficult position, given the 1980 *Yeshiva University* case [39] in which the Supreme Court held that "[t]he University's full-time faculty members are managerial employees excluded from the [National Labor Relations] Act's coverage." As explained more fully in the syllabus (a summary at the head of the decision), the majority held that

[t]he controlling consideration is that the faculty exercises authority which in any other context unquestionably would be managerial, its authority in academic matters being absolute. The faculty's professional interests—as applied to governance at a university like *Yeshiva* which depends on the professional judgment of its faculty to formulate and apply policies—cannot be separated from those of the institution, and thus it cannot be said that a faculty member exercising independent judgment acts primarily in his own interest and does not represent the interest of his employer.⁶

This decision is well worth reading for those interested in the perception of academics and our institutions, particularly as much that is said there remains a live issue four decades down the line. Indeed, the decision is too germane to this discussion to forgo quoting at some length from the ruling, delivered by Justice Lewis F. Powell, Jr. and joined by four other justices; and the dissent, filed by Justice William J. Brennan, Jr. and joined by three other justices.⁷ They set the stage for this discussion rather well. In addition to the legal question itself, the decision rehearses debates about the relationships between academics and their institutions, and about the very nature of these institutions as they exist in the real world, rather than the fantasy one of college brochures and official institutional histories. The dissent in particular points to the benefits of collective bargaining in the academy not only for individual academic workers, but for the entire endeavor, especially in the context of education and research as a business, in a way that

⁶Here and below, I have retained the gendered language of the original legal document, which unfortunately infests even some of the otherwise admirable passages from the dissent. I wish I could say that this is a practice the Supreme Court has long since abandoned.

⁷In all cases, I will omit footnotes from quotations.

makes it clear that academic unionization is well within the spirit of the labor protections envisioned by the NLRA, and should be well within the spirit of the political commitments of those who support organized labor as a whole.⁸

The contention of the ruling is not that faculty supervise other employees (indeed, the Court chose not to resolve the issue of the supervisory status of faculty), but that they are managerial employees, defined as those who “formulate and effectuate management policies by expressing and making operative the decisions of their employer.” (Here the ruling is quoting an earlier Supreme Court decision, which itself is quoting an NLRB ruling from the 1940s.) Part of this classification has to do with the ruling’s concurrence with the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, whose own ruling in this case it upheld, in the Court of Appeals’ finding that the NLRB

[...] had ignored “the extensive control of Yeshiva’s faculty” over academic and personnel decisions as well as “the crucial role of the full-time faculty in determining other central policies of the institutions.” [...] the faculty are, “in effect, substantially and pervasively operating the enterprise.” [Quotations here are from the decision of the Court of Appeals.]

And later:

To the extent the industrial analogy applies, the faculty determines within each school the product to be produced, the terms upon which it will be offered, and the customers who will be served.

Now, I don’t know what conditions actually obtained at Yeshiva University forty years ago, but I expect this description of faculty control will seem rather alien to many at institutions to which the Yeshiva decision still applies (even if the product/customer analogy unfortunately might feel much closer to home). As the dissent puts it,

[...] the Court’s vision is clouded by its failure fully to discern and comprehend the nature of the faculty’s role in university governance.

Unlike the purely hierarchical decisionmaking structure that prevails in the typical industrial organization, the bureaucratic foundation of most “mature” universities is characterized by dual authority systems. The primary decisional network is hierarchical in nature: Authority is lodged in the administration, and a formal chain of command runs from a lay governing board down through university officers to individual faculty members and students. At the same time, there exists a parallel professional network, in which formal mechanisms have been created to bring the expertise of the faculty into the decisionmaking process. [...]

[...]

And while the administration may attempt to defer to the faculty’s competence whenever possible, it must and does apply its own distinct perspective to those recommendations, a perspective

⁸It is not irrelevant that Powell is usually regarded as having been a business-friendly conservative, while Brennan is regarded as having been one of the Court’s leading liberal voices.

that is based on fiscal and other managerial policies which the faculty has no part in developing. The University always retains the ultimate decisionmaking authority, [...] and the administration gives what weight and import to the faculty's collective judgment as it chooses and deems consistent with its own perception of the institution's needs and objectives.

With the passing of the years, even the more realistic picture this passage paints seems like a significant overstatement of the role of faculty at many institutions. At how many institutions nowadays, especially larger ones, does the administration "attempt to defer to the faculty's competence whenever possible", unless that is taken to mean, "whenever none of the many other things it thinks of as more important apply"?

However, even more jarring to me is the idea of "alignment with management". According to the ruling, the exemption from coverage under the NLRA for managerial employees comes out of the concern "[t]hat an employer is entitled to the undivided loyalty of its representatives." As the ruling goes on to say,

[m]anagerial employees must exercise discretion within, or even independently of, established employer policy and must be aligned with management. [...] normally an employee may be excluded as managerial only if he represents management interests by taking or recommending discretionary actions that effectively control or implement employer policy.

As the dissent says,

[...] [t]he touchstone of managerial status is thus an alliance with management, and the pivotal inquiry is whether the employee in performing his duties represents his own interests or those of his employer. If his actions are undertaken for the purpose of implementing the employer's policies, then he is accountable to management and may be subject to conflicting loyalties. But if the employee is acting only on his own behalf and in his own interest, he is covered under the Act and is entitled to the benefits of collective bargaining.

The majority clearly believed the former was the case: "In fact, the faculty's professional interests—as applied to governance at a university like Yeshiva—cannot be separated from those of the institution." The ruling even goes as far as to say that "[t]he large measure of independence enjoyed by faculty members can only increase the danger that divided loyalty will lead to those harms that the Board traditionally has sought to prevent." Which seems to me like "damned if you do and damned if you don't" at its worst.

I can't be the only one who, with the concept of academic freedom firmly in mind, has no more articulate first response than "Say what?!" The dissent puts it a bit more fluently:

Unlike industrial supervisors and managers, university professors are not hired to "make operative" the policies and decisions of their employer. Nor are they retained on the condition that their interests will correspond to those of the university administration. Indeed, the notion that a faculty member's professional competence

could depend on his undivided loyalty to management is antithetical to the whole concept of academic freedom. Faculty members are judged by their employer on the quality of their teaching and scholarship, not on the compatibility of their advice with administration policy.

And later on:

[...] The very fact that Yeshiva's faculty has voted for the Union to serve as its representative in future negotiations with the administration indicates that the faculty does not perceive its interests to be aligned with those of management. Indeed, on the precise topics which are specified as mandatory subjects of collective bargaining—wages, hours, and other terms and conditions of employment—the interests of teacher and administrator are often diametrically opposed.

Near the end, the dissent gives a picture of the state of the contemporary university that is remarkably resonant with our current condition, but even more remarkably, still not universally acknowledged:

Finally, the Court's perception of the Yeshiva faculty's status is distorted by the rose-colored lens through which it views the governance structure of the modern-day university. The Court's conclusion that the faculty's professional interests are indistinguishable from those of the administration is bottomed on an idealized model of collegial decisionmaking that is a vestige of the great medieval university. But the university of today bears little resemblance to the "community of scholars" of yesteryear. Education has become "big business," and the task of operating the university enterprise has been transferred from the faculty to an autonomous administration, which faces the same pressures to cut costs and increase efficiencies that confront any large industrial organization. The past decade of budgetary cutbacks, declining enrollments, reductions in faculty appointments, curtailment of academic programs, and increasing calls for accountability to alumni and other special interest groups has only added to the erosion of the faculty's role in the institution's decisionmaking process.

These economic exigencies have also exacerbated the tensions in university labor relations, as the faculty and administration more and more frequently find themselves advocating conflicting positions not only on issues of compensation, job security, and working conditions, but even on subjects formerly thought to be the faculty's prerogative. [...]

Despite the ever-increasing aptness of the dissent's view of the academy, the Yeshiva ruling still holds. The Obama-era NLRB tried to limit its applicability in 2014, in a case involving Pacific Lutheran University [40], with a decision that explicitly mentions corporatization and the further erosion of the role of faculty in decision-making, but more recently the Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit made the application of the Pacific Lutheran decision problematic, and opened the possibility for the NLRB to reverse it entirely, in a case involving the University of Southern California [41].

The legal aspect is only part of the equation, however. Overcoming internal resistance to academic unionization is also a significant challenge. As Rebecca Kolins Givan puts it in “Acquiescent No More” [10], when discussing the passage used as an epigraph to this essay (which I will touch on again further below), “the persistent problem of a professional culture of faculty acquiescence, as Guido Marx’s words demonstrate, long predated the legal denial of the faculty’s collective-bargaining rights.” Even if we might not see our own institutional arrangements accurately reflected in the Yeshiva decision’s funhouse mirror version of academia, many of us still can’t quite think of ourselves as workers, at least not the kind who unionize. As Paula M. Krebs puts it when discussing “The Faculty-Staff Divide” [16], we inhabit “a culture that encourages us to see ourselves as thinkers rather than as workers.” (A particularly terrible application of the excluded middle. . .)

The most common version of this attitude among mathematicians, or perhaps among academics in general, might well be an allergy to engaging with such issues at all. “I just do math and don’t get involved in academic politics.” Collectively, one result of this attitude has been the sacrifice of our democratic voice to the convenience of avoiding responsibility, even at the cost of giving up decision-making power. This essay is an argument that one *should* get involved, indeed, that getting involved is essential to doing one’s work responsibly, and for many academic workers, mathematicians included, might well be essential to continuing to be able to do this work at all.

But there are also more active forms of resistance to thinking of what we do as labor. We see ourselves as independent agents, who might draw salaries but are surely not “employees”. We are proud that “herding cats” is often used in connection with trying to get us to do anything in concert. We see the protections of academic freedom, real or imagined, as distinguishing us from workers who can be fired for not toeing the company line. And we are at the vanguard of the modern call to love one’s job, to see it as a calling that can only be diminished by engaging in the same kind of collective bargaining as a factory worker.⁹ Is it seemly to worry about the nutritional content of the sacramental bread?

In “Down with Love: Feminist Critique and the New Ideologies of Work” [23], Kathi Weeks notes that “today management discourse seems to be obsessed with love and happiness”, and draws on the work of 1970s feminist scholars to perform a remarkable critique of how the ideology of romantic love is being used “to recruit all waged workers into a more intimate relationship with work”, with all the attendant benefits that this one-sided attachment brings to corporations that are under no obligation to love their workers back. As she says,

⁹Administrations like to play on academics’ sense of remoteness and specialness by making much of the idea of unions as outside entities with no expertise on issues central to our precious little world. There is a rhetorical trick here in equating the union with the supporting national organization, rather than the local, whose leaders and members are fully part of this world. There is also a sly nod to academic elitism, which relies on the historical names of unions such as the United Auto Workers, and assumes academics will react with disgust, because, after all, “we make knowledge, not cars”. . . The lack of content in this argument was put into sharp relief for me when my own institution’s administration “copy-pasted” this same argument when writing to faculty about GSU, which at the time was affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers and the AAUP. Arguing that these organizations have no experience with educational matters is at best bizarre. Of course, nothing is ever said about the academic experience of the boards of trustees and analogous entities that have far more power than any union could hope for.

more and more of workers' subjectivities become folded into and fused with their identity as workers. To configure work as the center of our identity requires a reconfiguration of the self in its relationship to work. This is facilitated by the fact that, mimicking the unbounded qualities of household care work, in the contemporary economy the borders that were once thought to separate waged work from nonwork time, spaces, practices, and relations are widely acknowledged to have broken down. Waged work and its values have thus come to dominate ever more of our time and energy.

I think many of us will see ourselves or our colleagues in this description. In a way, the rest of the world has just caught up with the academy's ethos that one's profession should be in essence a romantic attachment, and one that calls for a total commitment, even if the rest of the world has not quite yet gotten to the point of denying like some of us that what we do is even "really work" at all. This ethos also plays a part in views of graduate student worker unionization. If love is what binds us, and graduate students are "us in training", then thinking of anything they do as labor subject to collective bargaining is a category mistake, and an unseemly one at that, like suing one's parents for an allowance raise. This is also an ethos exceptionally ripe for exploitation, and even on those grounds alone we should be wary of adopting it uncritically.

I want to argue here that, more and more, this whole view is a fantasy that we can't afford ourselves,¹⁰ and that also comes at far too high a cost to others. This is not to say that we cannot enjoy what we do, even love what we do, but that this enjoyment should not preclude us from seeing clearly that, whatever else we are, we are also academic laborers, part of a collective whose relationships to the institutions within which we perform this labor are not nearly as simple and secure as we might like them to be. And it should never cause us to look through the "rose-colored lens" mentioned in the Yeshiva dissent when viewing these institutions.

What I will not argue is that this is an easy perspective to come to for many of us, given the apprenticeship model of graduate education and the sheer wall of propaganda academic institutions put out into the ambient culture.¹¹ As a graduate student at Cornell in the late 1990s, my own view of academic unionization was definitely clouded by some of the misconceptions I'm talking about here. I don't really want to engage in the rhetoric of "Yeah, I used to think that, but then I grew up", but I can't deny that to some extent that is how I feel when I hear some people speak against academic unionization. I will say, though, that I'm not taking credit for anything here. It took the help of many colleagues, some whom I have gotten to know, some whom I know only through their writing, for me to change my mindset. I am grateful to them and their faith in the notion that education is a

¹⁰To be honest, I am privileged enough to have the kind of position that would likely allow me to preserve this fantasy of being an island unto myself in a big sea of love for the next couple of decades until I reach retirement age, without much personal cost, as long as I were willing to stick my fingers in my ears and not listen to any voices outside my little domain. But even this privilege is predicated on a kind of stability that might soon become a casualty of political and environmental crises.

¹¹Some would rather call it advertising. In my native language of Portuguese, the two words are the same.

process of constant engagement, and of being willing to live with the idea that the first hundred people one talks to might not listen, but the hundred-and-first might.

Even the concept of solidarity has to be learned by those with the luxury never to have had to rely on it. This fact becomes clear when colleagues in a department that feels it takes good care of its graduate students express surprise that these students would join picket lines along with those in other, less well-resourced departments, or when administrators try to drive a wedge between full-time and part-time non-tenure-track faculty during contract negotiations. The epigraph to this essay is, as explained in [10, 21], from a letter by Guido Marx, an engineering professor at Stanford and member of the organizing committee for the AAUP's founding meeting, to John Dewey, who would become its first president. Marx was arguing for the inclusion of assistant professors (who at that time were in many ways contingent faculty) in the AAUP's membership. He was unsuccessful at the time, but I am glad to say that the AAUP is now open to all academics, including graduate students, in recognition of Marx's prescient belief that "our organization gains its strength for accomplishment through its numbers as well as their representative character [...] If this movement is to get anywhere it should be firmly based on a philosophy of inclusiveness and cooperation and not exclusiveness."

I would also like to say something about the belief many of us have that we are fortunate to be paid to do something we would want to do anyway, and should feel nothing but gratitude and obligation towards our institutions. To the extent that we feel privileged to do what we do, it is essential to understand that our work depends on a network of labor to which we do a great disservice if we stand apart from it. The "thinkers rather than workers mentality" can "prevent us from understanding much of what makes our research, and especially our teaching, possible. We are encouraged to see the workers around us as there to make our jobs easier, rather than as fellow employees of a nonprofit corporation with its own corporate culture." [16] We also need to understand that we do this work within individual institutions and an overall academic system that have both greatly benefited from and helped create a host of inequalities. (Again, I recommend watching [30].) So any sense of gratitude we might have ought to be expressed by a commitment to stand in solidarity with those who make it possible directly, as well as those who have been hurt and disadvantaged by this process. When I call my institution on its failures to promote economic and racial justice, when I support academic and nonacademic unions at my institution, as well as student and community organizations fighting against some of the inequities that it has helped maintain, I am doing it *because*, not despite of how fortunate I feel to be able to make a good living proving theorems and teaching highly-engaged students.¹²

Academics' sense of mission can also get in its own way. At the time of the industrial action with which I opened this essay, a colleague asked whether those of us supporting the action took for granted that there was a protected right not to cross picket lines, and hence not teach in the case of a strike. They themselves did not feel they had such a right, but did feel a responsibility to students in their

¹²We might have something to learn here from professional athletes, who have seen the benefits of collective bargaining despite not being what one might think of as the typical kinds of workers associated with labor unions. A few days ago as I write, WNBA and NBA players, some of whom make even more money than top university administrators, went on strike not because of their own working conditions, but as a way to protest and bring attention to the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

classes, and indirectly to their parents. My response was to say that, in addition to the fact that even highly responsible instructors will occasionally cancel classes for reasons far less important than the right of workers to have a say in their working conditions, there are many professions that come with great responsibility to others, some greater than our own, as in the case of medical professionals, but if we are to say that this should always come before the struggle for workers' rights, and should prevent us from joining labor actions or refusing to cross picket lines, then that is the end of the labor movement. I do believe I have the right, indeed the responsibility, to do my part in the struggle for the rights of workers at my university. (I am not speaking here of my legal rights, which are complicated, but of moral ones.) But even more to the point here, instructor working conditions are student learning conditions. I have supported striking nurses at the hospital at which I get my medical care, not only because I believe in the rightness of their demands, but also because I know that many of these demands are aimed at improving patient care. I feel the same about academic unions vis-à-vis students.

All of these challenges, legal and sociological, cannot be ignored. However: Laws can be changed, and organizing toward large-scale unionization can include political action to affect legislation. (As I write, for instance, the "Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act", a large-scale piece of labor reform legislation, has passed the House of Representatives.) The Yeshiva decision noted that "[t]here is no evidence that Congress has considered whether a university faculty may organize for collective bargaining under the [NLRA]." There is no reason that must remain the case. More importantly, unionization efforts do not have to depend on the NLRB and the courts. Minds can also be changed. Colleges and universities can voluntarily recognize unions, and faculty can pressure them in that direction. It is fully consistent with these institutions' stated missions, and their accountability to society in general rather than to stockholders, to do so. To think that to voluntarily recognize a union is to let an enemy into the house is a failure of the imagination, an inability to recognize the mutually beneficial nature of democratic power-sharing. Collective bargaining is inherently oppositional only when institutions are inherently exploitative. Whether academic institutions are that or not at the moment, they should certainly wish not to be.

The Yeshiva dissent clearly recognizes that what we should be talking about is a collaborative arrangement, one meant to avoid rather than create conflict. The dissent sees a basic alignment of interests, and goes on to say that "[d]ifferences of opinion and emphasis may develop, however, on exactly how to devote the institution's resources to achieve those goals. When these disagreements surface, the national labor laws contemplate their resolution through the peaceful process of collective bargaining." If an institution is not too far gone down a road that we cannot countenance, this is the right attitude. And if it is that far gone, then of course that's when we *really* need the legal protection of unionization. Basically, as the dissent says, when discussing an increase in collective bargaining agreements at the time, which had led to over 130,000 academic workers being unionized, "[t]he upsurge in the incidence of collective bargaining has generally been attributed to the faculty's desire to use the process as a countervailing force against increased administrative power and to ensure that the ideals of the academic community are actually practiced." Near the end of the dissent, though, comes a warning:

Today's decision, however, threatens to eliminate much of the administration's incentive to resolve its disputes with the faculty through open discussion and mutual agreement. By its overbroad and unwarranted interpretation of the managerial exclusion, the Court denies the faculty the protections of the NLRA and, in so doing, removes whatever deterrent value the Act's availability may offer against unreasonable administrative conduct. Rather than promoting the Act's objective of funneling dissension between employers and employees into collective bargaining, the Court's decision undermines that goal and contributes to the possibility that "recurring disputes [will] fester outside the negotiation process until strikes or other forms of economic warfare occur." [The quote is from an earlier Supreme Court labor-related decision.]

In other words, collective bargaining should be in everyone's best interests. I believe that this fact holds for graduate student worker unionization, for non-tenure-track faculty unionization, for tenure-track faculty unionization, and indeed for all forms of unionization within colleges and universities. Collective bargaining is not only a way to protect individual employment rights. It is also a way to make institutions as a whole better.

It is also worth keeping in mind that organizing and collective planning can yield significant results even before they result in any kind of official recognition. At Chicago, for example, GSU has managed to do a great deal for its members, including influence institutional policies (despite our administration's refusal to even name them in communications), as well as for other organizations and causes through its solidarity actions and shows of support. Sometimes it can even be just a matter of being able to reach a large group of people with a common cause, or being able to bring enough people together to share information and counter strategies aimed at siloing different parts of an institution, or different categories of workers (as well as students and community members). Legal recognition is fundamental, as a tool and as a motivating goal, but it is not a precondition for a great deal of effectiveness, nor do we have to agree completely on the details of what we are building towards. Organizing is powerful in itself. Working things out collectively is powerful in itself.

None of this is to say that it won't require great effort to change institutional and individual minds. For reasons I will discuss below, I believe it is an effort well worth making, but it will be a struggle, no doubt. Many institutions, my own included, have fought academic unionization, especially for graduate student workers, in ways that have alienated even some faculty members who oppose it. At the same time, many other faculty members have bought the administration line entirely, even some who otherwise consider themselves aligned with the labor movement and other progressive causes. In addition to the issue of how we see ourselves and our work, there is also the effect of the entirely one-sided picture that administrations so often paint, using their control of the means of communication to do things like pass off rehashes of rehashes of texts prepared by lawyers and public relations specialists as the carefully considered personal opinions of deans, provosts, and presidents. It takes some work to learn enough to parse this kind of propaganda, but I think it is necessary work for anyone who wants to be a responsible academic citizen.

Of course there are financial considerations at play in this kind of opposition by administrations, and most definitely the desire to hoard decision-making power, whether for personal gain or out of a genuine belief that “daddy knows best”. But there is also an ideological consonance on the part of many academic administrations with the class that keeps the lights on. (How much of that is appeasement and how much genuine agreement is usually an open question.) And some of these administrations’ responses have been so unnecessarily heavy-handed, so out of keeping with their usual political and PR savvy, that I have come to believe that not only do they want to fight organized labor, they want to be *seen* to fight it, by boards of trustees and other donor-class interests.¹³

Which brings me to the crucial context for this discussion, the contemporary academic environment that neoliberalism has wrought. Academic corporatization is an umbrella term that stands in for a variety of multifaceted but interconnected phenomena (some of which were apparently already clear to Justice Brennan when writing his *Yeshiva* dissent in 1980): the ascendancy of free-market thinking and human capital theory within academia, the influence of large donors, the rise in metrics and rankings, the move away from the humanities and towards areas like “big science”, the bastardization of the struggle for equity and social justice into the corporate weaselspeak of so many “diversity and inclusion” programs, the view of students as customers, and so on.¹⁴ It is a problematic term, not least because it often comes with a counterproductive nostalgia for a time that never was, a point I’ll return to later in connection with [6]. But the term will do for this discussion. (By all means look for more nuanced views in recent work such as [5].) Especially if we keep in mind that this is a two-way street: academia is not just subject to these phenomena; it is a major generating force for them, both through the direct actions of institutions with substantial local, and in some cases national and global presence, and through its roles in ideological creation and reproduction in both scholarship and pedagogy, and in subject formation. (I am, after all, writing from the home of the Chicago Boys and their heirs.)¹⁵ In this context, mathematicians and mathematics departments are in an interesting position.

Organizationally, the size and structure of many of our departments depend heavily on “service teaching”. There are serious questions about the long-term sustainability of this model, especially as turf wars encouraged by a competitive, free-market approach and “butts in seats” budgeting encourage other departments to teach their own basic math courses. There is also the question of how to oppose the increased use and exploitation of adjunct faculty, if service teaching is the justification for our departments to be as they are. And the question of how to justify

¹³See [15] for a discussion of both tactics and ideological motivations, in the particular but generalizable case of graduate student workers and the University of Chicago.

¹⁴Though that last one, disturbing as it is, seems almost quaint to me by now. I feel that many institutions no longer see students even as customers, but as product. The donors are the customers.

¹⁵It is also important to note, that, through their tax-exempt status and extensive use of public resources, even so-called private academic institutions cannot be thought of as private entities with no inherent responsibility to the public good, a point well made by Destin Jenkins in [30]. Their exclusionary practices are thus often a form of expropriation. When they serve the interests of corporations and large donors, they then engage in a form of double expropriation, allowing what should belong to the public to be bought by those whose capital is itself generally the result of the privatization of public resources.

and defend tenure—one of the few legally-protected bulwarks against administrative overreach that some of us still have—if it is not being used as an instrument of solidarity, and is instead increasingly becoming part of an unsustainable divide between academic haves and have-nots that threatens ultimately to swallow even the haves (see for instance [8], and many of the articles linked to in that piece).¹⁶ Intellectual and moral arguments against adjunctification, and for the protection of tenure and other safeguards against exploitation, might be doomed to failure at many institutions. These are labor issues, a couple among several in which we should seriously consider the benefits of being able to demand rather than plead.

Intellectually, I think there are several ways in which mathematicians share the position of the humanities, at least to the extent that we retain a commitment to work that falls under the rubric of “basic science”. In this regard, the situation of the humanities might be a canary in the coalmine for us. When Kevin Birmingham became the first adjunct faculty member to win the Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism, he gave an acceptance talk [4] in which he called out his tenured and tenure-track colleagues for complicity in the adjunctification of the humanities, arguing that it relies on the overproduction of PhD students. He said in that talk that “[t]he key feature of adjunctification is a form of labor-market polarization. The desirability of elite faculty positions doesn’t just correlate with worsening adjunct conditions; it helps create the worsening conditions”, and later that “[i]f you are a tenured (or tenure-track) faculty member teaching in a humanities department with Ph.D. candidates, you are both the instrument and the direct beneficiary of exploitation.” (See also [1].) This is an important warning. Being in a field that might not be in quite such dire straits yet, and one with greater “marketability” outside the academy, should not be a cause for complacency. Indeed, the possibility that we might still be able to do something about it makes it all that more important to listen to such warnings, and to fight now for labor structures that will not pit us against each other in a desperate fight for resources made to seem scarcer than they really are by their poor distribution.

In the mid-1990s, the University of Rochester announced its “Rochester Renaissance Plan” [35], which among other things included a massive reduction in the number of math faculty and the elimination of the math graduate program. I was a graduate student at the time, and remember being heartened by a swift response not only by mathematicians but also by academics in other areas [13], who helped pressure the university into dropping that idea [36]. This kind of top-down restructuring continues to be a threat, and the economic climate as I write makes it likely that it will become increasingly common. Of course, when some institutions are being forced to close their doors entirely, “downsizing” starts to look like a reasonable compromise by comparison. But restructuring plans that are not made in collaboration with those who know the prevailing conditions on the ground, and will be the most directly affected, are almost necessarily doomed to be dismal reflections of

¹⁶If the protection of academic freedom and freedom of speech is a major argument for tenure, then it seems that those of us with tenure have a duty to help defend these freedoms for those who do not enjoy the same protection. This cannot be done via the kind of formal equality associated for instance with the “Chicago Principles” touted by the University of Chicago’s president (and fellow mathematician) Robert Zimmer, which completely ignores differences in power and access, and can at best produce a world in which all can speak but only those in power can be heard. In this way, unionization is very much a free speech issue.

blinkered thought, flexible morality, and institutional magical thinking. And given the interests at play, real collaboration needs at least a modicum of power balance.

For personal reasons, I followed some of the developments in a recent exercise in large-scale restructuring, this one at Goucher College, which closed several majors [9], including mathematics. I couldn't help thinking as I saw some of that unfold that, with the passing of a couple of decades and the different situation and visibility of a liberal arts college, responses like that in the Rochester case are likely to come only if there is not just an internal organization of academic labor, but cross-institutional instruments of solidarity that can significantly mobilize faculty at other institutions, including more nationally visible ones. Similar thoughts about the possibilities of solidarity occurred to me locally when Chicago State University went through a financial crisis, which included all 900 of its employees receiving layoff notices in 2016, closely followed by its president leaving with a \$600,000 severance package [20]. And of course more recently, as many institutions slide into insolvency largely un mourned by wealthier ones that can see the world only in competitive terms. But it is a competition with few real winners other than the large donors who receive the return of prestige and influence for their investments, and the administrators who use parameters such as that exorcism, the U.S. News & World Report rankings, to further their careers.

On the other hand, a dissociation from the most threatened parts of the academy, and an increased alignment with applied science and engineering, carry their own questions, raised for instance by funding sources, political issues like those we have seen around climate science, and the labor arrangements of labs. Collective action is key to protecting ourselves to the extent that we remain committed to work that is not at the center of corporate interests, and to protecting our souls, so to speak, to the extent that we don't. The structures of organized labor are not the only forms of collective action we need to engage in, but they can form a major part of that effort, even its center if done on a large enough scale.

At the same time, in some institutions at least, mathematicians might be in a reasonable position to resist some of the more noxious effects of corporatization, and hence might well have a responsibility to do so, because we are not as dependent on precarious labor and outside funding as lab scientists, or as under duress as those in the humanities. Perhaps there is a kind of rough analogy that can be drawn between academic corporatization and gentrification. In both cases one could use a positive phrase like "economic development", and certainly we shouldn't disregard the significant marshaling of resources that absolutely crucial areas of research and teaching such as climate science require.¹⁷ One can make similar arguments about the needs of cities, but development *can* be done carefully and thoughtfully, and in particular it can be done with explicit, legally-enforced power-sharing, via instruments such as rent control and community benefits agreements. Indeed, the real engagement with community needs represented by such instruments seems to me a precondition to avoiding disaster. Labor unions can fulfill the same kind of legally-protected power-sharing role in the academy. In this analogy, mathematics departments and mathematicians might be a bit like higher-income members of communities undergoing gentrification. We see ourselves as neither gentrifiers nor

¹⁷On what it will take for academic institutions to respond in a responsible manner to climate change, including the role of unions and coordinated action between them, see Izabella Laba's clear-eyed and moving contribution to this volume, posted online at [17].

gentrified against, for now. Then some questions arise: What are the responsibilities of those who are not being displaced to those who are? How sure are they that they will remain in that position, and what compromises will that involve? Even if all goes well, will the resulting environment be one they want to live in?

But why not pursue collective action through existing means, formal ones like organs of faculty governance, or informal ones like lobbying through department chairs, ad hoc meetings with administrators, petitions, and so on? And for those for whom recognized academic unions are already an existing means, like faculty at some public institutions, why put in the effort to strengthen them, and make them part of a broader, intra- and interinstitutional solidarity movement? The moment we find ourselves in as I write might have something to teach us here.

A lesson of the pandemic: Things are fine until they're not, $n^2 + n + 41$ is always prime until it isn't, and the cost of not being prepared can be staggering. This is true at the individual level, and all the more so at the communal one. Asking why someone without major grievances would want to unionize is like asking why a healthy person would want to get health insurance. But no, it isn't. It's like asking why a healthy person would want to have a robust public health system.

A second lesson of the pandemic: When things go wrong, current institutional structures will not save us. The extent to which faculty governance has eroded at most institutions has been placed in stark relief by the lack of democratic faculty participation in planning for teaching and research during this emergency. I'm not talking here about having some faculty presence in committees with no ultimate decision power. I'm talking about the call made in the AAUP's "Principles of Academic Governance during the COVID-19 Pandemic" [33] to "honor the faculty's decision-making responsibility for academic and faculty personnel matters as the most effective means of weathering the current crisis", and the reminder that, in well-functioning institutions, "[n]o important institutional decision should be made unilaterally by administrations or governing boards." At the University of Chicago, for example, as I write the elected Council of the University Senate, which according to the university's statutes [34] is "the supreme academic body of the University" has not been called to vote on any aspect of the teaching model to be adopted in the Autumn of 2020. I am well aware that at other institutions, faculty participation in decision-making on this issue has been even less than at Chicago. It should be clear that, especially when it comes to matters where the financial interest is likely to outweigh the academic one, we cannot rely on informal influence, nor unfortunately on formal organs of faculty governance, as much as I am still willing to fight for this possibly outdated notion,¹⁸ for similar forms of institutional democratization, and for cross-institutional initiatives like the COVID-19 Statement of Academic Solidarity [27]. To have a voice, we need real power. We need union power.¹⁹

¹⁸Some of what I say about the empty shell that faculty governance has become at many institutions comes from the experience of having served a couple of stints on the Council of the University Senate.

¹⁹Sara Matthiesen's "How to Stop the Cuts" [18] has several examples of recent collective action by academics that has had real positive effects. See also [24] for an extended discussion of the case of Rutgers. I can add the example of the University of Chicago's non-tenure track faculty union, which negotiated a contract with significant improvements to its members' working conditions in 2018. The negotiations were long, and involved the possibility of a strike. Our AAUP chapter wrote a public letter in support of these colleagues as they prepared to make the exceptionally difficult decision of authorizing a strike, and organized within departments to obtain

And so a third lesson of the pandemic: To riff on Churchill, collective solutions are the worst solutions to our problems except for all of those others that have been tried. Organized collective action should not be entered into thoughtlessly. As much as we might decry those who fail to participate, we have to keep in mind that there is often a solid history behind their distrust of the collective. The purpose of unions is to check power with power, so if they are working correctly, they will be powerful. And power doesn't only corrupt, it corrodes. The work to keep this from happening is endless, but the alternative is this great perversion of the idea of individual freedom that animates the maskless libertarians of the current moment, whose actual freedom extends exactly as far as those who wield real power want it to. That their horror of being told what to do has a history does not mean that it isn't hugely self-defeating, as well of course as all-of-us-defeating. If the day ever comes that we have a full faculty union at my university, I will celebrate that evening, and show up the next day ready to fight to make sure the union is and remains democratic, transparent, accountable, and committed to the greater good. *Hay gobierno? Soy Contra!* But opposition can still be constructive when the balance of power has not shifted so far as to be not only out of reach, but even out of sight. In a union I would have a vote, but I think I would have more luck finding out the formula for Coca-Cola than just trying to learn what goes on at the meetings of my university's Board of Trustees, let alone affecting any of their decisions.

As wary as I am of the rhetorical trick wherein one presents a caricature of others' arguments and then proceeds to destroy them like an action hero in a choreographed fight, I think there is value in going through some other possible responses to corporatization, in very broad strokes, and responding to them in turn.

One, of course, is to see it as generally a good thing, to think that the academy needs to be more like the business world anyway, let the free market work its magic, etc. That world-view might be a little too far from my own for me to engage without writing a whole other essay, but I'll say that it's a miserable tautology to assume that a system is working because it does well by those who "deserve it most", where the latter are defined exactly as those who have become successful under the system. (A particularly salient point for a field like mathematics that is so implicated in the reproduction of the myth of meritocracy.) Brazilian writer Luis Fernando Veríssimo has an essay [22] in which, speaking about neoliberalism, he tells the story of a particular kind of dolphin that has become well-known for saving people from drowning by pushing them towards the shore. There is a theory, he says, that these dolphins just like to push people. Some of them get pushed towards the shore, some away from it. But no one gets to hear the version of the drowned.

There are also those who deny, explicitly or implicitly, that these things are happening, at least at their own institutions. If that is really the case, then congratulations. But even then I would ask: What safeguards are in place to prevent

over 200 tenured and tenure-track faculty signatures. This effort was nothing compared to the enormous work put in by the union's negotiating team and other organizers, but an important aspect of solidarity is that every little bit helps, and focusing mainly on showy, heroic actions is ultimately counterproductive.

it from happening in the future? What mechanisms of solidarity with other institutions are being established? It's not exactly wise to say everything is fine because it's just my next-door neighbor's house that is on fire.

Another response is that, whatever we think of it, corporatization is an inevitability that we need to learn to work within rather than try to resist. As mentioned above, probably the most common version of this response is implicit, through keeping one's nose down and not worrying about anything beyond one's own work. Similar in effect is the position that things are too far gone for anything to make a difference. I think that much of what I'm saying in this essay is that there is still much that we can do, and that fighting for changes, however small they might seem individually, is both an obligation and an exercise in self-interest. Especially because whether or not things can get better, they can definitely get worse. (See for instance [2].)

Even the most cynical versions of this perspective tend to come with moral self-justifications and all their typical attending contradictions. I found it rather interesting to hear of an account from someone in the lab sciences of some of their colleagues' reasons for opposing a graduate student worker union, which included both the belief that graduate students in the lab sciences are richly rewarded, so that they have no grounds for complaint, and the knowledge that many lab leaders are asking too much of their students and should be worried about external oversight.²⁰ (But of course, it's all in the name of science. . .)

I have much greater sympathy for those who choose to operate within the existing framework by using informal power channels to work on others' behalf, or in the collective interest. (I'll say something about more formal means below.) To some extent, this is necessary work even within highly functional organizations, given that a perfectly flat power structure is something of a point at infinity. An over-reliance on it is dangerous, however. For example, I suspect that there are many politically savvy departments that have found ways to improve the conditions of their graduate students beyond those of others at the same institutions through backroom negotiations. But I am not ready to give up on democratic institutions and transparency, or accept the distortions and inequities that this informal approach creates. Fostering internal competition for resources, some of which have been made artificially scarce, is a key strategy of the corporate power structure. And it's dangerous to feed the monster in the hope that it will never turn against us. That's just not how monsters work.

Nor should we acquiesce to the paternalism of administrators who demand our trust that they have our best interests at heart, and quickly become offended when we question the wisdom of blind trust. It is often difficult to read this offense as anything other than strategy, when they must know full well that, by giving up our right to share in the decision-making, we are extending our trust not only to them, but to all of their as-yet-unknown successors.

There are also those who see taking care of oneself or one's immediate community as a form of resistance. I do have some sympathy for this idea too. One version of it

²⁰The idea, so beloved of private university administrators, that unions will drive wedges between graduate students and their advisors is generally drivel. If anything, a graduate student worker union would be a welcome ally in advocating for my students in areas over which I have no direct influence. I will say, however, that there are advisors out there who are right to be worried about the increased protections against exploitation and harassment that unions can bring. These, of course, are advisors we would be well rid of.

can be found in Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber's *The Slow Professor* [3], which advocates adopting principles of the Slow movement (probably most famous in its Slow Food form) as a form of resistance to the demands for increased speed and efficiency in the academy. Although there is much in that book I agree with, I was struck by the lack of discussion of demands on our time and energy placed not by corporatized interests themselves, but by the need to stand with those who are most affected by these interests. This is also labor that tends to fall disproportionately on women and people of color, all the more so in a field like math with its deep gender and racial imbalances. The kind of slowdown through collective and institutional action advocated by Izabella Laba in [17] seems to me a much better version, and as noted near the end of that piece, unions have an important role to play here.

I see a similar problem in the way that the influential idea of being “in but not of” an institution, from the chapter on “The University and the Undercommons” in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* [11], to “disappear[] into the underground” of the university, can be taken as permission to check out. I think of the work I do in criticizing, protesting, and organizing against some of the policies of the University of Chicago's administration as part of my service to the university. I mean that quite unironically. It might not be serving “the University” if we define it as coterminous with its official version, or its current policies and practices, but this work is meant to serve a different university, a potential one that I am happy to be of, not just in.

Even the more “traditional” academic service I do, sitting on various committees and such, is something I try to do with that university in mind. I should make sure to reinforce here that I think of responsible, thoughtful work undertaken as a committee member, department chair, or even a higher-level administrator as potentially a “yes and” thing. It is definitely true that much of this work helps to buttress problematic structures, but that is one major reason that I want it to happen in a context in which there are other structures in place to help fix these problems. So, for instance, I will serve on my department's graduate admissions committee regardless, but I would be happier doing so if I knew that our incoming students were entering a university where they could be part of a recognized union with the ability to negotiate with the university administration in ways that I, or even my department as a whole, cannot, for example when it come to issues related to health benefits. I would be even happier if the academic labor system many of them will continue to inhabit after graduating were a more humane and equitable one, protected by real power-sharing and solidarity among democratized institutions. And while this kind of service work can certainly help if it is done with the right goals in mind (which is not possible for all positions, unfortunately), it is not enough, for similar structural reasons that make organs of faculty governance not enough.

A final response I want to consider is the one that holds that the way to resist corporatization is to resist everything that comes with it, including reactions to it like unionization. I have talked to academics who see efforts at academic unionization as something that creates, rather than responds to, the transformation of education and research into a business. All I can say there is that I think that the corporatization ship has long since sailed, and that this is exactly the wrong way around. Can one really look an adjunct trying to cobble together a living out of several part-time positions with no benefits in the eye and say that it is their desire to improve academic labor structures that is sullyng the beautifully pure and

abstract world of the ivory tower? Or can one deny the relevance of that adjunct's working conditions because they are not working in one's particular institution or department (yet)?

This perspective reminds me of the situation in which those who want to address issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia in the arts, or the academy, or any number of other settings are accused of wanting to "politicize" things that were somehow beautiful and pure and blessedly unworldly. This kind of argument might be out of favor at the moment, as individuals and organizations are forced to confront one of the many truths that the Me Too Movement and Black Lives Matter have put in front of us, that the "neutral" position is one of the most politically-charged of all. But it will return, and it will find new places to deploy itself.

A particular feature of this last perspective is a preservationism based on the image of a past in which the academy was a highly functional community of scholars. There are others who, while believing that there is little or nothing left of this past to preserve, nevertheless see a return to it as the ideal towards which our reformist work should be directed. But those who would live in Xanadu always imagine themselves the Khan, never a servant. I hope it is no longer controversial to point out the general idea that the "good old days" were good for very few. Even if there are aspects of how colleges and universities used to function that we would like to recapture, a naive regress, even if it were possible, would get us nowhere near where we need to be. We need a way forward that minimizes the harm done by our individual inabilities to see much beyond our own interests. To me, a promising direction is pointed to by broadly collective organizations like the UChicago Labor Council, which brings together officers, stewards, and members of various university and university-related labor unions, academic and nonacademic alike, as well as other solidary groups, including student and community organizations. The aims of the council include mutual support, knowledge-sharing, the coordination of efforts, and visibility. Particularly important is its underlying premise that there is common cause between workers of various kinds at the university and beyond, as well as those affected by its policies.

I would also like to highlight the case of Rutgers University, as outlined by Todd Wolfson, president of the Rutgers AAUP-AFT Executive Council, in his recent interview [24] with Astra Taylor, where he describes an expansive and ambitious kind of coalition-building, and an organizing framework known as Bargaining for the Common Good [26]. I am very glad that this interview was published before I had completed revisions to this essay, so that I could cite it and note that Wolfson discusses many of the issues I've touched on here, with the concrete details of a particular multi-campus institution's realities, making a compelling case for a broad form of solidarity within the context of academic labor organizing.

In "Critical University Studies and the Crisis Consensus" [6], Abigail Boggs and Nick Mitchell point out that critics of academia of all political stripes agree that academia is in crisis (and this pre-pandemic...). They say that

[t]he crisis consensus is a mainstay of political ideology that functions with particular ardor in higher education, where it pivots on the invocation of the university as a good in itself, as an institution defined ultimately by the progressive nature at its core. The crisis consensus thereby settles in advance the constitutive problems and

paradoxes—to say nothing of the forms of real expropriation and violence—that continue to constitute the university as such.

Later, talking about the field of Critical University Studies specifically, they further point out that this work has too often made the crisis consensus normative, and that this consensus itself is “normed, often silently, by an analytical predisposition toward rescue and restoration.”

There are a couple of vague thoughts I have had a for a while, which crystallized when I read their analysis. One is that this predisposition is particularly relevant to unionization because the “good old days” that many critics of present-day academic institutions long for did not have academic unions as an important constituent part, or to the extent that they did, these unions’ contributions have been largely forgotten. Unionization as a way forward may not appeal to those who would rather move back in time. Even with the best intentions, the desire to revisit a mythical past (which in reality was worse than the current moment in several aspects) can serve to bolster the status quo by undermining institutions like academic labor unions, especially in their role within a new labor movement.

The other thing that particularly struck me while reading [6] is just how clearly right its perspective appears to be to the people I interact with in settings like the Labor Council and other organizations that involve people whose relationships to the university are very different from that of tenured faculty. Community organizations in particular have the memory that whatever good old days there might have been within the academy were bought at a great cost to many outside it (and, of course, to many within it). To give just one example of how this process has worked, the Reparations at UChicago Working Group (see [14]) has built a case based not only on the original founding gift to the university from capital gained at the expense of enslaved people, but also on a long history of complicity with racist practices extending well beyond its early days. Of course, it’s possible to separate an institution’s internal and external practices, faculty can be teaching responsibly even when their institution behaves irresponsibly, camels do sometimes pass through the eyes of needles, but it’s an iffy proposition. Particularly so for those who devote significant labor to institution-building, who then take on a responsibility for the actions of the institutions they help build, and deserve a real say in those actions, even outside their particular spheres. It might be a strange idea to some that helping to build up a mathematics program, say, confers both a duty and a right to play a part in determining the overall practices of the institution within which it exists, but it should be a powerfully motivating one if we are willing to engage with it seriously.

One doesn’t have to agree with the specific diagnoses or demands of organizations that bring a critical eye to the practices of colleges and universities to find their perspectives important,²¹ to see the benefits of having a broader array of voices at the table, or to want to work toward a more democratic future, indeed, one in which we ourselves can have a greater say. It does require us to talk to each other, to negotiate alliances, and not to think of our institutions as the only sources

²¹In fact, these organizations often disagree with each other, which is of course very healthy. When these disagreements happen, however, universities often seek those whose positions are most closely aligned with institutional interests, and market their voices as the predominant “will of the people”. My point here is not that university administrations are unique in amplifying only the voices they agree with, but that on many issues, they are currently the only ones with a sufficient loud amplifier to be heard above the ambient noise.

of possible solutions. It also requires us to educate ourselves about organizing strategies, to understand processes like power mapping (see [18]), perhaps to put into real practice what is sometimes an empty commonplace and learn from our students. And it does raise the distinct possibility that we ourselves will be called to account for some of our own practices, will be made uncomfortable, and will not be able to remain in our carefully carved-out niches in the status quo. None of these are drawbacks.

Some of what I've said above might sound dismal and depressing. I know there are those who see as dismal in itself any analysis of academic life that describes it as at least in part a system of power relationships. To me, it's only the same kind of acknowledgment of reality that architects and engineers must face when building on difficult terrain. I began this essay with a sense of possibility, and I want to end that way as well. It's not easy to keep that spirit up, particularly so at this time in which I'm writing, but I don't think we have the option to give up. It's once again time to do the Hokey Pokey while walking in a circle.

Labor unions are a tool, not an end in themselves. They are not the only collectivities we need to build on and around campuses, and they certainly should not be a way for us to abdicate our responsibilities to an organization. As I said before, unions have suffered from many corrupting and corroding forces, and a 21st century labor movement requires constant participation and vigilance, in all directions. We need to ensure that unions work in our interest and that of the common good, and we need to fight institutional reactions, including ones deliberately designed to cause damage and blame it on unions. For instance, it is a central part of universities' union-busting playbook to try to portray graduate student worker unions and non-tenure-track faculty unions as oppositional to tenured faculty. It is particularly important to resist this trope, which is part of the overall corporate strategy of turning workers against each other.

So yes, labor unions are a tool, but they are a crucial one. We need institutions with real power, to demand and decide, not merely to request and advise, and to help set the agenda in the first place, so that our decisions are not merely symbolic. We also need collective resources and organizational infrastructure. It is very difficult to conduct productive negotiations when one set of participants has an array of resources, including the services of dedicated professionals, while another has to rely entirely on a small group of volunteers whose energy might disappear at any moment. The floors of the academy are littered with noble causes dropped as soon as the two or three people leading the charge found themselves faced with too many other, more pressing demands. Meanwhile, an institution's lawyers or PR staff will never give up on an issue because classes have started and they have a pile of homework to grade.

More than anything, though, we need solidarity. This is not an empty word; it's a real, day-by-day, lived thing. It's a matter of showing up, of doing the work, of supporting each other, of organizing and re-organizing and negotiating, but never losing track of what we can build together. Of believing, for example, that through collective action we can flatten the income distribution of academic and nonacademic workers within and across institutions, and that doing so will produce a better environment for all of us. It's a matter of using whatever power we might have, and of joining forces to amplify this power. As Carolyn Betensky of Tenure for the Common Good says (as quoted in [19]): "This isn't a savior thing."

This coming together of interests is powerfully summed up in the words, sometimes attributed to Lila Watson but according to her, more properly credited collectively to an Aboriginal activists group she was part of in 1970s Queensland: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

When I think of academic unionization, I don’t think only of individual unions negotiating over local employment conditions, as important as that is. I think of an opportunity for collaboration and solidarity within and across institutions on a range of issues, involving many moving parts, with unions forming a key component, even if not the only one. Yes, salaries, timely payment, benefits, grievance procedures, health care, but also shared governance, class sizes, student loan burdens, responses to climate change, helping those at financially-strapped institutions through cooperation, and very much also the responsibilities of academic institutions to individuals and communities, their political roles at various levels, and how we can act as a powerful force within a new kind of labor movement.

So my call to action is not a single-minded one. I very much believe that we should be organizing to create new unions and get them recognized; strengthening existing academic unions, and fighting to keep them focused on the broad struggle for equity and justice on all fronts; and building connections between unions, academic and nonacademic alike, as well as between them and other organizations within and outside academic institutions. None of this requires heroic individual effort. Each of us can do our own bit of the work and encourage, help, and when necessary and possible, protect others who are also willing to do theirs. We can also take small collective actions without a full-time commitment to a cause. Starting a chapter of the AAUP, for instance, is not difficult. But I also believe in the importance of an individual and collective rethinking on the part of academics of the structure of our institutions, their internal and external impact, and our own status as workers who share a collective interest that goes well beyond their carefully guarded walls. From this kind of understanding, the work can flow naturally, as naturally as the things big and small so many of us do every day within our mathematical communities flow from our love of mathematics. (And yes, there is nothing wrong with love, when it doesn’t blind us, or bind us to an unjust system.)

It’s an old saw, but its teeth are still sharp: “United we bargain, divided we beg.” I am under no illusions that sustained, well-informed collective action, even unto a fully unionized university, can solve all the problems of the contemporary academy. But it is our best hope to make at least a turn toward more democratic, more just, more humane institutions, ones in which we can thrive ourselves, without being forced by the need to keep our heads barely above the water into practices and alignments that ultimately hurt us, our students, our fellow workers, and our communities.

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