



We Are All Workers: A Class Analysis of University Labour Strikes

Amy Pason

abstract

The 2007 AFSCME workers' strike at the University of Minnesota exposed the extent that "we are all workers", showing that it is not strategic nor correct to operate under the assumption that the work of students and faculty is different from the wage labour of staffs that handle the daily operations of the university. This analysis suggests that using class as a framework to understand the operations of the university best builds solidarity across all worker classes, and that we must use our various class/worker positions in the university to change the nature of knowledge production and combat the corporate logics that turn knowledge and ideas into purchasable commodities. It is through realizing that *we all are workers* that we can work against the logics of capital to reclaim the university as a non-capitalist commons, or transform our workplace into a more democratically derived site of knowledge production. Previous critiques of the corporatization of the university have not gone so far to argue that we must all view ourselves as workers, but given the spread of corporatization in all areas of university work, we cannot afford not to recognize ourselves as workers.

Contrary to the numerous emails from university administration sent during the fall of 2007 that "business was continuing as usual," business was *not* continuing as usual as clerical, technical, and health care workers of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) union went on strike for a living wage at the University of Minnesota (U of M). AFSCME workers at the U of M control the day-to-day operations of the university from classroom scheduling, library archiving, managing department budgets, laboratory maintenance, and "making sure they pull the right tooth" (AFSCME, 2007b). In the three years I have been at the U of M, business as usual has not meant seeing picketing workers in front of campus buildings, wearing buttons stating "We Support U of M Workers," and it certainly has not included emails from administration reminding me of my job obligations (to hold class on campus) including the limitations of the support I could legally give to the striking staff.

Business as usual has not meant that students, faculty, and staff felt tension and division between our labours. Business as usual has not included understanding that my position at the university was no different than the workers on the picket line – that as a graduate student, first and foremost, I was considered an *employee* in service to undergraduates. This last realization is perhaps the greatest lesson of the failed 2007 strike: we are all workers, and that our best strategy to work against the corporatization of our universities is to organize ourselves, across our various positions, *as workers*.

The corporatization of the university has been enabled by faculty and students who have laboured under the fantasy that knowledge production – specifically teaching and research – is somehow different than other forms of labour, and is unconnected from the wage labour of university staff. Understanding knowledge production not as *labour* is perpetuated further by a symbolic hierarchy in which faculty, students, and staff are located in different positions of privilege and status in the economic system of the university. The reality, however, is that the ‘product’ of college degrees and research is made possible only by the collaboration and cooperation among faculty, staff, and students (especially undergraduates), and that all our work is indeed labour. Closer to the truth is that all of us have our labour exploited, albeit in different forms, because Capital does not discriminate.

The persistent belief that these positions *are different* has prevented organizing on campuses across classes, which is the same as the mechanisms that nation-states employ to create divisions between the working, middle, and upper classes. Under the rule of university administration – that has the power to restructure, administer wage increases, and effectively control the university community’s relationship to the public – those of us who work in the university must recognize that we can have solidarity through understanding our interconnectedness through work. The AFSCME strike, and the attempts at strike support, exposed the extent that the administration understands us all as workers, and it is from this position that we must construct our analysis for future strategies. I offer here a class analysis as a lens to understand and mobilize support when strikes, of any kind, occur at our universities.

Strategic Positioning and the 2007 AFSCME Strike

To understand what fully transpired in the 2007 AFSCME strike, it must be put into the context of the overt neoliberal programs that have defined the U of M climate. In order to make itself a “top three public research institution”, the university administration implemented Strategic Positioning. Begun in 2004, Strategic Positioning is an effort to deal with the “fierce competition” of US Higher Education and the “dwindling resources” that have characterized federal funding of public institutions (Bruininks, 2007). In practice, this has meant that university administration has enlisted the *volunteer* labour of faculty and staff to develop proposals for making the university competitive in the categories of students, faculty, innovation, and organization. Essentially, Strategic Positioning is a form of participatory management that articulates a collective university identity based on “global competitiveness” – undermining and marginalizing local struggles such as labour union strikes or educational access for the Minnesota community. Strategic Positioning has been successful in creating an illusion of a democratically governed university, but that works to re-stabilize “the divisions between the diverse struggles that emerge from non- and anti-capitalist commons in departmental and classroom communities” (Kamola and Meyerhoff, 2008: 27). The terms defined in the initiative to meet a top three goal created both internal and external competition at the university, thus foreclosing the possibility of creating a localized solidarity for a workers’ strike from the start.

In implementation, Strategic Positioning is similar to restructuring in any corporation – merging or eliminating redundant departments and cutting programs that did not contribute to quantifiable standards measuring progress and success of being ‘top three’. The priorities of Strategic Positioning, however defined, are for profit, and the cleverness of the initiative is that it enlisted the service of university members to create a system that pits departments and workers against one another. For example, some departments (such as Communication Studies) absorbed teaching loads from departments made redundant; based on the rubrics created, other departments became more marketable based on research produced and faculty awards. Although both teaching and marketable departments have perceived value in the institution, this, in practice, has not translated into more resources for those departments. Moreover, other departments not institutionally recognized in the various marketing campaigns have continued to compete with one another for attracting students to the courses that they offer. The system of *required* undergraduate courses promotes competition among departments as they jockey for a better position by creating courses that meet multiple requirements at once – certainly a draw for consumer students getting the most for their tuition dollar. In total, the assumption of Strategic Positioning is that if the university ‘wins’ in this higher education competition, all will profit as well, but the conditions of AFSCME workers that led up to the strike proved that this assumption is misguided – only some *individuals*, especially the Administration, profit.

Against the highly (internally) competitive climate of the U of M, AFSCME went on strike demanding a wage increase higher than what the Administration would allow. Whereas the university measures itself competitively against other institutions by the salaries of the President, faculty, and other administration, the wages of workers at the university seem to fall under a different competitive rubric – that of keeping operation costs low. As AFSCME flyers showed, President Bruininks received a 79% salary increase, and other administrators (about 1586 people making over \$100,000 each year) averaged between 12-59% increases since 2002 (AFSCME, 2007a). AFSCME wages actually *declined* by 5% (adjusted for inflation) since 2002, so their demands for a wage increase of 3.25% (3.5% for health care workers) seemed fair, especially when the Minnesota State Legislature gave this wage increase to all non-university AFSCME employees as well as recommended the same for university workers as part of the funding given to the University in 2007.

However, as proclaimed in a full-page ad by the administration in the U of M student newspaper, the “not only fair, but great!” contract that the administration maintained was only 2.25% (2.5% for health care workers). After 16 days, the one-third of eligible workers that went on strike (a majority of the AFSCME workers who voted to strike literally could not afford to go without wages) were forced to go back to work in order to not lose health insurance benefits, only receiving the 2.25% wage increase with consolation prize of a \$300 additional lump sum payment offered by the administration. The administration waited out the strike, and continued to assure the campus community through mass emailings that business would continue on with or without the AFSCME workers. In terms of negotiating a fair contract, the strike failed.

The strategic use of a strike is based on the premise that a union can force negotiations because *work has stopped*. To some extent, work did stop at the U of M, but the

publicly visible work of teaching and research continued on more or less uninterrupted. The 'product' of an education marketed to the public, is largely defined by the work conducted by *faculty* – regardless that research and teaching is facilitated by the work of all others in the university. Thus, it is easy for the university administration to convince the public that business is continuing as usual during a strike when classes are still being held and faculty continue in their various roles as department chairs, expert spokespersons, and even as public intellectuals writing letters of support for workers. It should be noted that labour strikes in the US are not common place as it is a struggle in many places to achieve the right to form a union at a particular work site in the first place. Especially in academia, attempts by faculty and students to organize have been prevented; moreover, public support for academic strikes is a challenge to build. At the same time, when *teaching* stops, it does gain attention as was the case for the New York University graduate student strike in 2005 (Krause et al., 2008), if not achieve the aims of the strike.

But when non-teaching workers strike, it tends to go unnoticed because work does continue albeit less efficiently. On campus, many felt that indeed it was business as usual as faculty and graduate students mostly towed the line, holding classes (mostly on campus) and creating a normal atmosphere for undergraduates as requested by the administration's emails. Moreover, undergraduate student workers (contrary to administrative emails) picked up the slack of AFSCME workers who were on the picket lines by taking on extra duties in their federal work-study positions. The flexible labour of students and faculty is transformed to absorb operations tasks, while the nature of other knowledge production is not easily quantified or stopped, thus many have questioned whether an effective strike is actually possible at a university. Clearly, it is hard for students and faculty to stop *work* when much of what we do is considered service or not labour at all, and when students and faculty have no real legal protection to strike in solidarity.

For many faculty and students, a work stoppage would both be illegal and illogical. Faculty and graduate students must continue to produce research not only for our local institutions, but also to remain competitive in the academic labour market. We are taught to think of ourselves as autonomous professionals with allegiances outside our home institutions. Undergraduates similarly face the necessity of timely graduation in preparation for their own job markets – all work cannot stop because of these external constraints. Moreover, for many, teaching is defined as a political practice instead of wage labour, so many found continuing this work during a strike as consistent with strike support. Strike support from faculty and students, then, came in the forms of a teach-in, faculty and student initiated demonstrations, and a student initiated hunger strike. Students and workers demonstrated and were arrested at a Board of Regents meeting (the governing board of the university elected by the State Legislature); faculty, labour unions, and community activist groups wrote numerous letters of support for the AFSCME workers (U of M Labour and Community Strike Support Committee, 2007).

Even with good intentions, these efforts were *ad hoc* and haphazard at best, and their ineffectiveness has been attributed to the fact that there was insufficient time to organize faculty and students during the first week of the semester. AFSCME leadership stated that they did not want students and faculty engaging in illegal activity

on their behalf, but at the same time, noted that even holding classes off campus was technically crossing the picket line – work was still continuing. Multiple levels of strike support were employed, with the battle defined as an unorganized collective of students, faculty, and workers against the Administration.

These different tactics of support were constructed based on the symbolic and material differences of each group's understood position in the university. Faculty assumed that the administration and Board of Regents would respect their opinions and analysis because of their expertise and prestige within the university, and might reconsider their offer to the union on that basis. However, the Regents, though some were in support of the workers, considered wage contracts an administrative matter that they had no jurisdiction over; perceived ownership of the university by the faculty was not realized in practice. Similarly, letter writing to supportive state legislators also was futile as the State can only make recommendations on funding allocation to the university. The U of M, founded before the State of Minnesota, has the power to allocate funds as it wishes. President Bruininks, who holds the most power over contract decisions, refused to be swayed by letters and continued sending emails reminding us all to continue working.

Moreover, student efforts faced similar challenges. The small collective of students who engaged in the hunger strike assumed that they could use their positions as students-in-the-care-of-the-university to shame the university (and Bruininks). University administration responded by sending a health care worker to check on the students, but publicly made statements that they disagreed with the students' tactic (Hunger Strike at the U of M, 2007). Other student supporters thought that they could use their position as student-as-consumer to demand better business practices of fair wages for workers. Bruininks blocked some students from emailing, and gave no public response to letters sent in support of the strike. Since the administration effectively used its power to communicate with the university to present their side of the story (whereas the union and supporters did not have access to mass emailings), other demonstrations attempted to shame an administration for being antidemocratic. Symbolic demonstrations of being 'struck silent' or putting one's body in peril through a hunger strike does not work when the administration has proven that it cannot be shamed and does not see itself as accountable to the students, faculty, and workers within the university as long as the university can be measured against others as being 'top three'. Clearly, democratic governance within the university is only illusionary, and is not part of the rubric that defines being a top research institution.

In the aftermath of the strike, failures of the above tactics were understood as our failure to organize across classes – as a unified student, faculty, and worker collective – against the administration. Because Strategic Positioning (neoliberalism in action) stabilized divisions between labour groups, prompting us to see ourselves as *individuals*, attempts to bring groups together in support largely fell on student organizers, and were too little too late. Capital, similarly, uses a 'divide and conquer' mentality to pit classes against other classes – undermining democratic potential possible through classes working collaboratively. The AFSCME strike showed that Capital was successful in allowing production to go on uninterrupted and largely unquestioned as campus workers were caught in a neoliberal web.

Defining this struggle as a contest between the administration and the rest of us in the university, then, is misguided. We are not citizens of a university community that can appeal to the benevolent ruler of the administration. We have to redefine ourselves as the administration did through its various email propaganda: we are all workers. And we are workers struggling against Capital. Capital is personified in the Office of the President and the Administration – it is Capital that underwrites decisions of what is valuable labour and how much that labour is allotted. Our struggle must shift, and for us to realize that our various positions in the university are not all that different as we are all against Capital. Capital is always threatened when cracks emerge, or when situations like the strike start to allow us to see ourselves and our work differently (Mandel, 1978). It is precisely by coming back to our role as workers that we might be able to find the leverage to take back our knowledge factory.

Working from Within the Cracks and Reclaiming the Common

Many of us who labour in the university do so because we believe (or hope) that it is somehow different than working for exploitative corporations. In the US, the ideal that citizens should receive free education – further extended through land-grant initiatives of the late 1800s that granted states federally controlled land for the express purpose of building universities to give access to and teach all citizens practical arts and the classics – allows us to believe that public universities are indeed *for the public*, and based on the mission of providing knowledge and resources for the *public good*. However, even those of us organizing during the strike quickly realized that mantras of ‘Keep the U of M Public’ were misguided as the U of M and most public institutions have never *really* been public and have systematically excluded groups. A liberal arts education, even in the paradigm of land-grant institutions, has always been defined as the knowledge of elites, thus we cannot continue thinking about the university as an idealistic space, or that there is something that we nostalgically want to return to. We cannot continue to fetishize the roles of students and faculty as pursuers of knowledge when it is clear that knowledge has a price and is marketed as a product. Clearly, we must redefine the space of the university, our labour, and the relations between workers. These are the parameters to build solidarity: all as workers differently situated in the same economic/factory system.

The first step of redefining ourselves is to break away from the imaginaries that have allowed us to be complicit in the corporatizing of our workplace. We must recognize that the ‘university of the mind’ or immaterial knowledge production is not protected from corporatization, and cannot be understood separately from the operations of the ‘university of bricks’ or the management of the physical institution. Inequities that are normalized in the ‘university of bricks’ through our understanding of wage labour, is not so different from class systems that sustain administrative control in the ‘university of the mind’. The imaginary of the ‘university of the mind’ has allowed us to not see our labour as inextricably connected to the labour of staff, and has perpetuated a divide between faculty and students. We forget easily that (under)graduate students are not mere recipients or passive consumers of our teaching, but are indeed co-producers of knowledge. We must realize that we are all co-producers of the educational product, and we are all contributing to the same system – together.

Second, we must recognize that the university is not a training ground for a *democracy to come* that itself can be operated undemocratically. Democracy is an ideal based on promises that we endlessly work to achieve, improve, or perfect (Derrida, 1997), thus we should not labour under the assumption that a ‘democracy’ awaits for us outside the university walls. Democracy must be enacted in all spheres. To *make* a university into a public institution takes more than trying to work against neoliberalizing tendencies and corporate rhetoric. It takes the building of an anti- or non-capitalist commons to define our university community – the university as a space regulated by value systems not connected to Capital defined systems (de Angelis, 2007). It means that our educational product is a collective effort between all positions, especially undergraduate students, and we must fight against the competitive and quantitative rubrics that currently define our labour and divide cooperative potential that work against democracy at all.

Third, we must redefine our relationships between faculty, students, and workers to recognize the economic boundaries that prevent solidarity. Political theorists have debated which class is the truly democratic class, and who, in the bounds of a nation-state is responsible for achieving democratic governance. Ultimately, democracy is won through coordinated efforts between low, middle, and upper classes, but the challenge is in having classes give up their specific class interests for a greater good. Democracy has been lost when the State stifles cooperation between classes since that lessens State authority. The system of capitalism becomes a tool of the State to achieve these ends (Rueschemeyer et al., 1992). When we transpose this analysis to the space of the university, we can begin to see the ways in which the administration works to divide constituent factions, and how designators of faculty or student do not hold more symbolic capital than if we self-identify as co-producers or workers.

The analogy works when we place university administration in the role of the nation-state (organized by Capital) and faculty in the role of the bourgeoisie. The Bourgeoisie, with the most resources and potential persuasive power, are convinced to maintain the status quo through allowances and awards given by the State (such as serving on a Strategic Positioning advisory committee). Faculty must recognize that they have more to gain from working with others than the illusion of power yet to come; they must resist the inertia of producing research for the sake of producing or contributing to a discipline at large. They must resist committing themselves to advisory boards in the hopes of gaining privilege or assumed ownership. Wage workers (the literal working class) have the most to gain from more equity in operations in all aspects of the university, and other classes must recognize that the knowledge product of research and teaching benefits from the experience and fair wages given to all.

Lastly, students (both undergraduates and graduates) are positioned in the role of the middle class. As both consumers and producers, students perhaps have the most power within the system and ability to bridge classes. Graduate students must recognize themselves as part of the knowledge production system (and not merely preparing for a tenure-track job yet to come), and all must recognize undergraduates as workers as well – and not merely consumers that we are in opposition to yet working so hard to please for evaluation’s sake. We must all recognize that power and prestige will only be realized through the creation of a commons – where we all produce together as equals – not in the nostalgia of a university that never was. Although we all bring different

experience and expertise from our various class positions, ultimately, we are still contributing to the same educational public good and knowledge advancement.

What, then, would a struggle for the commons in a university look like? At the first level, we must seek social justice within the ‘university of bricks’ at the level of wages for all workers. At the next level, we must recognize the tension of faculty labour that navigates between localized service and tenure as well as external disciplinary publication. We must foster a tenure/publication system that values work contributing to the collective goal of education for the public good. The drive for producing knowledge should not be so great that we fail to see that the products of such a system are as corrupt as the system itself. We must recognize that students are consumers and producers, but also can occupy a space as critical agents – to be able to call to question when operations are not just. At the same time, students need help in understanding this role and being constituted into it. And when the lowest paid workers stop their production, faculty and students, too, must stop production and use their position as public intellectuals to produce analysis and work that brings equality back to the system.

Previous critiques (e.g. Gould, 2003) of the corporatized university have not gone so far to argue that we all must view ourselves as workers. It is assumed that if we change the rhetoric of what an education is for, that somehow, miraculously, it will be so and we will be freed from the neoliberal logics that undermine the liberal arts. When the current global economic crisis is affecting our universities, we cannot afford to rest on idyllic notions of what a university used to be or that is somehow doesn’t operate within the same system. Our strategy and logic must shift to understanding the system of production and our own roles – all of us – as workers in the system. We must work from within to make the factory itself a just place so that the educational products developed within also reflect that ethos. We should not wear buttons that proclaim we are in “Support of U of M workers”, because we *all* are workers.

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the author

Amy Pason is a PhD Candidate in Communication Studies, and researches women's peace movements. She is a member of the *Reworking Collective* that has organized for and after the AFSCME strike including the People's Conference, an Experimental College program, and the *Rethinking the University: Labour, Knowledge, Value Conference* at the University of Minnesota. This analysis has been developed through the conversations and input of the working collective of these initiatives, and she would like to thank her fellow graduate student workers for their work and analysis of struggles within the university, as well as her advisor, Ron Greene who allowed her to 'stop production' to devote time and energy on the strike.

E-mail: pason001@umn.edu