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Making a Place for Labor: Composition and Unions

College English teachers have been describing (and often bemoaning) their working lives ever since there were English Departments. In the last quarter century, however, public considerations of the conditions of academic labor in English have greatly multiplied—ironically, but not coincidentally, during a time of unprecedented academic unemployment and underemployment for PhDs in the humanities. Some of these considerations, like Gary Rhoades' *Managed Professionals* or Randy Martin's edited collection *Chalk Lines*, touch on English studies only peripherally and thus may still be unfamiliar to many English faculty. Probably better known is work like Richard Ohmann's *English in America*, Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature*, Evan Watkins' *Work Time*, and Richard Miller's *As If Learning Mattered*. And seemingly most relevant of all for my purposes in this paper is the recent flurry of publications in Composition studies connecting the teaching of writing to the institutional and material positions of writing teachers (e.g., Sharon Crowley's *Composition in the University*; Bruce Horner's *Terms of Work for Composition*; Eileen Schell's *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers*; Frank Sullivan et al.'s "Student Needs and Strong Composition"; Jennifer Trainor and Amanda Godley's "After Wyoming").

This work is difficult to characterize in the aggregate. It has been diverse, multiply motivated. An important impetus for some has been the (perhaps inevitably) belated recognition that the academy is not a privileged realm. The attacks on labor since the early 1970s--driven by American capitalism's scramble to maintain its markets and profits after the post-War boom petered out--have spared no one (see Ohmann, "Historical Reflections"; Zweig 74-75). What we

are now beginning to see is less astonished outrage at the “corporatization of the university” and more attention to fighting back--in a variety of ways, and from various political perspectives. Especially for composition teachers, one factor motivating writing about the workplace has been troubled reflections on “access” to post-secondary education (e.g., What are the connections between educating our students and credentialing them?; or, In what ways might writing courses function to limit rather than expand what students can know and do?). And, again, especially in Composition, recent writing about the academic workplace has often been spurred by a desire to insist that teaching and learning are ineluctably tied, for both students and teachers, to the social and material circumstances of their enactment.

Even in Composition studies, however, writing about the academic workplace, despite its recent proliferation, has to date had relatively little influence in improving the working lives of teachers. More surprisingly, even in Composition (the field, not the educational enterprise) labor is still often ignored. In much of the recent literature on composition reform, labor continues to be invisible in two ways. First, proposals for reform are often propounded with a seeming blindness to human activity--who will do what, how, under what conditions, and with what negotiations between students, teachers, and other actors. (For notable exceptions to this tendency, see Rodby and Fox; Sullivan et al.) Second, mainstream Composition (again, the field) seems to be remarkably uninformed about organized labor. When they are mentioned at all, unions are most often treated as tangential rather than as the centrally important player that, I believe, they must be in successful transformations of the academic workplace. I think that Composition’s double blindness to labor is unfortunate for three reasons. The neglect of labor is unfortunate insofar as it frustrates and vitiates efforts to improve the teaching and study of writing in college. Second, blindness to organized labor is

unfortunate because academic unions offer a collective strategy that can make some of the problems of composition teachers not only more tractable but actually solvable. Finally, the relative disregard of unions in mainstream Composition is also unfortunate because to set unions aside is to relinquish the single most important instrument that composition teachers (and other workers) in this country have to effect social justice. Unions link desire to power.

My aim in this paper is to contribute toward making a larger place for labor in Composition theory and practice. I will be attempting—roughly, but not exclusively, in this order, 1) to demonstrate that, despite the new climate of interest in the material conditions of our jobs, Composition often continues to ignore both the work of change and the existence of academic unions; 2) to explain what I take to be the major causes of this neglect; and 3) to outline what I believe greater appreciation for and participation in organized labor could mean for composition teachers and their work.

Forgetting Labor in Composition Reform

Many representations of school in our reform literature—and, for that fact, in the various forums of our culture wars—are static ideological abstractions. And teachers are either the focus of blame or, despite all the talk about “teacher empowerment,” are impotent shadow figures. We lack adequately complex models of schools as institutions in which both limiting and liberating forces contend. (429)

Mike Rose, Possible Lives

The Spring 2000 issue of *Writing Program Administration* includes an article by Keith Rhodes on “Marketing Composition for the 21st Century.” Rhodes believes that curricular and programmatic debates in Composition generally proceed at some ivory-tower distance from the material facts, which are, as I understand Rhodes’ argument: 1) that writing teachers (and all other faculty) are laboring in a “market-driven institution”; 2) that required composition

generally does not respond in strategically beneficial ways to the powers that ultimately sponsor it (basically business and industry); 3) that this is so *partly* because composition doesn't uniformly produce what employers want but *mainly* because composition has failed to demonstrate to employers that it does in fact have that which they are seeking; and that, consequently, 4) composition could better respond to existing demand—and also go a long way toward ending exploitative conditions in composition teaching—by aggressively marketing fewer (because not required) but “fully rhetorical composition” courses, courses taught by better-educated and better-paid teachers and designed to fill the market niche of employers looking for rhetorically-skilled workers and managers.

While, in common with some other recent work in Composition (e.g., Gleason; Graham, Birmingham, and Zachry; Schell), Rhodes' article has the virtue of insisting that the teaching of composition must not be seen apart from its material circumstances, it tends nonetheless to ignore labor. Despite his insistence that composition teachers ought to be paid a whole lot more, in money and respect, than they generally now get, Rhodes ignores labor, makes no place for it, in two ways. Rhodes erases the struggle between capital and labor by assuming that “the market” is really the only game in town, that academic workers have no interests, agency, or power not subsumed by market forces. And Rhodes also ignores “labor” in a different but related sense by almost completely eliding the multiple and very long negotiations between social actors (faculty, administrators, boards of trustees, legislators, corporate managers, and others) that would be necessary in order to enact the sort of “marketing” plan he has in mind. It's as if for him the “labor,” the work, of such negotiations is not that significant; just get WPAs and theoretically-informed compositionists in line and the rest will be merely a mopping-up operation.

“Marketing Composition for the 21st Century” can be seen as a contribution to the larger and more general “abolition” debate currently consuming Composition--the idea, first articulated by Sharon Crowley a decade ago, that *required* freshman composition ought to be abolished (241, 249). How to read the abolitionists’ arguments? Toward what ends are they intended? As Maureen Daly Goggin and Susan Kay Miller have recently cautioned (95), the arguments are not all the same. Let me suggest their variety. *Pedagogically*, for example, it has been said that required first-year composition must be abolished because of the twin barriers to its efficacy brought about by insufficiently-trained teachers and insufficiently-motivated students. From an *ideological* perspective, it has been claimed that required fyc must be abolished because it tends to inculcate political quietism and cultural conformity in those forced to undergo it. *Instrumentally*, required fyc must be abolished because it does not well serve either writing in upper-division courses or the writing that students must/will do when they graduate. *Ethically*, required fyc must be abolished because it has often tended to create and maintain unjust working conditions and compensation for writing teachers.

Each of these warrants (and there are others) for abolishing required first-year composition has been responded to in various ways. For instance, Marjorie Roemer, Lucille Schultz, and Russel Durst argue that composition teachers are generally well-trained (385). Bruce Horner questions Sharon Crowley’s view of fyc as cultural cop (126-27). James Sledd thinks that “general-purpose prose” is both teachable in first-year composition courses and can provide a valuable foundation for writing in the disciplines and the workplace (27). But I have no interest here in keeping score or declaring a victor. For what I have found to be most puzzling and troubling in the Great Debate is the way in which it is often implied that readers of this textual combat (mostly people with professional interests in Composition and the

teaching of composition) have intellectual and ethical obligations to *take a position* on the question of whether first-year composition should be required, or at least reconceptualized (see Crowley 241; Goggin 42-44; Roemer, Schultz, and Durst 382; Sledd 24-28). What seems obvious to me, however, from my perspective as an advocate for the rights of academic labor, is that I have an obligation *not* to take a position on this question, save within my own workplace. It seems to me both ethically dubious and logistically deluded that I should offer to teachers in other workplaces dicta about how (or whether) they should do the work of composition.

When it comes to abolishing required first-year composition at California University of Pennsylvania, my workplace, I'm against it, for now. Two years ago, the University began a General Education program that requires various things of undergraduates (everyone now has to take some mathematics, for instance, and everyone now has to take a laboratory course). In writing, the requirement is Composition I (an introduction to rhetoric), Composition II (an introduction to research writing in the disciplines), and two upper-division writing-intensive courses in the major. For me, a significant feature, probably *the* most important element, of the new Gen Ed program is that it is the result of long (don't ask how many years) faculty deliberations and a final ratification vote by all faculty. Even if I were to become uneasy about any part of the new writing requirement (including the two composition courses), I would be very reluctant, at least near-term, to argue against my colleagues' democratically expressed desires. In this instance, those who must produce were those who decided. Like my colleagues across campus, I'm curious to see what the results of the new program will be.

While each of the abolitionists' rationales for abolishing required fyc has been responded to in various ways, I think that the "ethical" warrant (that required fyc must be

abolished because it has often tended to create and maintain unjust working conditions and compensation for writing teachers) has been countered least successfully. Though I have said that I don't think Composition has the right to specify how—or whether—composition should be taught in other people's workplaces, I also think that labor advocacy requires continuing collective efforts to ensure that composition be taught (whenever it *is* taught) with justice for labor.

On the Difficulty of Beginning with Labor: Composition and Unions

With a few exceptions—for example, the State University of New York System—research university faculty (who do the most writing about higher education) are not unionized. . . .

[One] can read much higher education literature and not discover that faculty unions exist. One can read many of the most widely read books on higher education and not learn that faculty unions exist. One can get a master's or doctoral degree in many Higher Education programs, and gain no knowledge of faculty unions. (9-10)

Gary Rhoades, Managed Professionals

To date, corporate restructuring of the academic workplace has not made much progress in figuring out how to replace writing teachers with machines. At least in the near future, writing instruction will remain largely labor intensive, a matter of teachers and students working together, though not always in classrooms. The essential task for composition teachers is thus not to stay employed but to carry on collective deliberations about how the work of teaching writing can be made not just more remunerative but more intellectually and emotionally rewarding for the human beings involved in it. Within a capitalist framework, our framework, to say that those who must produce are those who must decide is not *only* an ideal. As a principle of labor advocacy, it has a present as well as a future. It is a way to begin negotiations, to not give away the game in advance.

Academic labor unions have been around since the 1960s (Tirelli 182; Rhoades 10), but it is particularly in the last decade that labor activism among college teachers has evolved from a fairly site-specific activity into a national phenomenon that has reoriented notions of “professionalism” in higher education. While in recent years union membership among tenure-track faculty, contingent faculty, and graduate students has continued its steady growth (Leatherman, “AAUP Reaches Out”; Rhoades and Slaughter 44; Smallwood), the new organizing activity has not simply been more of the same, not just more teachers getting organized. Rather, the recent organizing gains have also often been accompanied by a new discourse of labor militancy that links justice for academic labor to an examination of what sorts of educational practices in what kind of university are best suited for students and teachers to work together (see “Casual Nation”; Cox; Harney and Moten 168-72; Leatherman, “Part-Time Faculty Members”; Leatherman, “Union Organizers”; Thompson A22-23; Trainor and Godley).

The new labor activism connecting conditions of work to quality of educational results has been especially notable among composition teachers. This is hardly surprising. Because composition teachers are unusually heavily represented among the ranks of graduate-student TAs and contingent faculty, and because composition teachers have on many campuses been under siege even within the English departments where they mainly work, but also because composition teachers are keenly aware of the links between the terms of their employment and the achievements their students can make—for all of these reasons college composition teachers have been especially attracted to and actively concerned with questions of labor organizing (see Horner 22-24, 179; Kavanagh; Schell 109-12).

As Gary Rhoades makes clear in his *Unionized Faculty and Restructuring Academic Labor*, unionization has been of substantial economic benefit to US college teachers. In English, for example, unionized faculty make on average 30% more than their non-unionized colleagues (78). And, though apparently unknown to some in higher education, unionized faculty are by no means a marginal group. Already by 1994, 44 percent of full-time faculty (and 26 percent of full- and part-time faculty combined) were unionized. If only *public* colleges and universities are considered, by the mid-1990s 63 percent of full-time faculty were union members. If a further selection is made to include only *non-research* public universities, by 1995 89 percent of full-time faculty in public non-research universities were unionized (Rhoades 9-10).

Yet despite the obvious interest of composition *teachers* in academic unions, I think that we often see in the *field* of Composition today indications of, or perhaps an analogue to, the relative silence about faculty unionization in the literature of higher education that Rhoades has noted. Sharon Crowley has for the last decade been a vocal and persistent critic of required first-year composition courses. One of her arguments for getting rid of what has become the only almost-universally required part of the undergraduate curriculum is that required composition tends to perpetuate the inequitable pay and working conditions that most composition teachers labor under. “Today,” Crowley writes, “first-year composition is largely taught by graduate students and temporary or part-time teachers. Full-time permanent faculty regularly teach the course only in liberal arts colleges, two-year colleges, and the few four-year universities that still privilege teaching over research” (118). Furthermore, Crowley says, “[P]eople who labor overlong at teaching composition find themselves shut out of tenurable positions in English departments” (131).

But it is puzzling to read that full-time permanent faculty regularly teach required composition courses *only* in liberal arts colleges, two-year colleges, and four-year universities with a primary commitment to teaching—*only*, that is, in the vast majority of colleges and universities in the country. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*'s "Almanac" for 2000-2001 puts the number of US colleges and universities at 4096, of which only 261 are listed as "doctorate-granting institutions" (7, 51). Crowley may have good reason to believe that only a "few four-year universities . . . still privilege teaching over research," but she offers no explanation for this claim in *Composition in the University*.¹

Equally strange, to me, is Crowley's contention that faculty who spend too much time teaching comp reduce their chances of getting tenure. In my department at California University, for instance, where there are currently 17 tenure-track, 4 full-time adjunct, and 1 part-time adjunct faculty, all 22 English Department members regularly teach our required composition courses, and 16 of the 17 tenure-track faculty are tenured. But to move beyond my own workplace, what of all of the full-time permanent faculty that, Crowley acknowledges, are teaching composition at community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and non-research universities? Few of them are tenured or likely to get tenure?

There is what I take to be another instance of *Composition*'s obliviousness to the pervasiveness and power of faculty unions in Joseph Harris's "Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss: Class Consciousness in Composition," published in the September 2000 issue of *College Composition and Communication*. Harris calls for improvements in pay and working conditions for *all* teachers of composition, including TAs and adjunct faculty. "We" must, he says, "find ways now of supporting good teaching for undergraduates and fair working conditions for teachers—including . . . *full-time non-tenure-track instructorships*"

(56, my emphasis). But why consign *any* composition faculty to non-tenure-track instructorships (in which, for one thing, opportunities for promotion might never materialize)? As Harris sees it, this is simply a consequence of the current economic reality in higher education, where tenure-track jobs will inevitably shrink everywhere (56, 60, 64, 66—note 4). Yet this is not the reality I am familiar with in my everyday working life. In fact, the current contract that my union, the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties (APSCUF), signed in November 1999 with Pennsylvania’s State System of Higher Education (SSHE) provides opportunities to not only halt but reverse the erosion of tenure-track jobs (*Agreement 20-22*)², opportunities that are currently being realized, though not without considerable struggle, at California as well as at other SSHE schools.

Harris says that if composition teachers and their students are to do good work together, we will have to wean ourselves from the delusion that “composition can become part of what English professors routinely study and teach—and thus that the need to maintain small armies of contingent instructors to staff first-year writing courses will eventually disappear” (56). While I don’t want to overgeneralize from my own work situation, and while, further, I realize that, despite the fact that SSHE faculty at all 14 schools are working under a uniform contract, the situation for composition teachers varies from school to school, still, I know that, at California, composition already *is* part of what all English professors regularly teach and study and that there is reason to expect that adjunct positions, already few in number, will continue to be converted into tenure-track jobs. At nonunion research universities, perhaps, Harris’s vision of a better-supported but still second-tier composition workforce might seem attractive, but I think that few non-research university faculty are likely to succumb to its putatively hard-nosed logic. This is especially true at SSHE campuses, of course, since all

faculty, tenure-track and non-tenure-track, are part of a single bargaining unit working under a unified collective bargaining agreement, an advantage that was not in place at Eastern Michigan University in the fall of 2000 when striking full-time faculty found that they had to settle for a mediocre contract because they and their part-time colleagues were in different bargaining units (Leatherman, “Tenured Professors”).³

What makes unions so hard to see? Why is organized labor so often ignored in the discourses of Composition? Maybe the first thing to say is that the answers to this question must be social, not personal. I do not believe for one instant that Sharon Crowley and Joseph Harris covertly harbor anti-union sentiments. But good intentions are not the issue. We are not dealing here with individual failures of moral imagination. Rather, I think that what makes it so difficult for Composition to begin with labor is a cluster of cultural, professional, and political factors, most of them not exclusive to Composition or the teaching of composition.

Academic culture. Much in the social imaginaries, or ideologies, of capitalism and professionalism conspires against the move to begin with labor. In an opinion piece in May 2000 in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Catharine Stimpson, dean of the graduate school of arts and sciences at New York University, explains her opposition to the drive among graduate students at NYU for unionization (“A Dean’s Skepticism”). Stimpson is angry that NYU’s graduate students would identify themselves as “workers,” and she seems especially angry that they want to affiliate with the United Auto Workers, thus seeing themselves, according to Stimpson, as “industrial workers.” Stimpson adduces her own experience as a member of the unionized faculty at Rutgers, an experience that for her was mixed. While acknowledging the benefits of unionization for her own working life at Rutgers, Stimpson

also recalls that the union was sometimes harmful, most egregiously by “sometimes promoting the belief that the union mattered more, and deserved greater allegiance, than the university.” And that, I take it, is the rhetorical center of Stimpson’s piece: what must we think of an academic union that would promote the belief that it mattered more than the university?

Setting aside the specious binary opposition (the union is, after all, a part of the university), it’s interesting to speculate whether Stimpson would find equally nonsensical the position that advocacy for feminism and justice for women could be harmful by “sometimes promoting the belief that feminism and justice for women mattered more, and deserved greater allegiance, than the university.” Actually, we don’t even need to speculate since Stimpson has argued elsewhere that feminism and justice for women *are* sometimes more important and deserve greater allegiance than business as usual within the academy (see her essay “Feminist Criticism”). I am not accusing Stimpson of conscious bad faith, only trying to suggest by her example how conceptually difficult it is in our culture to begin with labor, especially for academics. In common with many liberal academic enterprises, Composition, because it has serious difficulty imagining what *collective* self-interest might be, tends to counterpose against the bad guy of *individual* self-interest the good guy of professional responsibility and solicitude, a “social work” perspective that keeps organized labor out of sight.

Professional positioning. Perhaps the most obvious reason for Composition’s neglect of organized labor is what Gary Rhoades alludes to in the epigraph to this section. Because so much of what is published in the field’s mainline journals is by faculty working at research universities, the labor situations at these sites start to look like the norm.⁴ True, faculty

unions are relatively scarce at research universities and at private liberal arts colleges.

Elsewhere, however, faculty unions are quite common.

And there are other phenomena of professional positioning that also tend to militate against a deep knowledge of or concern with organized labor. By their nature, unions involve collective activity, often anonymous. Unions are promiscuous, everyday, open to all. They are thus not particularly “academic.” They are not fertile sites for professional distinction. There is no easy way out of what, to many, will be seen as this deeply uncomfortable bind. I am obviously not the first to notice this; some important work in Composition has been done recently on the not-necessarily reconcilable conflicts between academic professionalism and academic labor (e.g., Horner; Spellmeyer; Trimbur).

Moreover, writing program administration, which employs many who see themselves as compositionists, almost inevitably calls upon WPAs to start to think of administering labor as akin to, though secondary to, administering program goals or curricula. All is manageable (or had *better* be manageable if WPAs are to receive favor from those above them in the university hierarchy). Even on unionized campuses, putting labor first can be difficult for WPAs as they work (though not always harmoniously) with university administrators who almost invariably see faculty unions as strictly an impediment to right management.

The social factors I am attempting to describe are not the exclusive burden of WPAs or prominent compositionists. I think that an important motivation for *all* composition teachers--currently in unions or not, pro-union or not--to want to hold unions at arm’s length is that unionized academic workplaces are often not comfortable places to be. When they’re working right, faculty unions are a pain in the ass, a constant irritant. Academics don’t shrink from professional conflict, but we expect, in our working lives, that our opinions will be respected,

that *we* will be respected. We expect, as we say, “collegiality.” But unionization tends to redefine “collegiality,” which has become the term most often extended by management to faculty on unionized campuses as an invitation to forget about the rights of labor.

Class, organized labor, and power. Another potential barrier to composition teachers’ identification with the labor movement may be too little understanding of organized labor’s 20th-century *successes*. In a recent *College Composition and Communication* article, Debra Hawhee laments that our “working class status” is something composition teachers may never escape (522). Yes, many composition workers are grossly exploited, but, as the 20th-century history of industrial, craft, and professional organized labor might suggest, there is nothing *inherent* in “working class status” that ought to connote penury.

Power, on the other hand, is another matter, more problematic. Though Hawhee at the end of her essay says that it is “composition teachers” generally, not some segment of composition teachers, who may never escape their “working class status,” her article as a whole suggests that in her peroration she may really be thinking of non-tenure-track composition teachers. From *that* perspective (teachers of college composition = contingent academic labor), what Hawhee says makes sense. And though partly this is a matter of pay, mostly (and here I follow Michael Zweig’s delineations of “class”) it is a matter of “the power and authority people have at work” (3). For the most part, contingent faculty in composition have not just lousy pay and working conditions but relatively little say in determining the shape of their working lives.

In contrast, however, tenure-track faculty teaching composition continue to have considerable workplace autonomy. They (we) may also have (and certainly this applies to tenure-track faculty teaching composition at every campus of Pennsylvania’s State System) job security, good benefits, excellent pay. Though some of us have “working class” identifications,

we are, systemically, “middle class.” The irony is that tenure-track faculty at public non-research universities owe much of what they have to labor unions, the vehicle connected by many to “working class” labor. The concomitant scandal is that unionized tenure-track faculty (including many unionized tenure-track teachers of composition) have often been way too slow to identify themselves as part of the labor movement and far too amenable to maintaining (or acceding to) barriers between themselves and non-tenure-track faculty—one of the results of which is that non-tenure-track faculty are much less unionized than tenure-track faculty and often, even when they are unionized, work under inferior contracts.

Though “class” is almost inevitably linked to any considerations of labor, I am in this paper concerned with “class” only secondarily. I am primarily talking about the labor movement. I am not speaking primarily of “studying” the labor movement, though I think that’s a good idea. And I am not even speaking of “supporting” the labor movement (thus maintaining a respectful distance from it). I am speaking, rather, of a combination of self-identification and direct political action, of composition teachers *belonging* to the labor movement and working collectively toward expanding its, our, range and power.

Making a Place for Labor

Management under globalization can destroy the concept of seniority and the memory of its life-course benefits only if the public becomes passive or hostile. One way to produce these reactions is to convince people rhetorically that there are no alternatives to lifetime insecurity. The complementary way is to eliminate the existing alternatives by making people feel that Sisyphus’s situation ought to be more broadly shared.
(104)

Margaret Morganroth Gullette, “The American Dream as a Life Narrative”

I think that the “Report of the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Staffing,” the “Final Report of the MLA Committee on Professional Employment,” and “Who Is Teaching In U.S. College Classrooms?” by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce are at once fundamentally accurate and significantly incomplete. They are accurate in their depiction of the massive casualization of academic labor that has occurred in the U.S. over the last 30 years; but they are incomplete in their silence about organized labor’s (sometimes successful) efforts to fight back. A somewhat different picture of the crisis in academic labor emerges from reading documents like the American Federation of Teachers’ “The Vanishing Professor” or the Coalition of Graduate Student Employee Unions’ “Casual Nation,” both of which paint the same bleak scene as do the ADE, MLA, and CAW reports but also detail recent successes in academic labor activism.

But academic labor can not afford to confine its efforts to unionization (see Kavanagh). “Organized labor” includes more than unions. I think it is significant that at the MLA’s December 2000 convention delegates voted to “create . . . a system in which the association would give its stamp of approval to departments in which at least half of the credits are taught by tenured or tenure-track professors” and that the delegates also passed “resolutions to encourage professors and graduate students to unionize, and to censure colleges that do not recognize the results of collective-bargaining votes”⁵ (“MLA Moves”). I am very encouraged that for the past six years *College Composition and Communication* has included within its pages *Forum*, the semi-annual newsletter of the Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Special Interest Group. And I think it is of the utmost importance that within the last few years the National Labor Relations Board has ruled that both faculty and graduate students have the right to collective bargaining at private colleges and universities

(Leatherman, “NLRB Lets Stand”; Leatherman, “NLRB Rules”; and see Abram), thus beginning to dismantle the 20-year-old barrier of the Yeshiva decision (especially, for now, for graduate students). “Organized labor” includes for composition teachers more than union organizing. It includes work within the courts (in some states, it is illegal for *public* college faculty to unionize); work in professional advocacy organizations; work in public relations (see the PR campaign described in “The Vanishing Professor”); lobbying in state legislatures and state educational bureaucracies; agitation for and within faculty governance on campus; and work within the larger labor movement. In what follows, then, as I outline some implications of what I believe greater appreciation for and participation in organized labor might mean for composition teachers, I will sometimes be ranging beyond unions.

Inclusiveness. We all have multiple identities. In what may be a disappointment to some, I think that in advocating that one of composition teachers’ self-identifications be with the labor movement, I am proposing nothing that is either revolutionary or utopian. In fact, I mostly agree with Richard Miller’s idea that compositionists must work within the system (“Let’s Do the Numbers”). It’s just that, while I acknowledge the value of our being canny bureaucrats, I place greater value in our being academic workers who are committed to the labor movement—which is also part of “the system,” its permanent opposition.

“Working people,” says James Sledd in “Return to Service,” “see [academics’] claim to tenure as a claim to unique job security in a world where mergers and downsizing have made job security a bad joke. . . . If we really meant what we say when we talk virtuously about the evils of frozen hierarchies, we’d work to abolish . . . tenure” (26). I don’t see why this follows. Why would we not work instead for greater job security and economic justice for all, especially on campus? I don’t think that that equal-opportunity suffering is the road to

labor justice, and I doubt that “working people” are eager to see college professors have less job security. In the fall of 1999, my union, APSCUF, almost went out on strike. That we did not, that a settlement was reached, was the result of many factors, one of which was a pledge by transport unions not to cross faculty picket lines to make deliveries in the event of a strike. In the November/December 2000 issue of *Steellabor* appears a letter in which John Goodman, Local 338 of the United Steelworkers of America, reflects on the two-year strike and lockout he had just been through at Kaiser-MAXXAM in Washington State. Goodman says in part: “When I looked into the eyes of my sons and granddaughters, and thought of what the future may hold for them if we were not successful in this battle for human rights and dignity, I knew I had to go on. Jodi Viabrock, a sister Steelworker, once said with conviction, ‘These are our jobs and we deserve them,’ and she was so right” (2). I would say that not only is the labor movement as a whole not waiting expectantly for college faculty to weaken their own job security but that it would be considered madness if we tried to—madness and also perhaps a kind of betrayal, since less job security for some workers tends toward weakening it for other workers. As I’ve argued above (and see endnote 3), faculty unions are strongest and fairest when they include tenure-track faculty and non-tenure-track faculty in the same bargaining units, so I think that Sledd is dead-on in his advocacy for “inclusive unions of faculty” (12).

But I think that in advocating “inclusiveness,” Sledd is not being as inclusive as he might. Specifically, I think that Sledd is mistaken, politically and rhetorically, in the contempt he lavishes on “boss compositionists,” by which term he seems to mean sometimes writing program administrators and sometimes composition theorists who’ve been theorizing in ways that Sledd doesn’t like. Sledd asks “who or what imposes” the “wretched conditions

of the teachers and teaching of the basic course that so many institutions require and so few properly support” (28). The “obvious answer,” Sledd says, is “hierarchy and the hierarchs, including the hierarchical assumption that research is superior to ‘mere’ teaching and that service is beneath the dignity of brahminical theorists” (28). While, as I’ve suggested earlier, Composition and compositionists are not immune to the institutional assumption that would place research above “mere” teaching, I don’t think that in “Return to Service” Sledd establishes the existence of a group of theorists/WPAs in Composition who, in the aggregate, really are unable in their working lives to overcome this assumption, or who, worse, let this assumption control absolutely their leadership roles in composition programs.

Is the struggle really between composition teachers on one side, hierarchy and hierarchs on the other? I’d define it differently. I think that the struggle now, as it has been for quite some time, is between capital and labor. Faculty governance in the academic workplace is worth fighting for. If writing programs benefit from leadership, and I think they do, it ought to come from justly compensated (with released time) faculty, not from the Administration. In working toward establishing or strengthening the collective structures necessary for labor ascendancy and workplace democracy, composition teachers can be in a distinctly more advantageous position by working with, if sometimes challenging, those who generally share these goals than they would be if they were only working against those who assuredly do not.

Composition as unspecial. I suppose that both my general orientation in this paper and many of the points I make along the way would be different if my working life had been different. In the last three decades, I have spent all but four years working in unionized jobs, not all of them teaching jobs. Chronologically: one year in the National Education Association; two years in the United Electrical Workers; 10 years in the United Steelworkers;

two years in the Temple Association of University Professionals; 11 years in the Association of Pennsylvania College and University Faculties. (Right, the UE and USWA stints were the non-teaching jobs.) Good work. With the exception of one year (as a high school teacher in a small town in Ohio), always a living wage. Conflicts unending, but I've never felt particularly oppressed. Unions have not made my working life smooth, but they have made it doable, survivable with some measure of material reward, dignity, satisfaction.

Past and present. Now, in my current job, if I am less worried than some about academic pecking orders, it is probably in part because in my workplace the usual (at least in research universities) English Department hierarchy (Literature first, other fields of English studies next, composition always last) is not much in evidence. Collectively, my colleagues and I have agreed that we will each teach two courses a semester in composition and two courses a semester in other things (though, for me, every course becomes a kind of writing course). And so I have taught courses in English education, in professional writing, in literature and critical theory, in composition theory. For me, this has been a stimulating mix. My colleagues and I are all essentially generalists, each of us working in many rooms of the House of English and meeting from time to time in the commons area of the composition courses that we all teach.

Thus it may be all-too-easy for me to say that I think that advancing labor justice for composition teachers will probably require letting go of some of our *professional* grievances as composition teachers, an effort to soft-pedal the feeling that we get no respect, that we are special because we have been specially victimized. Yes, nationally and numerically, all non-tenure-track composition teachers *have* been especially victimized, but that is probably beside the point. Though I may be just reacting to an elliptical way of talking, when I occasionally

read proposals that “composition teachers” *as a discrete group* should “unionize,” I wonder whom it is thought they will bargain collectively *with*. It’s the collective that matters.

Working to create or strengthen faculty and graduate student unions means working together with all faculty (full-time and part-time) and graduate students in the bargaining unit, proposed or actual: the sheep and the goats, people we like and some we don’t, people who have supported us and some who have spit on us, people who know and love what they’re doing in the composition classroom and some who hope never to teach composition again.

When I taught at Temple University (1988-1990), I was introduced to what was for me a new term, “salary compression,” which signified the phenomenon of some new faculty being hired at salaries significantly above some veteran members of the same departments. The faculty union (TAUP) declared itself against salary compression and attempted to reduce it in negotiations for the 1990-92 contract. In contrast, APSCUF, my union, has made it a goal in recent years to *increase* salary compression, though here the term has a different meaning. In APSCUF bargaining with Pennsylvania’s State System (SSHE), the union has had some success in “increasing salary compression” by *reducing the ratio* of the highest salary to the lowest.⁶ Salary increases for those at the top of the scale have continued, but salary increases for those at the bottom have been much greater. The significance of this strategy is partly that it increases labor equity (and union solidarity) by flattening the financial hierarchy among currently-employed faculty. Equally important, however, this strategy works toward altering the *future* composition of the faculty workforce—both by helping to attract good candidates for new tenure-track slots and by continuing to make it only marginally cost-effective for management to attempt to hire more part-timers instead of new tenure-track faculty (since per-course payments for all non-tenure-track faculty are pro-rated

to the bottom steps of the salary scale). Obviously, it is not only the union that foresees these results. One of the more dramatic moments of the last contract negotiations was an 11th-hour attempt by SSHE to offer higher wage increases to full professors if the union would modify its demands for big increases at the lowest levels, a bribe that was flatly rejected. So yes, in some ways, and at some times, hierarchy is the enemy.

Putting labor first. Where I work, whether compositionists, or any other faculty, ought to “return to service” is a question that, frankly, has never come up. Always it is assumed that faculty’s primary job is to serve our students.

There are of course some disagreements about how this might best be done, about what it might mean, for example, to teach “the general-purpose prose that our students need and our colleagues want” (Sledd 11). I think that in imagining at the end of “Return to Service” that compositionists might return to that unproblematical historical moment before the seductions of disciplinarity had infected them with the researching and theorizing bugs, Sledd is asking for a return to a consensus (a consensus about what college students need in the way of writing instruction) that has in fact never existed. Back in 1956, before Composition had lost its pre-disciplinary innocence, John Gerber, in a retrospective look at the first seven years of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, regretted that the organization was no closer than it had been in 1949 to agreeing on standards for freshman writing: “I could name five instructors who do not think writing is any good until it sounds like E. B. White’s, and I could name five others who think the letter-writing of the typical small business man is a reasonable goal for good writing. . . In all candor we must admit that we are confusing our students, we are confusing the public, and we are in many ways

confusing ourselves” (119). I am sorry to report that, at California University of Pennsylvania, such disagreements continue to this very day.

However, it may be that at the end Sledd is primarily thinking of something else, that he is not so much invoking a chimerical Golden Age as proposing that composition faculty *within their own workplaces* (like UT-Austin, or like Cal U) have an obligation to confer and debate with faculty across campus about what we value in student writing. If this is what Sledd has in mind, I cheerfully concur, having always found such labor to be intellectually and pedagogically rewarding. Not that my colleagues and I have ever reached consensus, not that I think we ever will (fortunately, since it is writing’s very incapacity to be so contained that sustains people’s engagements with teaching it, studying it, and doing it).

But I’ve strayed from my subject. I doubt that it is really necessary to choose between Composition and composition teachers. Yet I understand that respect for Composition is not the same thing as justice for academic labor (including composition teachers) and that, if we must choose, working for the latter is more important than working for the former. I think that, along with greater attention to and respect for workplace democracy (in which no one, no individual, always wins), composition teachers’ affiliation with the labor movement can provide a much more promising field for a progressive public agenda than can, for example, our largely hidden efforts to uncover the hidden workings of ideology. And I think that another important consequence of seeing ourselves as part of the labor movement is that doing so can give a new focus to our working lives, a focus that makes visible the perhaps unexpected degree to which academic labor’s battles are winnable—not easily, and not once and for all, but winnable nonetheless.⁷

¹ But doing a count by type of institution is of course not a reliable way of identifying the total workforce for composition teaching, particularly considering the enormous size of many doctorate-granting institutions. The ADE's "Report on Staffing," based on "a stratified sample of 123 English departments in four-year colleges and universities" ("Executive Summary" 1), concludes that contingent labor (graduate students + part-time faculty + full-time non-tenure-track faculty) is teaching 59% of undergraduate sections in English nationwide in departments having graduate student TAs and 31% of undergraduate sections in departments without TAs ("Executive Summary" 2). Using a much larger database, the MLA's "Final Report on Professional Employment" concludes that in PhD-granting English departments contingent labor is teaching 96% of fyc sections. The comparable figures for "departments where the MA was the highest degree" and for "departments where the BA was the highest degree" are 64% and 50% (1157).

² Article 11.G.1 provides that full-time temporary faculty who have worked for five years in the same department will be "placed in tenure-track status." Article 11.H.1. provides that the existence of any courses that have been staffed by temporary faculty for four years in such a way as to equal a full-time workload (4 courses a semester) for one or more tenure-track faculty shall constitute grounds for creating new tenure-track positions. Thus, two kinds of conversions have been instituted, conversion of persons to tenure-track (11.G.1.) and conversion of positions to tenure-track (11.H.1.).

These two new contract provisions supplement a continuing provision (Article 11.F.1.) that mandates that the number of part-time temporary faculty members not exceed 7% of the total number of tenure-track faculty. All three provisions are the subjects of ongoing interpretive and implementation wrangles between the union and the administration. As any faculty with experience in a unionized workplace know, getting a good contract is only half the battle; monitoring and implementing the contract never end.

³ I think that unified contracts (tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty working under the same bargaining agreement) are absolutely critical, for one thing, as a strategy for "[decreasing] the economic incentives for colleges and universities to employ part-timers" (Harris 61). One advantage of unified contracts is that per-course payment for part-timers goes up, being pro-rated to what a tenure-track faculty member (though often an entry-level tenure-track faculty member) would make for teaching the same course. At SSHE universities, which have unified contracts, the minimum per-section compensation for composition (or any other) instructors without a terminal degree is currently (January 2002) \$4670.

⁴ For a trenchant analysis of how "the experiences and practices of elite universities and liberal arts colleges" are often taken "as the norm for higher education" (563), see John Alberti's "Returning to Class."

⁵ Even more important in my view (though the *Chronicle* report doesn't mention it) was passage of a more radical and wide-ranging resolution (submitted by Leo Parascondola, Cary Nelson, and Marc Bousquet, with cosponsorship by the Graduate Student Caucus and the Radical Caucus in English and Modern Languages) calling for national minimum salaries for full- and part-time faculty, together with health-coverage and retirement benefits.

⁶ At the end of the last contract (1 July 1996 – 30 June 1999), the highest base salary step for full professors was \$77,889, and the lowest base salary step for instructors without the terminal degree was \$30,823, a ratio of 2.53 to 1. At the conclusion of the current contract (1 July 1999 – 30 June 2002), the highest base salary step for full professors will be \$87,706, and the lowest base salary step for instructors will be \$37,332, a ratio of 2.35 to 1.

⁷ A somewhat longer version of this paper was published in *Workplace* 4.1 (Spring 2001) in a special issue on “Composition as Management Science” edited by Marc Bousquet, Leo Parascondola, and Tony Scott (www.workplace-gsc.com).