

“Merit Raises and the Consciousness of the Professoriate”

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As many of you will recognize, (1) the title of this talk -- “Merit Raises and the Consciousness of the Professoriate” -- is an allusion to Lukacs’ great essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” and I guess the diminution of proletariat to professoriate and of reification to merit raises must sort of count also as an allusion to first time tragedy, second time farce.

Lukacs takes no position on the question of whether you should get a bigger raise if you published two articles last year than if you published one and college professors don’t exactly look like the workers of the world he was hoping to unite. Indeed, the question of whether college professors even belong to the proletariat is an open one – they can just as easily be understood as belonging to a class Lukacs had never heard of – the PMC, and in fact, at private universities where faculty are prohibited by law from unionizing, this is precisely because we are categorized as managers who literally do belong to the professional managerial class

At the same time, however, some college professors, whatever we understand our class position to be, have, in at least one very basic way, been behaving like workers – we’ve been forming unions. And although – or really, in the end, because -- Lukacs, like Marx, was both supportive and a little skeptical of unions, I want to talk about class consciousness and class politics today by talking about unionization. What made them skeptical was the sense that unionists were particularly susceptible to what Lukacs described as a fundamental problem for working class consciousness: its tendency to focus on “immediate objectives” rather than “ultimate goals,” thus separating “the economic struggle from the political one” and substituting the ambition for an improved position within class society for the ambition to end class society. And for sure, it does seem like the desire for a merit raise pool of 3.5% is a very immediate objective, and a modest one at that, as far removed as you can imagine from Marx’s exhortation to use our “organized forces as a lever for the final emancipation of the working class.”

But what makes me nevertheless want to talk about unionization is precisely the fact that just because the questions we are taught to ask when forming a union – what do you like about your job? What don't you like about your job? – are not political, and are instead almost a pure example of the immediate interests rather than the long-term objectives that Lukacs (rightly) insisted we need to pursue, they still provide a way into a better politics than what we have now. More precisely, they provide a way toward a politics in which the class consciousness of the worker can replace the class consciousness of the manager and (and even toward what Lukacs called the imputed class consciousness of the worker – not what we actually think but what we ought to think – can replace.. even point the way toward the end that Lukacs and Marx desired – the end of class society.

What do you, what don't you like about your job is the way we learned to begin conversations with people we were trying to get to join us and although we almost never got any answers that were the slightest bit surprising, every answer was educational. Indeed, the questions themselves – which could be asked of any person doing any job – were educational. Why? In part because of what they didn't do, which is ask people about their politics. If, for example, given that these early meetings were taking place in 2008, you were trying to figure out where people were politically, a standard way would have been to ask them how they felt about Obama. If the answer involved phrases like “vacuous opportunist” (which I believe is a quotation), then you were in the presence of an early adopter and (if you were me) you were among friends (literally); if it involved instead rapture about the possibility of our first black president (which was, of course, the more usual response), you were in the presence of the liberal enemy. Dinner parties could be made or ruined, and I myself gave many lectures at various colleges, attacking Obama and completely dividing the audience into two camps – one large and one less large. But the effort to form a union could not plausibly be the effort to create an organization of hard-core anti-Obamites, and not just because – at least on a university campus – you weren't going to find enough of them. More relevantly it was because how misty-eyed you did or didn't get at the prospect of having our first black president was a very different question from whether, say, if you were NTT, you thought that the biggest

problem was low pay or no job security. Or, if you were TT, whether you thought the biggest problem was salary compression or support for research.

The utility of these questions, in other words, was that they positioned both the asker and the answerer as interested in the material conditions of the job. So in recruiting for the union, we were never trying to persuade someone that unions offer some kind of moral high ground or to convince them of what might seem to one of us the correct analysis of neoliberalism, we were instead trying to lay out the ways in which a union could help them make their jobs better. Because at a second-tier research university like UIC, there was a certain amount of status anxiety, one response we often got was that no truly prestigious schools were unionized. But because even the most intense sufferers from that status anxiety could easily agree that, for example, a contractually guaranteed raise pool was way better than the constant threat of a unilateral declaration by the University that no raise pool was possible, status anxiety often lost. More generally, when asked about their jobs rather than about their views on neoliberalism or even on the value of unions, our colleagues produced a material rather than ideological analysis of their jobs (or better, as we'll see, a material analysis that would be able to provide a more powerful ideological analysis of their jobs).

And this was true not despite but because none of the answers was particularly surprising or profound or provocative. Intellectually, academic work often depends on cultivating differences and sometimes on vividly displaying them (I'm told). So even if it's true that many of us feel more comfortable aligning ourselves with the dominant intellectual and political views in our field, almost no one begins an essay on anything with the sentence "my views on x are basically the same as everyone else's." But lots of responses to our questions did begin with sentences like, "As everyone knows, you can't live on a lecturer's salary," or "As everyone knows, the research infrastructure is totally inadequate" and the "as everyone knows" was part of the point. Asked when or whether we thought texts necessarily meant what their authors intended, we might have very different answers but asked what we liked and didn't like about our jobs we basically all said the same thing.

So one thing these conversations did was build solidarity, and they did so by reminding us of the solidarity already built into our situation, a structural solidarity. We all wanted more money, more security, more autonomy. Furthermore, in the course of getting our union recognized and bargaining our first contract, the fact of our structural solidarity would be intensified by the equally structural lack of solidarity (more precisely the structural antagonism) built into our relation with the people on the other side of the bargaining table --the administrators whose job it was to represent the trustees, who were not so interested in giving us more money or autonomy, and who were in particular committed to flexibility rather than security.

Here we begin to see the point of distinguishing between a politics that might grow out of the material conditions of our jobs and a politics that embodies the values – both moral and political – that we brought to those jobs. The people on the other side of the bargaining table shared many of our moral and political values. My guess is that everyone in those bargaining sessions voted Democrat, and most were big Obama supporters. And since UIC had already begun branding itself as one of the most diverse universities in the country, (2) management was at least as committed to diversity as we were. It was no surprise that we came to agreement pretty quickly on the articles of our contract prohibiting discrimination and seeking to bolster diversity. But it took another 16 months and a two-day walkout to reach agreement on a \$7500 increase in minimum salary for NTT faculty. And, going beyond salary, three administrations since that first contract have been similarly intractable on every issue where the interests of management and labor are in contradiction. Just two months ago, I sat in on a bargaining session where, same as it ever was, the Administration signed off happily on a nondiscrimination article but categorically refused to consider a union proposal constraining the disciplinary power of Department chairs.

My point here is not that what matters are our material interests instead of our ideological commitments but that in remembering the difference between the material interests of

workers and management we can better understand the difference between our ideological commitments and theirs. I recently read a piece, written by a member of the faculty at the New School, expressing powerful support for the striking part-time faculty and eloquent dismay at the performance of the New School's president, whom she declines to name (so I won't name him either but his initials are Dwight McBride), while identifying him as "someone whose scholarship" she "deeply respected" but who has, in his handling of the strike, chosen "to betray" the "values" his work had once... embodied." I think it's crucial to see that this is exactly wrong. (3) The values of Dwight McBride's scholarship – embodied in his book on James Baldwin or in his collection *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch* (on "black male subjectivity") may be entirely admirable but they involve no more opposition to the exploitation of labor by capital than does the enthusiasm for DEI of virtually every academic manager in the country. And when they are understood to play a central role in a left politics, they function only to cut that politics off from its material base.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the current furor over Critical Race Theory and the right-wing effort to prevent us from teaching it. For while, of course, we shouldn't be prevented from teaching it (and we should do everything we can to keep from being prevented from teaching it), we also shouldn't teach it. (4)

Why not? Imagine you're a citizen of Ohio. In Ohio, the top 1% of the population earns an average of \$859,000 a year; the remaining 99% earn an average of \$46,000. Statistically, your chances of being in the top 1% are, well, 1%. And the majority of you belong to the bottom 60% of the population, whose income share is about 20% of the whole (that's 60% of the population, 20% of the income). (5) And, assuming Ohio is representative of the U.S. more generally, the situation is much worse with wealth: the bottom half of the U.S. has less than two per cent of the nation's wealth.

Critical race theory focuses on the role white supremacy plays in producing inequality, and it's almost certainly true that the Ohio 1 percent are overwhelmingly white. But in a state like Ohio

where most of the population is white, the bottom 99% are only slightly less overwhelmingly white! White supremacy has done nothing for them. Critical race theorists and everyone committed to the primacy of the racial wealth gap asks us to understand the fundamental injustice of American society as a function of racism. But every white person living below the median Ohio income knows that's not true. (6) Or if they do think it's true it's because they're among the white Americans who have actually bought into what Touré Reed calls race reductionism and they believe their own economic problems are a function of racism rather than capitalism.(7) In other words, while American capitalism has for the last half century been taking money away from the working class, Critical Race Theory tells us the problem is anti-black racism and Uncritical Race Theory has now started telling us it's anti-white racism. (8)

From this standpoint, it's not surprising that edition after edition of this into to Critical Race Theory tells us that CRT has "yet to develop a comprehensive theory of class." Its whole point is to subordinate class to race, and although it describes itself as "question (ing) the very foundations of the liberal order," in fact it commits us to a liberal vision of equality – the primacy of non-discrimination, the goal of equal opportunity – that is inimical to the ambitions of the working class, indeed inimical to the very idea of a class politics.

Here's where the merit raise part of my title begins to kick in, first by negation. This (9) is not a merit raise. Ten years ago, before we had a union, there was no minimum salary but most NTT faculty made \$26,800 a year with a 3/3 teaching load. Starting now, that number is \$60,000 (it's good to have a union). And you may remember (10) that all faculty were given a raise of \$2,500 this year, which is also not a merit raise. Both the minimum and especially the \$2500 were extremely hard to negotiate and would never have been won without striking. (11) The 3.5%, by contrast is for merit and, although the numbers were disputed, the principle wasn't and never has been and that principle in the form of the commitment to everyone having an equal opportunity to succeed is the same one at the heart of the commitment to anti-discrimination. If you've published two articles instead of one, then your race, gender or sexuality shouldn't

stand in the way of you getting the share you've earned of the raise pool. Which, as long as the merit raise pool is what you've got, it shouldn't.

But the goal of a minimum salary or of \$2500 for everyone is not making sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to get a raise; it's making sure that everyone gets a raise. We're not trying to solve the problem of the exploitative treatment of NTT professors just by making it possible for them to compete more fairly with each other for a few better jobs. The non-discrimination vision of social justice (the liberal vision of social justice) is that everyone should have the opportunity to escape bad jobs for better ones. But the vision of social justice embodied in the union – in the question what don't you like about your job -- is that the job should be made better. More generally, non-discrimination and equality of opportunity understand the fundamental ambition of members of the working class as escaping the working class. What don't you like about your job understands our fundamental ambition as securing rights, job security and money for the working class.

We can put the point a little more sharply by saying that non-discrimination and equality of opportunity embody the egalitarianism of Human Resources. This is in part an historical fact – what Frank Dobbin in his book *Inventing Equal Opportunity* calls the “revolution in personnel administration,” when the “focus on labor relations began to give way to a focus on nondiscrimination.” But if we think about the difference between union training and the trainings we do for HR, we can see that it's principled as well. From the standpoint of HR, the job is to make sure that what neoliberal economists call bad inequalities – the ones created by racism, sexism, etc. -- don't hamper the operation. Non-discrimination is part of the business plan. Not that there's anything wrong with that. We all – managers, workers and, in my experience, students – want a discrimination free workplace. Indeed, many of us understand anti-racism -- instilling in our students the commitments that structure both our own workplace and many of the workplaces where they'll be employed -- as part of our teaching mission. As do our bosses. At my university and many others, promotion cases now require a showing of how the candidate has contributed to diversity and, giving an earlier shorter version of this talk at

MLA, I noted sessions devoted to devising strategies for making the “racial justice work” we understand ourselves to be doing outside as well as inside the classroom “count in academia,” by which was meant count for “tenure and promotion.” If in some respects, our politics of non-discrimination are so aligned with our professional responsibilities that the two seem *virtually* indistinguishable, the goal of “Racial Justice Work in the Humanities” is to make it so that they are *actually* indistinguishable.

But the work we do for the union -- bargaining, fighting for academic freedom, grieving unfair discipline -- does not count for promotion and tenure; indeed, if it involves refusing to teach (i.e. striking), it counts for management as the opposite of work, and it involves withholding our pay. In this respect there’s a difference between racial justice work in the humanities and (let’s call it) “worker justice work” in the humanities. At almost every university strike or walkout, some of us will be carrying signs that say “Faculty working conditions are student learning conditions”: what we mean by this is that better conditions for the faculty will make us more effective teachers. But we ought to mean something different. We ought to mean that we should start teaching our students what our working conditions are teaching us – that the liberal vision of equality is at the same time the liberal justification of inequality, and that our emphasis on the values that unite management and labor functions mainly to repress the interests that oppose management to labor. And that if we were to build our politics on those interests, racial justice work would still have a place but not the pride of place in which it functions as a replacement for rather than an element of a working-class politics.

How might our students respond? Maybe it depends a little on who they are, that is, on where we teach. My own (admittedly anecdotal) sense has been that the richer the students, the more passionately committed they are to the managerial virtues, which isn’t surprising since the vast majority of the graduates of elite universities will in fact become managers or consultants to managers. Teaching Ivy plus students that it’s much more important for workers to be unionized than for management to be diversified and that labor should try to assert its control

over every aspect of the workplace would be identifying yourself as their class enemy. It's not surprising we prefer to tell them about white supremacy.

For those of us not teaching at elite universities, the situation is a little more complicated and, perhaps, a little more hopeful.¹ It's complicated because our students aspire to be managers – I've never encountered an undergraduate who came to UIC because of his or her political commitment to the working class. This is the fundamental condition of our employment – if students didn't see in college the promise of social mobility (as opposed to class solidarity) then, in our current form, we wouldn't exist. But if the desire for social mobility is bad news for a working-class politics, it's also – since that desire is increasingly likely to be frustrated – good news. This is the hopeful part: a capitalism that could provide most workers with access to better jobs, more money, more security, more autonomy, would be hard to fight against because, why would you even want to fight against it? But the experience of the last half century suggests that such a capitalism doesn't exist. (12) Social mobility has been declining and one look at the fastest growing jobs of the future indicates things won't get better. For example, lots of UIC students want to go into health care because the number of jobs is expanding and because some of them, like health services manager, are good jobs. In the next ten years, the economy is expected to add 136,000 nurse practitioners at a median salary of \$101K. But in the health care business (and in the economy as a whole) the largest job growth by far is personal care aide – there will be almost a million more of those in 2033. And personal care aides make \$29,000.² So how many of our students will actually end up with one of those managerial jobs? 20%? 30%? Should we be teaching our students that if we can just overcome racism and sexism all of them will have an equal chance to become one of the happy 30%? Or should we be teaching them that if we overcome racism and sexism 70% of them will still fail? The answer is that we should be teaching them what management's preference for diversity over security and for merit raises over cost of living raises teaches us -- the difference between capital's idea of equality and labor's idea of equality.³

Putting this point in the terms of our conference, we should be teaching them class consciousness. Lukacs would call this, replacing “the actual psychological state of consciousness of proletarians” with “the class consciousness of the proletariat.” What we could call it is replacing the idea that they live in a world structured by systemic racism with the idea that they live in a world where the antagonism not between black and white but between labor and capital is foundational, especially when it’s made to seem invisible or to feel irrelevant. Bruce Robbins, defending the idea that our work should be political, has recently and hopefully written that although Gramsci’s organic intellectuals were defined by their relation to a class rather than to identities, it’s not “much of a stretch to imagine the same dynamic might also work for a historical moment in which class has not been at the top of the agenda... and in which political energy has largely come instead from race, gender, and sexuality.” But it’s actually no stretch at all; it’s what we’ve been doing. The political energy that comes from race, gender and sexuality is the energy of a politics that regards inequality as a problem only insofar as it’s a function of disparate treatment of your race, gender or sexuality -- of discrimination. It’s the unclassconsciousness of identity. So today – both for our students and for us -- the first point to make about class is that it’s not an identity, it’s not a culture, it’s not a set of values you can either celebrate or deplore. People who take pride in being working class are as much beside the point as people who might be ashamed of it. Class is nothing but a position of opposition, and class consciousness is not a state of mind but the actions you take in what Lukacs called “the continuous struggle between capital and labor.” Which is why the actual phrase class struggle just says the same thing twice. What we want as workers cannot in the end be to affirm our position in class society but to destroy it.

Of course, the “we” in that sentence only works if we are in fact workers. If instead we are what we’re often said to be, members of the professional managerial class, the situation is very different. As members of the PMC, it’s not at all obvious that we should be dissatisfied with the class structure, which is why analysts like Gabriel Winant think that when we are, our dissatisfaction stems from what he calls our “awareness of the wrongness of class society.” But the whole point of the focus on class consciousness is that it doesn’t begin with an invitation to

recognize a moral wrong and then to acknowledge our complicity in it (it doesn't involve checking your privilege). That's why I began this talk with the question what don't you like about your job rather than what don't you like about class society. Nothing is either added to or subtracted from the work we do to make our jobs better (for example, what we do in our union) by reflecting on our complicity in a structure of exploitation, which, after all, is nothing more than reflecting on the fact that we work for a living. It's the question of how to make our jobs better and the fact that answering that question requires us to act not as individuals but in union that counts as our class consciousness.

But of course unions are no panacea. For one thing, there hardly are any of them (last slide). The decline in union membership since its height in the 1950s and even over the last 20 years has been steep – from 20% of the workforce to about half that, although there are some encouraging signs. When I was teaching at Berkeley in the 80s, there were lots of rallies against apartheid and on behalf of Salvadoran refugees. But even though that was the take-off period for American inequality, not a single member of the Berkeley faculty (including me) was thinking about the value of unions, much less about organizing one. Now, however, at Berkeley, in Chicago and right here in Bowling Green, that's the opposite of the truth. And, of course, everybody should be heartened by the efforts to organize workers at Starbucks and Amazon.

But even when you do get a union, your problems are not solved. Many health care aides have one – they'd no doubt be worse off without it but they're bad enough off with it. Part of the problem is the low union density, part of it the degree to which U.S. law is stacked against unions and part of it is the quality of the unions, some good, some not. And then, of course, from the standpoint of the left, there's the question of unions themselves. Even if almost all of us were unionized and the laws were changed, there's a limit to what unions can do. The way Marx put it, while unions "work well as centers of resistance against the encroachments of capital," they can fail "partially" from what he called "an injudicious use of their power" and "generally" by fighting against "the effects of the existing system instead of simultaneously trying to change it," with the relevant change being "the abolition of the wages system." And,

obviously, bargaining for a cost of living raise is not bargaining for the abolition of the wage system.

Indeed, you can't actually *bargain* for the abolition of the wage system, and, of course, the end of the wage system would be the end of bargaining. Unions in this sense cannot be revolutionary. But I don't see how this counts as an argument against unionization when the current alternatives (if any) don't even remotely involve some more radical alternative. And it's not even clear that organizing a union can't begin to count as the radical alternative. This is perhaps a discussion for another occasion but if Engels once dismissed the Trade Union demand of "a fair day's wages for a fair day's work" as an outmoded concession to capital's idea of fairness, he did so on behalf of the workers version of such a demand, a demand that could not in principle be met since if the worker really were paid fairly, the capitalist could make no profit. Which is just to say that, taken to its logical conclusion, the demand for a fair day's wages just is the demand for an end to the wage system. So if it often feels that we aren't doing a very good job even at just resisting the effects of the encroachments of capital, it's perhaps worthwhile remembering that every act of resistance – if it really is resistance and not another version of our trainings – is at least a step, however small, down the one path that management does not want us to take. That's the path of class consciousness.

¹ (Although it's worth remembering that we're still teaching a relatively privileged minority; most (57%) high school graduates don't go to four-year colleges; a third don't go to any college.¹)

² <https://www.healthjob.org/fastest-growing-jobs-in-health-care>

³ Eventually something about why it makes sense to think even of public universities as capital – using the U of C's investment in Blackstone's REIT as an example.