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Daniel T. Scott

Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California, dscott.education@gmail.com

Adrianna J. Kezar

Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California, kezar@rossier.usc.edu

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The Gig Academy: Naming the Problem and Identifying Solutions

Daniel Scott¹ and Adrianna Kezar²

Over the past few decades, workers (staff, faculty, postdocs, graduate students) in higher education face working conditions and employer relationships that are increasingly similar and exploitative. Higher education has seen the implementation, spread, and refinement of technologies of labor exploitation that have proliferated in a growing subset of the broader economy that is often termed the gig economy. In this article, we posit and articulate the features of the gig academy—a unique iteration of the gig economy in the higher education sector. We first describe the shifts in employment structures that make up the gig academy. We then describe how this transformation of the academy has eroded community, shared governance, collective action and student experiences and outcomes. Lastly we describe some ways that higher education change agents can resist this trend and help to turn the tide working within new forms of collective action. The ideas set forth here are reviewed in greater detail in our book—*The Gig Academy* (Kezar, DePaola & Scott, 2019).

Introduction

Precursors to the Gig Academy: Neoliberalism and Academic Capitalism

The gig academy provides a useful construct for elaborating and updating the concept of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Academic capitalism came about through the effect of neoliberal tendencies in higher education, prioritizing individual liberty over collective freedom and personal responsibility over shared welfare and thereby shifting responsibility over the provision of basic needs and public goods from democratic institutions to private enterprises (Harvey, 2005; Peck, 2010; Smyth, 2017). Scholars have assessed and chronicled the effects of neoliberalism in higher education at great length, but here it is worth noting that neoliberalism shifted higher education away from pursuing values associated with higher learning and the public good towards private, financialized interests including an emphasis on market logics (W.

¹ Daniel Scott is a research assistant at the Pullias Center for Higher Education and a graduate student at the Urban Education Policy PhD program at the University of Southern California Rossier School of Education.

² Adrianna Kezar is Dean's Professor of Leadership, Wilbur-Kieffer Professor of Higher Education and Director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California. Kezar holds a Ph.D. and M.A. in higher education administration from the University of Michigan and a B.A. from the University of California, Los Angeles. She has several years administrative experience in higher education both in academic and student affairs.

Brown, 2015; Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014; Levin, 2007; Slaughter & Leslie, 1999; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Smyth, 2017).

The Gig Academy's Nonacademic Counterpart: The Gig Economy

The nature of contingent labor outside of academia fundamentally shifted with the introduction of the gig economy, also known as the sharing economy. The gig economy is made up of businesses that created internet-driven peer-to-peer markets in which to exchange goods and services that were previously offered by traditional industries. In the gig economy, contingency and withdrawal of worker protections have been culturally reconfigured as virtuous markers of self-reliance. Standard gig economy firms (e.g., Uber, Lyft, Taskrabbit) encourage individuals to rent their labor and property to one another while charging everyone rent on access to the space of transaction itself. They also redefine workers as independent contractors to avoid offering workers benefits and job protections (Bousquet, 2008; Huws, 2014; Slee, 2015). While some may find gig work practical and lucrative, the majority earn well below a living wage. Even if work in the gig economy is plentiful, wages are so low that most often long hours are needed to make ends meet. Gig economy workers, regardless of how much they claimed to appreciate additional flexibility, also report some degree of personal, social, or economic anxiety linked to the precariousness and isolation of at-will employment (Petriglieri et al., 2018).

The Gig Academy

The gig academy emphasizes the dynamics of internal labor restructuring in higher education, which affects all levels of non-executive academic workers to varying degrees. Universities, like gig economy firms, leverage their status as platforms to surveil, de-skill, and devalue the labor they need to function while instilling the notion that contingency is best overcome through cultivating individual work ethic rather than collectively through solidarity and collaboration (Foucault, 1995; Hall, 2016; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Universities have created a system in which low wages and precariousness are standard terms of employment for most workers. The working conditions of most non-executive employees (non-tenure track faculty, post-docs, staff, and graduate students) on campus are becoming more similar to each other than ever, regardless of the kind of labor performed. Contrary to the accounts of proponents of such restructuring, this state of affairs is not normal, natural, or inevitable but is the product of choices made by organizational agents. So we employ the concept of the gig academy to describe this cluster of mutations, discussed next, that have rendered labor in higher education cheap and disposable. In the following sections, we note some of the most salient dimensions of the gig academy's shift to reliance on contingent labor and its normalization through an emphasis on entrepreneurial culture. We start by noting the broad shift to contingent

labor, proceed to the fissuring of the workplace, the deprofessionalization and unbundling of work roles, the shift of economic risk onto workers, the emphasis on micro-entrepreneurship, managerial manipulation of the labor pool, the implementation of technologies to reduce the cost of labor, and the structural discrimination that such a set of shifts facilitates.

Shift to Contingent Labor

Industries have a long history of trying to contain production costs by replacing full-time, permanent workers with short-term, contingent ones. For many postsecondary contingent workers, particularly those compelled to take part-time, short-term contracts at multiple institutions, contingent working arrangements are untenable. One of the most well-known worker groups rendered contingent is faculty, where now more than 70 percent of current instructional faculty are non-tenure-track. With little or no job security they are typically hired semester-to-semester or year-to-year, often within weeks or days of the semester's beginning, so they have very little ability to predict their work schedules, obligations, and even income. Yet contingency has spread to most other non-managerial worker segments as well. For example, 32% of office and administrative staff are now part-time (Rosser, 2011). To name a couple other groups, rising contingency has also been documented among custodial staff (Magolda, 2016) and postdocs (Jaeger & Dinin, 2018). Contingency is the greatest shift visible in the gig academy, and the remaining trends can all be understood as factors of that increased contingency.

The Fissured Workplace

The "fissured workplace" describes the separation of workers into distinct groups, for example through outsourcing (Weil, 2014). The gig academy is heavily infused with outsourced employment in many staff and service positions. Outsourcing cuts labor costs and fragments workers into de-linked nodes much like an assembly line. Where workers in housing, dining, security, maintenance, landscaping, tech support, and other areas once had a shared claim to the status and rights of university employees, now each of these areas can be staffed separately at a discount using private companies, each with its own distinct and largely part-time or contingent supply of labor. And outsourcing has moved to positions seen as core such as admissions, residential life, financial aid, housing, budget management, human resources management, and information technology (Bushman & Dean, 2005). Because employees work for many different employers, they are separated and constrained in their ability to organize at a scale that might constitute a threat. For university executives, outsourcing not only frees up resources so they can be used for administrative ends, but simplifies the process of acquiring a fluid supply of scalable and de-scalable on-demand labor with no additional commitment of resources required of the institution.

Deprofessionalization and Unbundling

Related to outsourcing and the fissuring of worker groups, the unbundling and deprofessionalization of academic work takes complex work processes and breaks them up into simple, standardized components (Huws, 2014). This allows executives to assume a greater degree of control over institutional resource flows and reconfigure them to optimize monetary returns. While deprofessionalization is most prominently documented among faculty, it is also seen commonly among staff, whose roles are also being routinized and professional expertise de-emphasized. For example, many student affairs roles are being automated, and the advice and decisions they once provided to students have been replaced with computer alerts and data analytics. But when positions are deprofessionalized, key aspects of roles are often lost. Faculty whose roles are unbundled are often stymied in their ability to provide high-quality instruction because other related aspects of the role have been removed, automated, or assigned to other workers. For example, an instructor may be responsible for teaching a particular course, while advising is assigned to workers in an advising center, and tutoring assigned to workers in a tutoring center. Without being involved with students on an advising level, faculty spend less time interacting with students and getting to know them, such that they are less able to connect the subject matter of the course to aspects of the student's lives in ways that would foster greater motivation and more effective learning. Should a student seek additional support in learning the subject matter, they are directed to a tutoring center which is often staffed by students who are likely to be less effective teachers since they are themselves students, have received no professional training in how to teach, and are providing generalized support to the entire university rather than providing the kind of specialized, course-specific support that could be provided by the faculty member teaching the specific course. In turn, advisors are less able to support students in their personal lives because they do not have any knowledge of the students gained from interacting with them in the classroom as an instructor. While deprofessionalization has most prominently been documented among faculty, it is also seen commonly among staff.

Shifting Economic Risk onto Workers

Universities save money by foisting the costs of labor reproduction back onto the worker. The typical contingent faculty member must find their own space to do work in lieu of an office and must provide their own computer supplies, copies, telephone, and internet, not to mention healthcare and insurance. If they sign a contract to teach 40 people three credits in English composition over four months for a fee of \$3,000, that rate is fixed regardless of whether it takes 20 minutes or two hours to grade an exam, and whether or not they must manage a chronic health condition, provide for children, or care for elderly family members. Staff face the same challenge, with campuses increasingly hiring marketing, development, recruitment, and other

staff through contingent appointments. These staff also are expected to provide their own office supplies, telephone and internet service, and benefits. Since the dawn of the labor movement such arrangements have been considered an unacceptable and dehumanizing violation of labor protections and basic dignity.

Micro-Entrepreneurship

Originally the parlance of jazz musicians and other artists, the term "gig" is usually interpreted as the kind of short-term work people motivated by passion, drive, and creativity do (Gold, 1964). By implication, under-remuneration and experiential compensation are socially acceptable trade-offs for autonomy. Employers have succeeded in interpolating intellectual workers with this "bohemian" ideology (long and irregular hours, debt subsidy, moonlighting, the substitution of reputation for a wage, casual workplace ethos, etc.) (Bousquet, 2008). Beyond passion, there is also a common need to recoup the exorbitant costs of doctoral studies, which for some can lead to motivated reasoning in an attempt to stave off the terrifying possibility that so much training and sacrifice could become economically worthless (Childress, 2019). Persistent misconceptions about the viability of a career in contemporary academia are an advantageous byproduct of more diffuse neoliberal attitudes that success or failure is determined solely by level of individual dedication, rather than the political economy of hiring and compensation. The gig academy is disciplining not only in the way it elicits worker compliance but in how it reconstitutes academic work in the style and mode of a competitive enterprise (Foucault, 1995; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Workers across higher education may be compelled by virtuous notions of education as a sacred calling and a desire to work in service of a social good, and the gig academy leverages this perceived ethos to support worker complacency (Hoerr, 2001).

Managerial Influence Over Labor Supply and Demand

Executives and high-level administrators have the collective incentive to reduce demand for primary (secure) workers while increasing the supply of primary job seekers. Once the latter are sufficient in number, they become less resistant to participation in the secondary labor market, recalling Marx's notion of the industrial reserve army (Marx & Bender, 1988). By restricting secure and well-paid positions to upper management and a smattering of faculty, while at the same time engineering a massive surplus of PhDs, institutions capitalize on the depressed value of labor which they have collectively brought about through systemic overproduction (Bousquet, 2002).

Technological Means of Reducing Labor Costs

In the gig academy, technology is often deployed to reduce labor costs but often in problematic ways. Technology can equally well be used for deprofessionalizing and devaluing workers, or supporting them by augmenting their capacities. Yet in the gig academy, techno-entrepreneurialism has been used to contribute to altered relations of production: any digital platforms that stand a chance of getting adopted (purchased) are almost certain to reinforce and exacerbate existing power imbalances in the institutional structure as a basic precondition. As more postsecondary work is unbundled and hiring becomes deprofessionalized and automated, the use of human capital management tools such as Oracle and Workday has started to proliferate in higher education. Targeting colleges and universities specifically, Workday's website describes "uniting financial and workforce planning" within one "flexible, modern platform that can adapt to your changing needs" (Workday, n.d.). Among the features it offers are tools to "support workforce restructuring [and] optimization" such as algorithms to guide staffing decisions that help determine which configurations are most "conducive to growth." Much like the scheduling software notoriously used by fast food restaurants and other low-wage employers, such systems shave labor costs through shift assignments and hour totals calculated to avoid triggering benefits eligibility. As digital labor intermediaries, Workday and Uber both serve as interfaces built to manage a flexible workforce that can provide services on demand with minimal compensation. Course management systems represent another example of technologies that have been utilized to cheapen the cost of labor, for example by asking faculty to design courses that will become the property of the university, such that the university can ask contingent faculty to follow that course plan. Intellectual property over course design in online and hybrid environments has been acknowledged as a growing issue for collective bargaining (Julius and DiGiovanni, 2019), but has not been studied extensively. Some faculty unions have been able to negotiate collective bargaining agreements that protect their intellectual property even when deployed over digital platforms, this is unfortunately the exception rather than the rule at present. One more technological example is student tracking and advising, where rather than students meeting regularly with faculty or advisors, they instead are monitored by algorithms watching for signs of "risk." Due to the nature of the gig academy, technologies implemented often serve to simplify the nature of academic work in ways that make it less impactful.

Structural Discrimination

The gig academy, like the gig economy, is rife with workplace discrimination. For contingent instructors, like Uber drivers, quality control processes work through crowdsourcing. The gig academy relies on student-customer reviews and star ratings that aggregate over time to

form a supposedly objective, free-market metric of quality. Yet women and people of color face significant job discrimination as a result because structural social biases are aggregated in the form of negative feedback and lower ratings (Hannák et al., 2017). Contingent faculty and their advocates have long criticized universities for relying on student evaluations to assess the re-employability of adjuncts and non-tenured faculty, which have replaced other means of assessment. There is a great deal of empirical evidence to show that student evaluations of teaching are not always measures of instructional quality, and rather show clear bias on the basis of race, gender, and perceived political orientation. Regardless of actual merit, if an instructor's evaluations are too low, a department chair could simply decide not to renew their contract, which again, is more likely to happen to adjuncts who are not white and/or not male (Ad-Hoc Committee on Grade Inflation, 2016; Boring et al., 2016; A. C. Brown, 2015; MacNeill et al., 2015; Merritt, 2008; Mitchell & Martin, 2018; Nikolakakos et al., 2012; Stark & Freishtat, 2014; Young, 2015).

Universities and gig economy firms alike have learned to mask underlying inequities through strategic counting. If they have subcontracted most campus services and support functions, they have no obligation to report the demographics of workers in these sectors. Omitting contingent workers from any official figures gives universities a way to maintain an institutional ignorance about the size and demographics of the contingent workforce. At the same time and perhaps unsurprisingly, the most secure and prestigious positions such as executive administrators and tenured faculty remain considerably overrepresented by white men (DePaola & Kezar, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

Impact of the Gig Academy

Having described some of the broad features of the gig academy, we will now move on to describe some of the negative consequences the gig academy has had on higher education more broadly.

From Communities to Competitors

While the features of the gig academy described above are problematic enough to raise concern among higher education stakeholders, its impacts clearly illustrate the dire need to fight this creeping trend. As described in the previous section, the gig academy is centered around corporatization and managerialism, entrepreneurialism and micro-entrepreneurship, atomization, and automation, which all work to dismantle community and thereby preclude collective action. This is particularly problematic in academia, which was previously organized around intellectual exploration and the pursuit of knowledge for the development and sustenance of community,

democracy, and the public good. Smyth (2017) cites Brown (2011) who quotes Thatcher (1987) in summarizing this aspect of neoliberal ideology, saying “there is no such thing as society... [only] individual men and women” (p. 18). A contemporary iteration focused on higher education might be *there is no such thing as academic community, only consumers and entrepreneurs*. This shift has implications both for senses of community among workers in the university in ways that affect their lives and the activities of the university and for senses of community between higher education workers and students in ways that affect student lives and learning experiences.

Reshaped Governance, Diminished Collective Action, and Hampered Student Learning

The first way that this change in community has affected academia is in the decline of shared governance. The gig academy logic asserts that the managerial class needs to maintain decision-making power to continue to maximize profits and institutional benefits. This comports with the view that academic managers are the institutional strategists who make executive decisions around structuring the work of their departments. Therefore, democratic structures have been dismantled so that power can be concentrated at the top of the hierarchy and so that academic capitalism and gig logics can remain dominant in decision-making and operating structures. Shared governance helped to facilitate positive relationships and communication between administrators and faculty as they made decisions together about important areas related to academic programs.

Gig academy logics also have deeply undermined organized labor and the role of unions in universities. Tensions between unions and administrators are at an all-time high. Barrow (2010) described these rising tensions between employees and administrators as resulting from administrators' corporatized goals, language, and viewpoint. Union members perceive administrators as focused less on academic goals, teaching, and learning and more on reducing costs, generating revenue, competition, and prestige. On the converse, the gig academy lens through which administrators look tends to view unions as power-hungry entities that invade workplaces, appropriate funds, stymie innovation, and interfere with the achievement of the goals of education. The gig academy has rendered working relationships even more hierarchical and at odds than in the past in ways that have undermined the goals of higher education.

The gig academy not only has rendered higher education workers more separate, but has also increased the distance between workers and students in ways that have changed student learning experiences and undermined their development and academic success. As the numbers of contingent faculty have swelled, various studies have investigated whether, and to what extent, this shift in faculty employment is associated with a concomitant negative trend in

student learning and success. Gig academy employment conditions are negatively associated with persistence, retention, graduation, academic performance, transfer from two-year to four-year institutions, early-college experiences, and high-quality faculty-student interactions, particularly among first-generation, low-income, and racially minoritized students (Kezar et al., 2014; Kezar & DePaola, 2018; Kezar & Sam, 2011b). See Kezar, DePaola, and Scott (2019) for more on the development and consequences of the gig academy.

Solutions: Toward Resisting and Dismantling the Gig Academy

Now that we have described the problem and some implications of the problem, what is there to be done? Higher education workers can pursue several avenues towards counteracting the trends of the gig academy. Given that the emergence of the gig academy is so much a result of consolidations in power among upper-level managers, solutions to the gig academy involve varying degrees of power shift to rebalance influence over the operations of higher education. We will outline the concept of workplace democracy and then describe two frameworks for organizing higher education—social-justice unionism and anarcho-syndicalism—workers at different levels to build the power necessary to resist the gig academy.

Workplace Democracy

Despite our strong collective belief in the rights afforded by democratic rule—rights to due process and elected representation, free expression, press, and assembly—Americans have never been united on the question of whether democratic rights also belong in our places of work (Eidlin & Uetrict, 2018). Workplace democracy involves applying democratic techniques to the functioning of workplaces including voting systems, debates, democratic structuring, input, due process, and appeals. It has also been seen as central to collective bargaining and organized labor as a means to achieve greater equity both on the job and in society. The labor movement did not always see the bare right to collectively bargain as its endgame (Eidlin & Uetrict, 2018). Organized labor was seen as the path to sovereignty in the workplace, where the production process itself could be democratically controlled, supporting a democratic economy that is coterminous with the democratic state. Workplace democracy may also involve employee ownership models and cooperatives in which workers collectively take part in decisions about organization and growth, and share in the benefits of its prosperity, or participatory management structures in which decisions are made through various consensus-based approaches (Pausch, 2013).

In higher education, a democratically controlled workplace would need a more equitable distribution of power than what is afforded through limited shared governance such as a faculty

senate. One noteworthy experiment (and perhaps the only one of its kind) comes from College of the Mainland, a working-class community college deep in the conservative oil country of Texas City (Smith, 2000). In 1993, they instituted a new management structure that effectively dissolved the hierarchical chain of authority and replaced it with a system of democratically organized self-managing teams that administered nearly every aspect of operations, from instruction and academic affairs to student services. Team leaders were elected, and decisions were made efficiently by consensus and occasionally majority votes. This fostered an environment with high levels of academic freedom, in which faculty, staff, students, trustees, and community members worked in close collaboration, leading to drastically improved employee engagement and diminished alienation. For more than a decade this system functioned with relative efficiency.

While workplace democracy is a broad concept, one place to start could be in expanding participation in governance. Typically, "shared governance" does not include contingent faculty and staff in meaningful decision-making. Workers of all types need to push for more involvement in campus decision-making and governance through organizing. This does not mean advocating superficial fixes, such as permitting a few adjuncts to vote in curriculum committee meetings, but a fundamental redistribution of power within the academy.

Current trends to reinstate shared governance provide opportunities for faculty and staff to reconstitute decision-making power they have lost on many campuses. Work by the Association of Governing Boards (AGB) defends the need for contingent faculty, in particular, to be included in campus decision-making and to revive shared governance (Association of Governing Boards, 2017). Accreditors are another powerful and underutilized group that has long supported shared governance as central to educational quality. They can be stronger allies if pressured to leverage their power in the course of initial accreditation and re-accreditation processes. Kezar and Sam (2011a) have showed how when contingent faculty are included in governance, campuses are more likely to create policies and practices that support their work. Many administrators are likely to begrudge conceding the power that they have diligently amassed over the last several decades. It will take an alliance of internal groups like faculty and staff working with external groups like AGB, accreditors, and parents to reclaim the decision-making power that faculty once had and to finally extend such decision-making power to staff.

Rebuild Worker Power through Organizing and Intergroup Solidarity

Labor power weakened over the years following World War II due to concerted efforts between (1) corporate interests and the federal government, (2) corporate interests and state governments, and (3) corporate interests and union leadership (for a discussion of this history,

see Scott & Kezar, 2019). Dubious collaborations utilized anti-leftist and anti-collectivist political and economic principles to displace the union movement's primary sources of strength and promise that made organizing so attractive to workers. The economic transformations that have fostered labor exploitation in all sectors, including the gig academy, are due in large part to a lack of worker power to resist them. The solution to the exploitative trends of the present economy, in the higher education sector as well as all others, lies in the problem itself—power.

If workers at all levels are to see any changes to their working conditions, it will likely be as a result of their own collective power and action bringing it about. Workers should focus on developing the interpersonal and intergroup infrastructure necessary to foster collective power not only between workers in higher education or all workers in general, but also between workers and other groups—namely, all people. The path towards collective power for social and economic transformation starts with workers and other groups organized under similar principles.

Anarcho-syndicalism refers to a framework for organizing groups of workers that develops without the requirement of government support or the goodwill of employers (Rocker 76). The independence of worker organization from government and employer support in this model makes it particularly advantageous in this context. The weakened state of labor in the United States stands as evidence that governmental interventions such as the establishment of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) under the Wagner Act and employer actions, like refusing to negotiate a contract, have prevented organized workers in different contexts from achieving their goals. An example of this from Boston University (BU) when tenured and tenure-track faculty went on strike in alliance with clerical workers over the mismanagement of president John Silber as he pursued the firing of left-leaning faculty, made financially questionable decisions, and used university funds to mount an aggressive, anti-union legal campaign. This led to unionization among faculty with the American Association of University Professors and among clerical workers and librarians with District 65 of the Distributive Workers of America. When the Silber administration refused to negotiate with the faculty union, the clerical and library workers joined the strike as well. Working together, the two groups were able to force the administration to recognize their respective unions and negotiate with them.

Social-justice unionism and anarcho-syndicalism are compatible organizing philosophies, and it is this combination that we propose as a framework for addressing the challenges facing higher education workers today. Social-justice unionism is an organizing philosophy that goes beyond the narrow concerns of business unionism. Where business unionism is focused on the well being of the individual members of a bargaining unit, social-justice unionism is concerned with the well being of all workers, as well as the broader impact that the employer has in the

community in which it is situated (Ikebe & Holstrom-Smith, 2014). While many unions in the U.S. followed business unionism values in a way that weakened their position overall, some unions in the U.S. have a history of social activism, expanding the bounds of their concern to encompass a wider community. This is reflected in the slogan shared by the International Longshore Workers Union and Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and often quoted by organizers in higher education: “an injury to one is an injury to all” (Ahlquist & Levi, 2013, p. 92).

Academic unions are in particularly strong positions to grow bargaining units and union strength through organizing due to the non-competitive nature of the higher education industry. Despite continued contestation by some universities, faculty, administrators, and the NLRB³, increasing unionization among graduate students at private universities points to this fact. Their ability to organize successfully may be partially explained by their lack of threat by competition, in addition to their broad embracing of a wider collective and social activism focus. Other higher education workers have also exhibited success as a result of employing strategies compatible with anarcho-syndicalism and embodying values compatible with the social-justice unionism paradigm. For example, the graduate student workers at the University of California (UC) Berkeley, as members of United Auto Workers Local 2865, provide another example of the intergroup solidarity that characterizes the re-emergence of social-justice unionism in higher education organizing. United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2865 made an explicit shift in strategy from business unionism and its focus on narrow economic demands to a social-justice unionism approach focused on “anti-oppression demands” and direct action instead of “closed-door negotiations with management” (Ikebe & Holstrom-Smith, 2014, p. 47). They provided an excellent example of effective cross-unit organizing and broader action as they went on strike with the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees Local 3299 service workers over intimidation practices in the University of California system (Wen, 2013). They were also joined by the California Nurses Association and UC Santa Cruz’s Skilled Crafts Unit (Burns, 2013). The graduate students cancelled their classes and turned out to protest in solidarity, which sent a message to the UC that intimidation practices leveraged against the service workers, or any workers, would not be tolerated (Burns, 2013; Wen, 2013).

However, these types of alliances should be taken as examples of routes towards success rather than as indication of a wholesale rise in graduate worker unionization or union strength. The vast majority of universities continue to resist graduate student unionization rhetorically,

³ The establishment of the NLRB came in response to militant unionism in the 1930s and, while some union victories have occurred under the auspices of the NLRB, over its history the NLRB has largely worked to control and suppress union activity rather than foster it (Lichtenstein, 2013). The current makeup of the NLRB, with anti-labor appointees of conservative and liberal political leanings alike, are further evidence that the NLRB functions to limit power-building among workers rather than foster it (McNicholas, Poydock, and Rhinehart, 2019).

through firings, and with the violent force of police. Rhetorically, universities resist graduate student unions by assert that graduate workers are students and apprentices—not workers—and therefore do not have the right to the protection of a union or collective bargaining. As graduate student workers have went on strike to assert their right to organize, hostile universities have called on police to brutalize and arrest them. In recent years, UC graduate students starting at Santa Cruz went on strike and have turned directly to the UC system to petition for increased wages due to the expense of living in California, particularly in the Bay area. Their wildcat strikes took place without UAW approval. The lack of approval from UAW leadership shows how the legacy of business unionism continues to undermine more radical union actions by aligning union leadership with the interests of the employer rather than with the interests of union members. Even more chilling is the fact that UC leadership, rather than communicating with their striking workers and negotiating in good faith, responded by firing striking graduate students and calling on police to beat and arrest them (Mahoney & Garces, 2020). See Scott and Kezar (2019) for more examples of success among higher education workers who have expressed broad intergroup solidarity and social justice in their organizing activities.

Conclusion

The stakes are high with higher education losing its fundamental features that have made it an efficacious institution in support of democratic governance and goals. We hope this article serves as a tool for consciousness raising by providing a logic so the various types of workers in higher education can see their aligned interests in resisting the exploitative nature of the gig academy. Too often, efforts remain diffuse because they do not rest on an expansive enough understanding of shared fate, which prevents moments of labor unrest from becoming movements for social transformation. Building connections between different groups of higher education workers is a key to finding the collective power to change the course of the higher education sector. We also hope this article inspires readers to pick up our fuller articulation of these ideas (Kezar, DePaola, and Scott, 2019) in our book to help chart a detailed strategic plan of action.

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