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Class Politics, Crisis, and Opportunity: A Call for Solidarity

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic is providing a stark reminder that higher education institutions, and faculty in particular, exist in a constant state of precarity. The crisis triggered by the pandemic is revealing the underlying contradictions at the heart of the employment relationship between faculty and administrative managers at colleges and universities. We suggest that without the protection provided by shared governance, tenure, and academic freedom, the core mission of colleges and universities to pursue truth and produce knowledge—as carried out by its faculty for the betterment of society—risks being eroded and eventually eliminated altogether. A brief review of the City University of New York and the evolution of the Professional Staff Congress, the union representing 30,000 staff and faculty at CUNY, as well as administrators' attacks on faculty at Ithaca College, shows that it is crucial to organize beyond the walls of academia during moments of crisis and establish connections with broader social movements. Responses to the crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic are an opportunity to fight back against the commodification of public goods.

The health, social, political, and economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic is providing a stark reminder that higher education institutions and faculty in particular exist in a constant state of precarity. This precarity exists as one manifestation of the tension between academic freedom as an ideal founded on the pursuit of truth for the betterment of society and the logic of capitalism—defined as a social, political, and

economic system that undermines the public sector in favor of privatization, the commodification of education, and attacks on the working class through the exploitation of their labor. The crisis has forced a moment of reckoning among faculty ranks with the reality that we do not fully control the means of mental production at our institutions and that shared governance, academic freedom, and tenure are inextricable from labor organizing. Academic freedom and tenure cannot exist without strong labor rights backed by collective bargaining agreements and a network of social movements that aim to protect these rights.

Historically, faculty teaching at higher education institutions have struggled with their class identity as private citizens who are allowed to critique society within preordained parameters set by college presidents, state legislatures, and boards of trustees. The key protections of tenure and academic freedom are embedded within a social, political, and economic matrix of material interests that are sharply manifested during moments of crisis like the one we are facing now. As Benjamin Ginsberg points out in *The Fall of the Faculty*, currently, “most professors possess surprisingly little influence in their own schools’ decision-making processes. . . . Power on campus is wielded mainly by administrators whose names and faces are seldom even recognized by students or recalled by alumni.”¹ The lack of faculty power is currently being translated into layoffs and increasing attacks on tenure and shared governance. From this context we can understand the question of who controls the material means of mental production at colleges and universities as fundamentally a problem of class relations. More specifically, as a class conflict between faculty and the political elite, trustees, and administrators who manage higher education institutions. As Clyde W. Barrow argues, “As a historical phenomenon, the problem of academic freedom has appeared almost exclusively as an element of the fundamental class conflicts associated with the development of

¹ Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

advanced industrial society.”² We can see the manifestation of this class conflict in the proposed cuts to colleges and university systems nationwide that have a direct, negative effect on faculty, staff, and students.

A brief review of the City University of New York and the evolution of the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), the union representing 30,000 staff and faculty at CUNY, as well as administrators’ attacks on faculty ranks through planned layoffs at Ithaca College, reveals how this class conflict has emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also worth reviewing how patterns of disinvestment and austerity threaten the recruitment, training, and mentoring of minority, poor, and working-class students, as well as faculty of color.

COVID-19 and the Contingency of Faculty

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic we are already seeing cases of governing boards implementing “emergency employee terminations and suspensions,” which include the firing of tenured faculty.³ Faculty and staff at both private and public institutions are experiencing the crunch.⁴ Overall, between the beginning of the pandemic and January 2021, the US Labor Department found that academic institutions have experienced a net loss of approximately 650,000 workers.⁵ At CUNY, the administration’s announcement that 2,800 adjunct faculty and part-time staff “would not be reappointed in the fall due to cost-cutting measures

² Clyde W. Barrow, *Universities and the Capitalist State: Corporate Liberalism and the Reconstruction of American Higher Education, 1894–1928* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 186.

³ Colleen Flaherty, “Suspending the Rules for Faculty Layoffs,” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 22, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/01/22/firing-professors-kansas-just-got-lot-easier>.

⁴ Megan Zahneis, “The Latest Assault on Tenure,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 16, 2020, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-latest-assault-on-tenure/>.

⁵ Dan Bauman, “A Brutal Tally: Higher Ed Lost 650,000 Jobs Last Year,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 6, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-brutal-tally-higher-ed-lost-650-000-jobs-last-year>.

in anticipation of state and city funding cuts”⁶ triggered a lawsuit by the PSC calling for the reversal of the layoffs.⁷ Unfortunately, the US Southern District Court of New York sided with CUNY’s management, allowing the layoffs to stand.⁸

During moments of crisis, we are all adjuncts facing precarious terms of employment. Shared governance and the production of knowledge are being actively decimated, along with the education of students, due to management-directed policies. And at CUNY, the impact of the crisis is disproportionately being felt by working-class students.⁹

As one recent study shows, state disinvestment results in “in higher tuition and fees, greater student loan debt, decreased resources for education and research, and fewer graduates and approved patent applications from public colleges and universities.”¹⁰ Already some states, including Georgia, Hawaii, Nevada, and North Dakota, are proposing cuts to their university systems, followed by growing pressure to implement “performance-based funding models” across the country.¹¹

⁶ Marjorie Valbrun, “CUNY Layoffs Prompt Union Lawsuit,” July 6, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/07/06/economic-fallout-pandemic-leads-layoffs-cuny-and-union-lawsuit>.

⁷ Barbara Bowen, “PSC Sues CUNY: Fights Layoffs,” PSC CUNY, July 1, 2020, <https://psc-cuny.org/news-events/psc-sues-cuny-fights-layoffs>.

⁸ Maya Schubert, “Judge Throws Out PSC Lawsuit: The Brooklyn College Vanguard,” accessed April 11, 2021, <http://vanguard.blog.brooklyn.edu/2020/11/18/judge-throws-out-psc-lawsuit/>.

⁹ Douglas A. Medina, “Working-Class Students Doing Double Duty during Coronavirus,” Common Dreams, opinion, April 15, 2020, <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2020/04/15/working-class-students-doing-double-duty-during-coronavirus>.

¹⁰ Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, “Consequences of State Disinvestment in Public Higher Education: Lessons for the New England States,” Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, February 21, 2019, <https://www.bostonfed.org/publications/new-england-public-policy-center-research-report/2019/consequences-of-state-disinvestment-in-public-higher-education.aspx>.

¹¹ Emma Whitford, “State Higher Ed Funding for Next Year Looks Like a Mixed Bag,” *Inside Higher Ed*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/02/16/governors-propose-cuts-increases-and-other-changes-higher-ed-funding-depending-state>.

And even though recent legislative attempts to eliminate tenure at Iowa's public universities have been defeated, the overall number of tenure and tenure-track positions has been declining, according to the state's board of regents report.¹²

In New York State, Governor Andrew Cuomo's proposed budget for the 2022 fiscal year would have produced a net decrease in funding for CUNY's senior and community colleges. Governor Cuomo is facing an impeachment probe and calls from top New York State leaders to resign, as well as pressure from community and PSC members. From this politically weak position, Cuomo approved a budget that actually restores some funding and prevents tuition increases for students, among other gains.¹³ A brief history of the PSC and the recent case of Ithaca College both show that during a crisis, it is possible to fight back against austerity.

Protecting Faculty, Fighting for Justice: CUNY and Ithaca College

Moments of social and political crisis are displaced into colleges and universities, particularly at public institutions. At CUNY, the PSC has experienced two significant moments of fiscal crisis and retrenchment in 1976 and during the 1990s, both of which led to the firing of faculty and staff.¹⁴ Both moments were also a historical moment for the PSC to organize based on broader mandates that transcended faculty and staff material interests to include the impact of austerity on the majority of the students who occupy our classrooms while connecting to broader social justice agendas.

¹² Vanessa Miller, "Tenure Numbers Drop across Iowa Public Universities, Even as Bills to Kill It Die," *Gazette*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.thegazette.com/education/tenure-numbers-drop-across-iowa-public-universities-even-as-bills-to-kill-it-die/>.

¹³ Barbara Bowen, "Statement on the FY2022 New York State Budget for CUNY," PSC CUNY, April 7, 2021, <https://www.psc-cuny.org/news-events/statement-fy2022-new-york-state-budget-cuny>.

¹⁴ Karen W. Arenson, "CUNY Misused Fiscal 'Emergency' To Cut Staff and Costs, Judge Rules (Published 1996)," *New York Times*, May 3, 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/05/03/nyregion/cuny-misused-fiscal-emergency-to-cut-staff-and-costs-judge-rules.html>.

The Professional Staff Congress was founded in 1972 as part of a merger between the Legislative Conference and the United Federation of College Teachers.¹⁵ The founding also coincided with the beginning of the fiscal crisis of the 1970s and the rise of what has come to be known as neoliberalism, which prioritizes the privatization of public goods.¹⁶ The 1970s were deeply traumatizing and destabilizing for New York City and CUNY in particular. The Open Admission policy was implemented in 1970, opening access to CUNY's senior colleges to previously marginalized Black and Puerto Rican students. Six years later, two neoliberal and undemocratic institutions—the Emergency Financial Control Board and the Municipal Assistance Corporation—put pressure on CUNY to end free tuition in 1976. This period of “retrenchment” affected everyone in New York City, particularly the poor and the working class, while decimating the public sector and unions in particular. It was also a time for organizing within the PSC to stop the cuts, culminating in one of the largest rallies in the history of CUNY on December 12, 1974.¹⁷

In 1991, nearly two decades later, CUNY was facing severe budgetary cuts, leading the board of trustees to declare a “financial emergency.” Subsequently, Governor Mario Cuomo, a Democrat, proposed additional cuts and tuition hikes, a proposal exacerbated by reductions on city contributions to CUNY, leading CUNY to declare financial exigency, in which some college administrators fired staff and faculty, while others avoided it.¹⁸

After a series of cuts, which were achieved through the reorganization of departments and letting go of tenured faculty, the PSC brought a lawsuit against CUNY. The initial lawsuit heard by the state Supreme Court, with Justice Alice Schlesinger presiding, found that “the university violated its own retrenchment rules by taking actions under a supposed

¹⁵ Irwin Yellowitz, “25 Years of Progress: Professional Staff Congress/CUNY,” CUNY Digital History Archive, April 14, 1997, <https://cdha.cuny.edu/items/show/2812>.

¹⁶ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁷ Yellowitz, “25 Years of Progress,” 12.

¹⁸ Yellowitz, “25 Years of Progress,” 25, 26.

financial emergency in June 1995 when there was considerable evidence that such an emergency no longer existed." CUNY appealed this decision. Ultimately, Schlesinger's ruling was reversed by the Appellate Division of New York's Supreme Court, except for the reduction of credits from 128 to 120 for a baccalaureate degree and 64 to 60 for an associate degree. Both CUNY and the PSC appealed the decision to New York's Court of Appeals.¹⁹ The PSC was turned down by the court and eventually, on November 1997, the board of trustees and the PSC came to an agreement about the reduction of credits.²⁰

The upshot of this incident is revealing. PSC president Irwin Polishook, when asked why the university acted in the way it did, said, "The declaration of exigency was largely a pretext to transform the university."²¹ The transformation Polishook refers to is the governance over academic issues that the board of trustees was pushing through under retrenchment as well as faculty's employment relationship to the college. This incident illustrates the precarity that faculty at CUNY have confronted during moments of crisis. It also underscores how administrators exert power and control over faculty and students.

Most recently, downsizing at Ithaca College has emerged as another egregious attempt to eliminate faculty jobs by administrative fiat. It is also a case study that warrants a close look at how equity, diversity, and inclusion can be misused to justify faculty layoffs and departmental restructuring. Ithaca College first announced drastic cuts to its faculty ranks in October 2020, targeting over 130 "full-time equivalent" positions.²² Creating a direct, causal link between student enrollment and faculty hiring, the college says that "enrollment decline" of approximately "700 students over 10 years, pre-pandemic, while full-time faculty positions increased by over 50," is the main reason for the planned cuts.

¹⁹ Yellowitz, "25 Years of Progress," 28, 30.

²⁰ CUNY, "CUNY Board Meeting Minutes," *CUNY Policy* (blog), 176–77, <https://policy.cuny.edu/minutes/>, accessed February 22, 2021.

²¹ Quoted in Yellowitz, "25 Years of Progress," 28–31.

²² Colleen Flaherty, "Ithaca Announces Sweeping Faculty Cuts," *Inside Higher Ed*, October 15, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/10/15/ithaca-announces-sweeping-faculty-cuts>.

Purportedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the cuts that were originally part of a “five-year strategic vision.”²³

As of January 2021, Ithaca College administrators have already fired at least thirty-eight faculty members.²⁴ The firings triggered an organized response by college alumni and current faculty.²⁵ The backlash has led to the creation of Ithaca College’s first AAUP chapter, which is calling for the rejection of the cuts.²⁶ As of the writing of this article, the IC AAUP chapter is circulating a petition that specifically calls for “shared governance, an extended timeline and increased financial transparency throughout the Academic Program Prioritization (APP) process.” As it stands, “The college is planning to eliminate 116 full-time equivalent faculty positions and 26 departments and majors and programs.”²⁷

Pointing to the COVID-19 crisis—which has exacerbated a pattern of declining student enrollments—IC’s president and provost, Shirley M. Collado and La Jerne Terry Cornish, respectively, have insisted that the “business model” of the college is not working and it is their responsibility to implement “significant strategic changes.”²⁸ Their public response is a direct counternarrative to the resistance by alumni and faculty at the

²³ Colleen Flaherty, “Ithaca Announces Sweeping Faculty Cuts.”

²⁴ “Ithaca College Layoffs, as of January 2021,” Google Docs, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_GS-Pjp4l92vJk5JGo1QByZLTed0UOt0TngZwDI7dL4/edit?usp=embed_facebook, accessed May 11, 2021; Caitlin Holtzman, Elizabeth Kharabadze, and Syd Pierre, “IC Organizations Hold Events to Discuss Impacts of APP,” *Ithacan*, April 29, 2021, <https://theithacan.org/news/ic-organizations-hold-events-to-discuss-app-impacts-on-bipoc/>.

²⁵ Colleen Flaherty, “The Growing Ithaca Resistance,” *Inside Higher Ed*, February 8, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/02/08/growing-resistance-against-cuts-ithaca>.

²⁶ Alexis Manore, “IC AAUP Circulates Petition to Reject Faculty and Program Cuts,” *Ithacan*, February 18, 2021, <https://theithacan.org/news/ic-aaup-circulate-petition-to-reject-faculty-and-program-cuts/>.

²⁷ Manore, “IC AAUP Circulates Petition.”

²⁸ Shirley M. Collado and La Jerne Terry Cornish, “Now Is the Time for Hard Decisions,” *Inside Higher Ed*, opinion, February 18, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/02/18/president-and-provost-ithaca-college-describe-why-they-think-strategic-change>.

college. Most telling is their framing of tenure as a “privileged” employment category that “reflects an inequitable paradigm” at the college and in faculty governance and employment.

In response, the Ithaca College AAUP chapter challenged the assumptions made by Collado and Cornish and asked,

Why is the solution not rather to *extend* these protections throughout the full faculty, an initiative to which the institution has been constantly resistant over the last decade? Further, why not encourage and facilitate the unionization of all staff at Ithaca College, to ensure that staff will also be afforded the job tenure and protection they are entitled to? How does making *all* workers contingent and expendable drive “systemic change that dismantles the status quo”? Why must so many college and university administrators insist that the only way to be fair is for everyone to expect less?²⁹

Tenure protection for faculty who earn it is at the heart of the employment relationship that strengthens academic freedom and faculty governance. At the same time, Collado and Cornish appeal for readers to understand that they are both “women of color who are driving systemic change that dismantles the status quo.” And that, “because one of [their] strategic planning goals is to be a national model for colleges committed to the values of diversity, equity and inclusion, achieving this goal is important to [them] and a constant consideration in [their] decision-making process.”

This framing and narrative for justifying the elimination of faculty jobs and the restructuring and elimination of entire academic departments at Ithaca College is dangerous. It amounts to a political weaponization of diversity, equity, and inclusion agendas for the purpose of decimating tenure, academic freedom, and faculty governance—all of which clearly has a negative impact on students. Collado and Cornish reveal the fundamentally corporate, managerial, and class-driven politics

²⁹ Ithaca College AAUP, “Questioning the Assumptions behind Budget Cuts,” *Inside Higher Ed*, letter, March 2, 2021, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/03/02/ithaca-college-aaup-questions-assumptions-behind-budget-plan-letter>.

behind austerity measures that we will continue to see across the higher education sector. In this regard, both the CUNY and Ithaca cases expose the class dimension of austerity measures that target faculty: any austerity measure that eliminates faculty, departments, and courses will inevitably trickle down to all students.

As the IC case and others show, reasons cited for declaring restructuring of higher education institutions rely on claims of financial “*near exigency*.”³⁰ At their core, these claims are political and economic attacks on academic freedom because they reduce the ability of faculty and support staff to produce knowledge and educate students. These cases also strike at the heart of faculty’s principle of self-governance, which translates to workplace democracy. Administrators and legislatures are pushing the limits of what it means to declare financial exigency. At the core of these attacks is the struggle to control and define the terms of labor that faculty members adhere to at their institutions, as the CUNY and Ithaca cases show. Now more than ever, austerity measures executed by state legislatures, boards of trustees, and administrators are having a significant impact on students and faculty. The impact will have both immediate and long-term consequences for academic freedom, shared governance, and tenure, which will undoubtedly have a disproportionate impact on underrepresented and vulnerable faculty and staff.

Austerity Threatens Vulnerable, Underrepresented, and Working-Class Students and Faculty

Implicit in the practice of academic freedom is the promise of social justice. Academic freedom thrives in the presence of diverse ways of knowing and in environments composed of multiple perspectives, histories, and traditions. Institutions of higher education advertise and promote themselves as “diverse” by offering statistical racial and sometimes socioeconomic data on their student bodies as “selling points” to attract applicants. As gatekeepers to middle-class status for many students, universities are perceived to be critical architects of the social

³⁰ Zahneis, “The Latest Assault on Tenure.”

fabric by offering new generations the power of knowledge and the pursuit of scholarship. Education as a public good confers the possibility of civic engagement, social mobility, and intergenerational transmission of its benefits. Education has long been known to be a path to achieving American ideals that are in theory promised to everyone. The promise of education for the most vulnerable students, however, is now under grave threat.

Disinvestment in public higher education has coincided with increasing numbers of minoritized, immigrant, and first-generation students enrolling in higher education institutions.³¹ Uniting them is their working-class identity. Decreases in public support, through tax-levy funding, have led minority-serving public institutions and private institutions to raise tuition and fees, creating additional barriers for students seeking higher education. Given that intergenerational wealth gaps have been steadily increasing over the past several decades, many students do not have the wherewithal to manage these additional costs. After minority enrollment began to rise in the 1980s and early 1990s, years of subsequent disinvestment have led to a decline in enrollment.³² While minority students are losing ground through lagging enrollment and graduation rates, faculty are likewise struggling with underrepresentation in the academy.

Diversity among faculty is of critical value to the protection and promulgation of academic freedom, and its precarity is increasingly recognized in the literature. Despite being purported as a race-neutral concept, in practice, academic freedom is fraught with the dynamics of race, class, and gender. Faculty of color report that, despite being aware

³¹ QianQian Yu, "If Tuition Rises . . . Does Racial and Ethnic Minority Student Enrollment Plummet?," ProQuest, <https://search.proquest.com/openview/eb2eaf33c9aa8c54c113eeb92503397c/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=47536>, accessed February 20, 2021.

³² Ben Miller, "It's Time to Worry about College Enrollment Declines among Black Students," Center for American Progress, September 28, 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-postsecondary/reports/2020/09/28/490838/time-worry-college-enrollment-declines-among-black-students/>.

of their right to academic freedom, they are hindered from exercising this right in their institutions due to their social identities, fear of reprisal or discrimination, and rank.³³ In essence, the failure to hire, retain, and promote these faculty leaves those few who remain in the academy particularly vulnerable and overburdened.

Austerity measures have resulted in cuts to research funding, faculty release time for scholarship, and travel budgets for conferences and presentations. When faculty are unable to access the means of mental production for scholarly work, their careers are hampered. This results in denial of tenure, promotion, faculty dissatisfaction, and turnover. Students have fewer opportunities to conduct collaborative or mentored research projects, and faculty's administrative demands limit student access to faculty knowledge. Less access to faculty mentors decreases students' ability to develop scholarly trajectories of their own.

Minority serving institutions, including several CUNY colleges, receive less funding than predominantly white institutions.³⁴ For students of color, particularly students who are the first generation in their families to attend college, academic success becomes elusive. They are hampered by cuts to financial aid, scholarships, as well as academic, social, and mental health support services. The lack of adequate support limits students' ability to advance to the doctoral level and follow a trajectory toward their *own* participation in the academy. Developing a robust cadre of racially and economically diverse scholars requires early investment, at the undergraduate and community-college level.

There is widespread awareness that all areas of academic and scientific research need investigators from diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. The inclusion of diverse perspectives has been

³³ Holley M. Locher, "Academic Freedom for Whom? Experiences and Perceptions of Faculty of Color," PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2013, <http://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/150960>.

³⁴ Walter R. Allen et al., "From *Bakke* to *Fisher*: African American Students in U.S. Higher Education over Forty Years," *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 4, no. 6 (2018): 41, <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2018.4.6.03>.

shown to yield results that benefit society at-large.³⁵ While the overwhelming dearth of minority scholars is being addressed nationally through pre- and postdoctoral fellowships and early career grants,³⁶ these highly competitive awards are aimed at those who have already moved into the highest levels of academia. In general, while these awards prioritize minority scholars, they benefit a select few and do little to make a transformative impact on the landscape. And despite these few initiatives, minority researchers remain underrepresented and their work grossly underfunded.³⁷

Due to the pandemic, many universities have temporarily, or in some cases, permanently suspended their doctoral programs.³⁸ Doctoral candidates often rely on funding to complete their training, and all students require reliable, consistent senior faculty mentorship to successfully conduct their independent research and satisfy the requirements of the degree. There is already a paucity of minority students in doctoral degree programs. The loss of program viability will reduce the faculty diversity of future higher education institutions. Faculty of color are more likely to mentor doctoral students of color than

³⁵ Hannah A. Valentine and Francis S. Collins, "National Institutes of Health Addresses the Science of Diversity," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 40 (October 6, 2015): 12240–42, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1515612112>.

³⁶ Hannah A. Valentine and Francis S. Collins, "National Institutes of Health Addresses the Science of Diversity," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 40 (October 6, 2015): 12240–42, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1515612112>; American Psychological Association, "Developing Minority Biomedical Research Talent in Psychology," <https://www.apa.org/pi/oema/programs/recruitment/minority-research>, accessed February 20, 2021.

³⁷ Mercedes R. Carnethon, Kiarri N. Kershaw, and Namratha R. Kandula, "Disparities Research, Disparities Researchers, and Health Equity," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 323, no. 3 (January 21, 2020): 211–12, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2019.19329>.

³⁸ Megan Zahneis, "More Doctoral Programs Suspend Admissions. That Could Have Lasting Effects on Graduate Education," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 28, 2020, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/more-doctoral-programs-suspend-admissions-that-could-have-lasting-effects-on-graduate-education>.

are white faculty. The effects of this potential cascade of lost mentorship opportunities may have a chilling effect on equality and social justice.³⁹

The effects of COVID-19 on faculty are disproportionately felt by women and faculty of color, revealing that the contingency of faculty is both gendered and racialized. Women often find themselves in caregiving roles during times of crisis. This has been well-documented during the pandemic, as public school closures have forced women to manage childcare while working from home, or to leave the workforce entirely.⁴⁰ For tenure-track faculty, this means reductions in research and service, leading to the curtailment of career advancement. For non-tenure-track or adjunct faculty, caregiving may result in fewer teaching hours or time to interact with students, which can result in lower wages, unfavorable student evaluations, and further marginalization of an already precariously employed group. The concerns of women of color faculty may be further exacerbated by having to take on unpaid and unrecognized work such as organizing around, or participating in, social justice movements (such as labor organizing or Black Lives Matter).⁴¹ The added pressures and precarity triggered by the pandemic may provide fertile ground for faculty to reconceptualize their professional identities away from kinship with management and toward a working-class identity.

This shift calls for a reevaluation of faculty's role in the political arena as advocates for working-class constituencies. Resistance to ongoing austerity measures and acknowledging that everyone, regardless of their identity, is fundamentally vulnerable in moments of crisis is the first step

³⁹ Kecia M. Thomas, Leigh A. Willis, and Jimmy Davis, "Mentoring Minority Graduate Students: Issues and Strategies for Institutions, Faculty, and Students," *Equal Opportunities International* 26, no. 3 (April 3, 2007): 178–92, <https://doi.org/10.1108/02610150710735471>.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Rothwell and Lydia Saad, "How Have U.S. Working Women Fared during the Pandemic?," Gallup.com, March 8, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/330533/working-women-fared-during-pandemic.aspx>.

⁴¹ Sarah Trainer et al., "Exploring the Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 on Faculty," January 24, 2021, <https://peer.asee.org/exploring-the-gendered-impacts-of-covid-19-on-faculty>.

toward a solidarity-based approach to organizing within and outside of the academy. Faculty can organize around calls for universal policies that will benefit everyone. Making public higher education free for all and cancelling student debt would strengthen any initiative that aims to diversify academic institutions while building solidarity.⁴² This is a key component of what needs to be done, with faculty at the forefront of the struggle.

Conclusion: Faculty as Vanguard

Since its inception, the PSC has fought against management control over academic freedom and faculty governance. Examples include its campaigns against the “tenure quotas” proposed by two CUNY chancellors: Albert Bowker in the late 1960s and Robert Kibbee in the 1970s.⁴³ It was no accident that the tenure quotas were the first major political and organizational challenges the PSC faced as a union. The history of the PSC, CUNY, and the Ithaca College case reveal what Clyde Barrow argues regarding class relations in academia: “It is the relation of class conflict that defines the ground on which we understand and measure the extent of autonomy.”⁴⁴ This suggests that class conflict and autonomy—as expressed through faculty governance, academic freedom, and tenure—must be understood as part and parcel of their local, concrete historical moments. During moments of crisis, faculty have to ally with other social movements, particularly labor-based movements.

Currently, the PSC is embarking on one of its most ambitious organizing drives, A New Deal for CUNY (ND4C).⁴⁵ It is being organized

⁴² Claire Bond Potter, “The Only Way to Save Higher Education Is to Make It Free,” *New York Times*, opinion, June 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/opinion/sunday/free-college-tuition-coronavirus.html>; Bernie Sanders, “Free College, Cancel Debt,” Bernie Sanders Official Website, <https://berniesanders.com/issues/free-college-cancel-debt/>, accessed February 21, 2021.

⁴³ Yellowitz, “25 Years of Progress,” 8.

⁴⁴ Barrow, *Universities and the Capitalist State*, 256.

⁴⁵ “ND4C Summary,” CUNY Rising Alliance, <https://cunyrisingalliance.org/nd4csummary>, accessed February 20, 2021.

under the auspices of the CUNY Rising Alliance, a coalition of “students, workers and communities” coming together to support CUNY’s mission to educate New York City’s working-class.⁴⁶ ND4C calls for a five-year phase-in of four key demands: make CUNY free for in-state students; hire more mental health counselors and academic advisors; increase the ratio of full-time faculty to students and professionalize adjunct compensation; and increase investment in the capital budget. CUNY promotes itself as one of “the greatest urban universities in the world” providing “opportunity” and a “quality, accessible education, regardless of background or means.”⁴⁷ Should the ND4C demands be met, it would indeed live up to that moniker.

Meeting the ND4C demands would strengthen academic freedom, faculty governance, and tenure protections by bringing together faculty, staff, students, community members together to protect the promise that a public higher education provides: educating students for the betterment of society. College teaching is arguably one of the few professions that embodies truth and autonomy as its operating principles. Within a capitalist society where metrics and profits dominate social exchanges, protecting the labor rights and academic freedom of faculty is an existential endeavor.

At Ithaca College, Dan Breen, an associate professor and chair of the college’s newly created AAUP chapter, explains that the administration’s austerity measures were the catalyst for the creation of the AAUP chapter. Working closely with the part-time faculty union, Students for Labor Action, a student and faculty group called Open the Books, the local Worker Center, and a very active alumni group, community members have been organizing to resist the cuts.⁴⁸

The most powerful tool faculty at colleges and universities possess is their ability to withhold their labor, bringing the entire process of teaching

⁴⁶ “About CUNY Rising Alliance,” CUNY Rising Alliance, <https://cunyrisingalliance.org/about>, accessed February 21, 2021.

⁴⁷ “The Greatest Urban University in the World,” City University of New York, accessed February 21, 2021; “The City University of New York,” City University of New York (blog), <https://www.cuny.edu/>, accessed February 21, 2021.

⁴⁸ Dan Breen, April 15, 2021.

and learning to a halt. We must revive this tool by organizing to eliminate the notorious Taylor Law, which affects public employees in New York.⁴⁹ Understood from this perspective, strong labor rights, solidarity forged in the midst of political, social, and economic struggles and buttressed by coalition-building and political organizing, are the most effective means to protect academic freedom while supporting broader social movements.⁵⁰

Faculty and staff labor rights are inherently about autonomy, academic freedom, self-governance, and the protection of these rights through tenure. These rights exist as a function of who controls the resources available to faculty and staff at higher education institutions. The infrastructure available to faculty and staff to do their jobs (Including access to technology, as we have seen during the COVID-19 crisis) is part of a labor relation rooted in a broader social relation of who controls what we do and how we do it. As high-level administrators assume control of academic matters through reallocation of financial resources, they are also controlling the context in which we educate our students. In other words, the social and class relations and the power dynamics that they reveal are becoming more evident during this moment of crisis.

The racial, gender, and economic inequalities and their impacts that we are witnessing within higher education intuitions are fundamentally rooted in these power dynamics and social relations that capitalism produces. And while each historical crisis reveals the limits of exercising labor rights, it also reveals the possibilities that lie ahead. As both the CUNY and IC cases show, asserting and defending our labor rights as faculty is the starting point for building solidarity within our workplace, while linking our struggles with broader social movements. The crisis is an opportunity to remind the public that faculty and the work that we do

⁴⁹ James Gray Pope, "Workers' Only True Weapon," *Jacobin*, October 2, 2018, <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/10/strike-taylor-law-de-blasio-cuomo>.

⁵⁰ Labor Commission on Racial and Economic Justice, "A Brief History of Labor, Race and Solidarity," <https://racial-justice.aflcio.org/blog/est-aliquid-se-ipsum-flagitiosum-etiamsi-nulla>, accessed February 2, 2021.

at colleges and universities is carried out in the pursuit of truth for the benefit of society and in defense of public goods.

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