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On Course Unionism

Introduction

The ultimate objective of the course union is to create an academic community of equals without distinctions in power and privilege.

However, it must be realized that we are living in a corporate society, which is based on fundamental inequality. The educational institutions in which we study help maintain the corporate structure by reproducing its form and content (read ideology) in the classroom and decision-making system. All of us are channelled, either by education and/or social values, into positions of unequal power and opportunity.

The different positions in which people find themselves and which are produced by our kind of social and educational system necessarily have basic conflicts of interest. The origin of these conflicts does not lie in the school alone, but in the society which shapes and sustains it. These conflicting interests cannot be resolved without getting at the roots of inequality. In the university, playing with numbers of students on committees will provide no solutions.

Equality in power cannot be achieved even by granting one-man one-vote while other factors determining inequality remain unchanged.

Our perspective, then, is to maximize the real power of students (and all teachers regardless of rank) and not to create false illusions of equality by setting up structures which would seek to assimilate students at the legislative level. We want to develop a structure which will help to generate the kinds of changes which will enable a transformation into a real community of equals.

It is necessary for students to maintain separate organizations in light of their low position of the power pole. It is only by organizing separately that students can understand their collective and individual needs and as a distinct group begin to negotiate for a redistribution of power. Only by identifying those who have and have not power will there be a basis for a redistribution of power. And unless students as a group (the have-nots) begin making these demands they will continue to be powerless in the university. Those in a privileged position are not willingly going to give up their special powers and privileges merely because one or two students point out the irrational and unequal organization of the university. A community of equals will only begin to come about through the development of collective organization of the powerless and the alienated. The course union is a beginning.

Course Union Structures

There have been a number of course union structures proposed in the past, most of which have failed in attaining a real equalization of power. It is necessary to take a look at the various alternatives and why they are inappropriate in order to create a community of equals.

The present trend in university structural reform or the new status quo i. e. parity on advisory committees, no direct decision-making powers, and speaking rights in open departmental meetings is merely an unattentive response to students'

demands for increased participation in decision-making. The presence of students in departmental meetings would tend to legitimize decisions made by non-students without the reality of any student power. There would be no control over how the ideas generated in joint committees would be used. The situation parallels somewhat the dilemma of the scholar who has no say over how his research is applied. Continuation of the new status quo would most likely create further elitism among the students. Only those students interested in "faculty matters" and close to the faculty socially would participate, those who tend to be least uncomfortable in political debate with these older and more experienced (and more powerful) than themselves. The apathy of the majority of students is not based on a satisfaction with the present situation or on a lack of potential or real interest in the problem being discussed. It is founded on the subconscious realization of their situation as non-members of the power structure who are the objects of decisions and are alienated from their educational work. They have no real way of asserting themselves in such a manner that they can see the fruits of their efforts relating to their daily experience, and again self-confidence and subjective involvement.

The minority of students who might get involved would simply legitimize, or delegitimize by their personal verbal dissent, faculty decisions without recourse to other students' opinions and interests.

An extension of the new status quo would be a representative quasiparliamentary system in which students would be elected either in proportion to their total numbers or in a number equal to the number of faculty to a joint student-faculty decision-making body. This approach has problems similar to the first. That is it denies that students can be considered as equals: X no. of students per representative compared with the 1:1 ratio of faculty. Also, some students are made more equal than others, i. e. those who hold real power by sitting on the constituent assembly. It has all the drawbacks of the parliamentary system where in the majority of people relinquish their individual political power to a small group of politicians.

In practice, it would mean that any separate organizing of students in a department into their own association would be difficult. If the union leadership were different from those in the assembly, who would officially represent student opinion? If the union leadership were also on the departmental committee there would still be a split between those who held both positions and the numerically greater group who solely held positions on the departmental committee.

More importantly, however, the student representatives could easily isolate themselves from their constituents and would continually tend to view situations through the eyes of "the good of the department", i. e. they would be co-opted into continually compromising student interests to those of faculty with no recourse open to other students in the department. This shift in the allegiance of student representatives to align with those who have real power is typical of a parliamentary system and is historically true in the reform of this and other university decision-making bodies.

Representivity and accountability might be ensured by hold-

ing regular union meetings prior to every assembly meeting. However, this would create a plethora of meetings which would be inadequate to achieve this purpose. If new arguments or information come out at the assembly meeting, or the situation under discussion changes, then the student representatives are in a dilemma as to how best to represent student interests and opinions.

The representative model flatly contradicts the principle of all students as equals. It integrates students as a "minority" into a structure which is not theirs in a classical co-optive way — assimilating some of the leadership and creating splits among students based on a confusion of their role as "semi-equals" vis-a-vis faculty and other students.

Finally there is the proposal wherein the faculty would meet with all of the students in an attempt to arrive at vital decisions regarding departmental policy. Besides being totally unweildy we would again be faced with the problem of having the faculty define the problems of the department. That is under the guidance of the "wise and the experienced" we would deal with only those problems which undermine the "normal operation of the department". Many students also would be justifiably intimidated in such a situation — a situation in which the individual unsure of his support from other equally intimidated students is forced to face a faculty, who by virtue of the marking and grading system, has ultimate power over him. "Normal" is then defined by the faculty.

The source of students' alienation lies in their inability to freely realize their potential. The achievement of this opportunity requires real changes in power relationships. If we are concerned with evolving towards a community of equals, the transitional structure must give students real power which does not compromise or integrate them into a corporate structure alien to their interests.

Having rejected both joint decision-making and "parallel" structures that invest students with only advisory power, we propose an approach based on the principles of parity, parallel participatory decision-making and dual power.

The parallel-parity-dual power approach could be put into operation as follows:

a) Form a course union with membership to all graduate students, majors, and those who register in at least one course in the department.

b) Pass a constitution declaring the regularly called course union meetings as the student plenum and elect what officers are necessary (chairman, convenor, and recording secretary) to transact its business.

c) Select two students for each of the committees paralleling those created by the faculty. Normally having access to the same information as their faculty counterparts, they will, within the policy guidelines established by the student plenum develop particular proposals in separate meetings. They will also meet regularly in joint session with their faculty counterparts. Usually, the joint committees should be able to work out a mutually acceptable compromise between student and faculty positions and present identical recommendations to their respective plenum. No policy will go into effect until it has been passed by both the student and faculty plenum. Motions not coming from joint committees, initiated in either body, will be put forward to the other plenum for ratification or counter-proposals.

d) All meetings of the plenum will be publicized and open. Students will not participate in the faculty plenum and vice-versa but any observer may be granted permission to speak by consent of two-thirds of those present.

e) All committees created by the faculty plenum in mutual agreement with the student plenum will have an equal number of students and faculty on them. The membership of the student half of the joint committee will be constituted of those elected to sit on the parallel student committee, or anyone the student plenum decides should represent them.

If and when students and faculty cannot agree at the committee level on a common recommendation, the student/faculty committee members will make separate recommendations to their respective plenum.

The resolutions consequently adopted by these bodies will set the stage for the opening of bargaining between the two groups. This might take the form of an informal joint student-faculty session which will work out settlement by consensus and then have the proposal formally ratified by the two plenums. It might result in a temporary stalemate, with no new policy until further examination of alternatives and informal discussion has taken place in a less tense atmosphere.

The virtue of the proposal is that it is sufficiently flexible to allow a gradual evolution toward "community" decision-making without compromising the autonomy necessary for the development of student and faculty perspectives. The faculty decision-making unit would remain intact. We would simply ask them to bind themselves by a series of standing resolutions to accept the "parity-parallel" dual plenum procedure for all de facto decision-making.

Because it is participatory, the proposal overcomes the problems associated with representative institutions. It gives students real power and an opportunity to directly participate in the affairs of the department without creating any false illusions of "semi-equality". Students are still students and faculty are still faculty insofar as the other variables causing inequality still exist, eg. power relationships in the classroom, status and role as determined by salary and fees paid by students, and privileges accorded in university level decision-making.

The parallel-parity structure assures that not only will decisions affecting students have to meet with their explicit approval, but it will necessitate full debate so that the reasons for decisions will be made public, if only since the majority of students will have to be convinced of the rightness of any policy put before them by other students. Also students can initiate policy according to their own evolving needs and priorities, defining the problems of the department for the student plenum which will decide its own agenda.

Finally, if the approach is followed in other departments a decentralized student union based on participatory locals dealing with the real problems of students will have been created.

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