The Unravelling of a Labor Agenda

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The evidence is clear: the decline of middle and working class incomes has kept pace with, and perhaps has even been driven by, the decline of union membership. Universities increasingly treat core education programs as a cash cow that support "professional schools" and fund bloated administrations. Students are viewed as consumers, and public universities starved by shrinking public sector support seek to maximize the price of their “product” by seeking students who can pay a rapidly rising tuition bill. In the end, the role of universities, especially public institutions, is no longer to be the center of a critical analysis of society and the purveyor of knowledge.

When I first came to Wayne State University, it was to become part of the College of Urban, Labor and Metropolitan Affairs (CULMA), one that focused the university’s activities related to research and teaching on labor and urban issues. The college had a very active Labor Studies Center with a broad range of programs in support of unions, and a range of courses much like those at UMass. It housed the Douglas A. Fraser Center for Workplace Issues that focused on labor organizations and organizing, and it included an independent Reuther Archives that supported a robust labor research agenda. All of it situated in the city with the UAW headquarters, receiving strong union support. Then, about 12 years ago, this college was dismantled under the guise of administrative restructuring to save money, and the pieces scattered across other colleges in the university. Administrators gave assurances the labor mission of the university would remain strong.

However, in the following years there has been a steady erosion as the Labor Studies Center staff and activities were drastically cut back and the Center was eliminated as an independent unit, the Fraser Center lost most of its funding and as a result its ability to support a range of programs and research, and the Reuther Archive has been increasingly marginalized. While students and scholars still undertake good labor research at the archive, the decline in union strength and the university’s shift to a "corporate model" of education has resulted in the little remaining as the remaining labor programs were folded into the business school or risk being cut altogether.

The WSU faculty supporting the dissolution of this college believed the administration promises staff would not be laid off, programs would remain protected and supported, and the dissolution was only a move to rationalize administrative costs. None of those promises were kept as a large portion of the staff were either reassigned to other units or let go within a year, and the part-time faculty reduced and many of the courses they taught eliminated. What was once one of the premier sites of labor education and research has become toothless or non-existent; labor research no longer has a strong center of gravity, but is now relegated to scattered efforts by faculty in various departments across the university.

It is very likely that it may already be too late for the program at UMASS--the lesson to be learned from the dissolution of CULMA is that too many people who could have fought the dissolution believed the administration’s promises and so did not act to stop the dismantling of the college and its labor programs. Senior administrators are now hired with the mandate to increasingly manage universities as if they are businesses, and to make decisions that are driven by cost calculations rather than by the underlying mission of the institution. Promises that little will change and the continuation of support for the labor agenda at UMASS may well be made by good intentioned individuals, but if the experience at WSU is any indication, either they are hollow or are being made by people who are fooling themselves.