

The Underfunding of Education in America

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Teachers in public education throughout the country have been struggling for decades, trying to educate children with insufficient funds and resources. But the present economic crisis has gutted even these inadequate budgets so that many teachers can now only pretend to educate, given the impossible conditions.

Nor has higher education been exempt from budget cuts. The good news is that faculty members at Oakland University, a public university in Michigan, have decided to fight back, as reported in *The New York Times*, September 4, 2009. Their decision was triggered when asked to accept a three-year salary freeze, a request that came on the heels of an almost 50 percent pay raise for the campus president, elevating his salary from \$250,000 to \$350,000, far above the average faculty pay. The administration also wants to increase the number of part-time faculty and increase faculty health care co-payments.

The rationale for this unseemly raise for the president was the usual: those running the university wanted to make his salary competitive with presidents' salaries at comparable universities. But those who advance this argument never explain why the presidents' salaries in general have skyrocketed nor why the first were allowed to begin the ascent.

In fact, the elevation of presidents' salaries has resulted from a carefully crafted policy foisted on universities by politicians who in turn are being pushed by business interests. Corporations have been clamoring for lower state taxes across the country, and education has constituted a huge drain on state budgets. When education costs are reduced, taxes can be lowered. So rather than playing their traditional collegial role with the faculty, campus presidents have been recast into the role of bosses with the directive to ferret out and eliminate what for those in power is inefficiency and waste. But such a role requires handsome monetary rewards because, for most, it is a thankless task. The fact that this new campus mode of operation is antithetical to a community of scholars and the pursuit of knowledge is of little concern to those whose only conception of value is money.

One especially pernicious cost-cutting measure has resulted in transforming almost half the faculty at most public universities into part-timers with lower salaries, few if any benefits, and no job security. This downward adjustment has conveniently served to weaken faculty resistance to new policies imposed on them by administrators. Because tenured faculty and part-time faculty work within such starkly different conditions with different rewards, they find it difficult to unite in order to put up a fight.

The faculty at Oakland University would consequently be well advised to include in their demands dramatic improvements for part-timers. Not only would such a position be morally commendable, but it will help unite the faculty so that a more effective fight can be waged.

However, the plight of the students must also be addressed. Tuition at public universities has climbed steadily for the past three decades so that the burden of paying for public education has been shifted away from the state and onto the students, resulting in increasing economic distress for them and their families. For tens of millions of people, tuition either prevents them from pursuing higher education or causes a crushing, un-repayable burden of debt. At Oakland University tuition rose 9 percent this year.

By including the demand that student tuition be lowered, the faculty will create a powerful ally among the 18,000 students attending Oakland University. And by adding demands in support of the staff, who have been generally required to do more work for less pay, the faculty can position itself to counter the appearance that they are simply out for themselves, which in turn will enhance the prospects of winning the support of the public.

In the final analysis, the morale of people on strike is often the crucial factor determining whether they win or lose. The 1997 Teamster strike at UPS was a smashing success in large part because the Teamsters won public support by championing the cause of the part-time, super-exploited workers first and foremost. The public roared with approval, and the Teamsters rode this wave of approval to victory. The faculty at Oakland could use the Teamster victory as a model to emulate.

Finally, in order to secure funding to meet its demands, the faculty must mount a campaign to augment the state's sources of revenue. But on this point they can look to the union movement for guidance where a popular demand is winning increasing support:

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