

Report on the Ottawa Retreat on Campus Organizing, May 20-22nd, 2005



Democratizing Education Program
Liberty Tree Foundation for the Democratic Revolution



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This report was drafted by Mishy Leiblum and Jed Murr, retreat participants from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Photos by Ben Manski. The retreat was a project of the Liberty Tree Foundation for the Democratic Revolution's Democratizing Education Program.

The Background – Higher Education Organizing in the US and Canada:

US campuses are home to a variety of single-issue organizations (often focusing on issues not overtly tied to colleges and universities) that primarily appeal to the undergraduate sector, while graduate students, faculty and other campus workers are predominantly organized through a variety of national and international labor unions, or through independent organizations outside of the campuses on which they work. Although some undergraduate students are linked at the state level via state student organizations and at the national level through the USSA (the United States Student Association), the USSA, state student associations, and student government associations on individual campuses have not typically been able to gain prominence or power on the local or national level in the way that Canadian student organizations have been able to.

A distinction here can be made between the premises of US and Canadian student organizations. Whereas most US undergraduate student organizations take the form of “student governments” and “associations,” Canadian student organizations are based on a model of student unionism or federation; rather than “govern” over the students “represented” by these organizations, Canadian student organizations more closely resemble union-membership structures. In this arrangement, student organizations advocate for—rather than attempt to “govern” or merely represent—their members, and the membership is the highest decision-making body in the organization; these organizations also fight for students’ interests in the political arena and provide them with basic services, such as dental and medical coverage and student discount cards.

The Thinking – Where to Go From Here, and the Canadian Model:

There is a noticeable void in our nation’s higher education sector of a nationally coordinated advocacy body that focuses explicitly on higher education and the various constituencies with a stake in higher education. While student organizations such as United Students Against Sweatshops, Muslim Student Associations, ACLU chapters and various statewide PIRGS typically do well by their individual charges, these organizations have been either unwilling or unable to push back against the rising corporatization of, and the declining accessibility to, public higher education on the national level.

Although under-acknowledged, higher education is an increasingly vital arena in our information-based economy, and the future of higher education will have immense consequences for our nation’s political climate and economy. Higher education represents a kind of intersection of various ongoing struggles in the US: a variety of undergraduate, graduate, and faculty organizations are fighting seemingly endless cuts to education funding; labor unions are focusing on service sector jobs based on campuses; anti-sweatshop campaigns are highlighting the exploited labor (both here in the US and abroad) that supports college and university operations;

communities around colleges and universities—particularly working class communities and communities of color—are struggling for access to the same public institutions that depend on their tax dollars for survival; faculty, graduate employee, and staff unions are battling for fair contracts in increasingly hostile climates; peace and social justice organizations are pointing out the direct connections between education spending and US foreign policy; etc. etc. Given the prevalence of these and related struggles on college and university campuses, the creation of a National Higher Education Union has a ripe, yet long overdue, potential.

Canadian Student Unions as a Potential Model for US Organizing:

Canada is home to a plethora of prominent higher education advocacy bodies, including, notably, the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS). In short, the CFS “federates” the needs of the provincial student organizations along with individual colleges and universities with which it is associated. CFS and other campus-based organizations in Canada typically operate on a set of guiding principles like the following:



- 1) A decentralized, yet strong, executive branch
- 2) Local sovereignty
- 3) A focused priority on education (and one that is highly political, yet non-partisan)
- 4) Obligatory results: since students pay for membership, they deserve results—which come both in the form of a) a plethora of student services and b) political advocacy

The CSF charges \$3.60 (CA)/term per student, which is reaffirmed via referendums, and the right to collect these dues are protected (in most provinces) via legislation. While the history, structure and guiding principles of the CFS can help us to articulate a potential model for a US Higher Education Union, it’s important to recognize that articulating a vision for a national, campus-based organization with the sort of prominence and success of CFS would require tailoring that organization to the particular demands and constraints of the US system.

The Long Term Vision – A National Higher Education Union:

Over the weekend of May 20-22, 2005, the Liberty Tree Foundation for the Democratic Revolution — an organization working via its Democratizing Education Program to, among other things, unite student associations, labor unions, faculty organizations, and grassroots student and community groups in a national movement for the democratization of schools, colleges, and universities—hosted a retreat for campus organizers, which was attended by representatives from five major politically active public universities across the US, including the University of Massachusetts–Amherst, the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the University of Missouri–Kansas City, the University of Illinois–Urbana-Champaign, and the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. Retreat participants included organizers with five labor unions (UAW, AFT, UE, SEIU, IWW), six student associations, and various other campus organizations (United Students Against Sweatshops, Take Back UMass!, SLAC, Campus Greens, NYSPC, Tent State University). Presentations were made by representatives of the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), Fédération étudiante universitaire du Québec (FEUQ), Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Liberty Tree, and UWatch.

After a series of presentations on the state of student organizing in Canada and an analysis of the terrain of higher education organizing in the US, we, the conference participants, agreed on the need for a nationally

coordinated network of campus-based organizations, individuals, and labor unions explicitly invested in securing a future for public, accessible post-secondary education that is in the collective interest of the working people of the US.

The vision that we began to articulate for a National Higher Education Union is very much open to debate and further thinking, but we are fairly confident that:

- 1) This union/federation/organization/coalition would be **multi-generational**, and include students (both graduate and undergraduate), workers, teachers and community members. The Achilles heel of most student organizations is the transience of the student population. In the interest of building greater sustainability and continuity into the very structure of the organization; in light of the current absence of a nationally-coordinated political presence of faculty, graduates, higher education workers, *and* undergraduates; and in the face of rising corporatization and exclusionary practices in higher education, we feel that, the wider the reach of such an organization, the greater our potential will be to gain control over and democratize the trajectory of higher education in the US.
- 2) The “organization” would be **all-inclusive**: since the future and nature of higher education in general, and public higher education in particular, will have stark implications for the future of the US as a whole (including on the way the US relates to the rest of the world), and since the public *own* (and therefore have the right to access to) public higher education, a National Higher Education Union should be open to the community and all its members. How private college groups, unions and individuals (or, for that matter, primary and secondary students, teachers and workers) would define themselves in relation to the union would, of course, be open for debate.
- 3) Like the Canadian Federation of Students, the organization would have a focused **priority on higher education**, at least at the beginning. (Whether to include primary and secondary education will be an issue for debate, and one that will play into discussions of class and racial dynamics. Regardless, it goes without saying that a move toward democratization within and prioritization of education in the US will only strengthen struggles to better fund the nation’s perpetually under-funded public school system at the K-12 level.)



Other ideas that came out of the Ottawa weekend include:

- 1) The union would be as **representative as possible**: since undergraduate students, and those at community colleges, represent the largest segment of higher education participants, the union would be, to a large extent, undergrad driven and directed.
- 2) The union would need **funding** in order to be successful: the structure for funding was not discussed, but two possibilities include mandatory or voluntary dues systems.

A highly preliminary list of principles/demands that were articulated during the course of the weekend include:

- 1) *Full Public Funding for Public Higher Education*
- 2) *Free (Full Federal?? Funding for Public) Higher Education*
- 3) *Recognize the Right to Organize*
- 4) *Democratic Management of Higher Education*
- 5) *End Institutionalized Racism / (Expand Affirmative Action)*
- 6) *Research in the Public Interest **
- 7) *Protect Academic Freedom **
- 8) *Forgive Student Debt*
- 9) *Stamp out Corruption **
- 10) *Give Back to Working People **
- 11) *[End attacks on Working People at Home and Abroad.]*

(Note that it was recognized that those in parentheses are in immediate need of rewording; those with asterisks are not framed as demands. Number 11 was not included explicitly, and there was some discussion as to whether it was included implicitly in the first ten demands.)

The Short Term Vision - A Sketch for a National Higher Education Strike:

In the spring of 2005, Quebecois student organizations in Quebec successfully shut down the province's education system for several consecutive weeks in the largest higher education strike in the province's history. Meanwhile, across the United States, graduate employee unions and progressive undergraduate student groups (often with the support of faculty and community organizations) staged dozens of major campus uprisings, employing a variety of tactics including labor strikes, walkouts, hunger strikes, boycotts and Tent State Universities (week-long 'free schools,' where students camped out on their campus lawns and organized teach-ins, soup kitchens, live music, and so on and so forth, largely as a way to call for redirecting military spending toward public higher education). While sometimes tacitly, and at other times explicitly, in solidarity with one another, these efforts were rarely directly coordinated at the national—or even regional—level. Yet, these demonstrations, in one form or another, all articulated a vision of diverse, accessible and democratically-run universities that are designed to serve the needs of the students, faculty, workers and surrounding communities.

In order to establish national and cross-generational links between all those interested in the future of our nation's higher education system, and in order to begin to explicitly coordinate our messages and labor at a national level, we—coming out of the Ottawa retreat—propose calling for a national, industrial, cross-generational higher education strike for the Spring of 2006 (likely beginning on Monday, April 2nd, 2006, the first Monday of the National Student Labor Week of Action).

As we envision it, a list of demands (likely a modified version of the ten principles listed above) would serve as the backdrop against which local demands would be articulated and pushed.

It is worth noting that there was debate over whether or not to call for a national "strike" or "week of action." It was argued, and temporarily agreed upon, that calling for a strike (as opposed to a week of action) would raise the stakes and sense of urgency embodied in this sort of an action; yet it was firmly acknowledged that not every participating campus would necessarily call for an all-out, indefinite strike, as local sovereignty would take priority.

It was generally felt that the duration, depth, and intensity of this action would be determined by the response with which it is met over course of the next several months as we reach out to campus-based organizers at major universities all over the US.

Immediate Steps:

Fortunately, if this proposal is met with interest by our fellow organizers, we have nearly ten months to coordinate and build for this action. Liberty Tree (website soon to be posted at <http://www.LibertyTreeFDR.org>) will facilitate the creation and organization of a list-serve, a series of conference calls, a new website (complete with a plethora of higher ed and organizing resources and news), a teach-in template, and a fall conference (to be held in Madison, Wisconsin, in the fall of 2005, and open to up to 100 campuses) in order to flesh out and pull off both the immediate action for the Spring of 2006 and the potential creation of a National Higher Education Union (or something of the sort).

The idea behind calling for a national strike is not solely for its one-time effect. A national education strike would: redirect public and governmental attention to the struggles going on in and around campuses; clearly highlight the state of crisis currently being experienced on campuses and their surrounding communities all over the country; and demonstrate a clear desire on the part of students, faculty, staff, and community members with ties to higher education to prioritize and democratize our higher education system. Further, it would help to begin the process of creating a National Education Union in the US by building and strengthening lasting coalitions among all the various groups that would benefit from a massive shift in higher education in the US.

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