VISUALIZE

A CONTRACT
Visualize
Academic Labor
in the 1990s:
Inventing an Activist Archive
in Santa Barbara

Jeanne Scheper

In 1997, pro-labor posters and flyers appeared overnight throughout the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) campus. "VISUALIZE," they admonished. "VISUALIZE... A CONTRACT." "VISUALIZE... A STRIKE." "VISUALIZE... HEALTHCARE." Affectionately termed "agit-prop" for "agitation/propaganda," these underground posters were created anonymously by a small group of women union activists and core organizers, and as such they represent a period in the late 1990s when the UCSB union of teaching assistants, readers, and tutors (Associated Student Employees/ASE) reached a peak of organizing and activism. Statewide, University of California (UC) student employees had been fighting in the courts for more than sixteen years to gain recognition of their union. In 1987, the union affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW), a national union that was willing and able to put up the money for what became a very costly, lengthy, and complicated legal battle. (In 1995-1996 the university reportedly spent more than $1.5 million fighting to get a court exemption from their obligation to talk to democratically formed unions.) These posters represent one facet of a multidimensional visual agit-prop campaign initiated at UCSB by core organizers in the union. These posters, however, are a covert product, a creative initiative
and collaboration specifically by women organizers, initiated anonymously by Zia Isola, an elected bargaining representative for the English department, and myself, an elected shop steward.

The subsequent proliferation and dispersal of posters were due in large part to many hands, of all genders, of both union members and nonmembers, of students and student-workers; the labor of these individuals cannot be fully recognized because of their anonymity, but their work was in the spirit of “One Big Union.” These images archive the effectiveness of the grassroots elements of our campaign and are a mark of the culture change on our campus and in our union. A measure of this change was that lots of people took up the agit-prop torch as an activist template to create and mobilize new forms of visual campaigning through covert affinity actions in the tradition of what Mark Dery has called activist culture jamming. I draw attention here to these labors as the work of women, people of color, queer, and transgender activists engaged in strategic and effective labor organizing that did not always fall within the official purview of the UAW or, for that matter, within the realm of the primary activist core of ASE, namely the ad hoc organizing committee. These labors have largely been unrepresented, resulting in the invisibility of certain labor in the often hypermasculinist and racialized idealizations of the terrain of labor history, in which images of the lone brawny white worker continue to dominate the imaginary of union solidarity, which after all most familiarly goes by the name, “brotherhood.” The images here cover the period of the culminating final two strikes before the union gained recognition from the university in 1999 under pressure from the courts, the California Public Employment Relations Board, and the California legislature.

In 1997, concerned about the low level of participation in previous graduate student employee strikes at other UC campuses, ASE elected to set an unprecedented 50 percent quorum for the upcoming strike vote to ensure that solidarity and student support for the action was truly widespread. UCSB union organizers used grassroots organizing strategies with little support from UAW staff, lawyers, or money. Nonetheless, more than 500 UCSB student employees and unemployed graduate students voted in this strike-authorization vote, with about 80 percent of them voting in favor of a two-day strike. Again, in May 1998, a successful strike-
authorization vote not only surpassed the 50 percent quorum, but ended up showing strong support for the strike with 82 percent in favor. On December 1, 1998, in a coordinated action across all UC campuses, UCSB teaching assistants (TAs) withheld their labor during finals week.

Along with more conventional and sanctioned organizing tactics such as membership drives, demonstrations, strikes, and teach-ins, those of us in the UCSB union adopted street theater tactics to make our work visible. We held public grade-ins and paraded with giant pencils. These props and images helped make concrete the too-vague phrase “academic labor” and rendered our work visible in material terms. In addition, the use of public performance, spectacle, and visual display helped to cultivate a sense of identity, presence, coherence, organization, and power for the union.

There were several inspired underground agit-prop visual campaigns, one of which is represented here. Representative of a visual protest campaign and a type of performance (their impact relies heavily on the drama of their appearance), these images are indebted to a long tradition of visual cultural protest from California’s El Teatro Campesino (farm laborer polit-
ical theater) to Not Channel Zero (an African American media collective of camcorder activists whose motto is “The Revolution, Televised”). As subversive practitioners using techniques such as wheat pasting and urban stenciling, and in this case posterizing, we were indebted to media and graphic activists such as the Guerrilla Girls, Gran Fury (formerly members of ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer, all of whom cultivated the technique of redeploying commercial media discourse for progressive political aims. We were also indebted to the Women’s Action Coalition (WAC), whose graphics we literally pirated to create “ASE Is Watching” picket signs, and to Western Cell Division who created a graphic logo for us that combined the image of a book and an industrial gear. Our political posters disseminated informational directives and posed questions by recycling consumer images, including “1960s radical chic” (popular at the time among our college age students). These posters highlight the reasons we were seeking recognition of our union: workload, the high cost of dependent healthcare, the right to fair grievance procedures, and most importantly our basic right as workers to unionize.

Although TAs receive a paycheck, pay taxes, and sometimes receive healthcare and other benefits, universities steadfastly resist the concept that graduate students are workers. Maintaining that graduate students were “apprentices,” UC conjured quaint images of a patrician past so as to deny student employees their rights as workers. Repeatedly ruling against such reasoning, California Judge James
W. Tamm at one point drew attention to the insincerity of such paternalism, writing that “[t]he argument that rights should be denied to individuals because those in power, when confronted with their alleged misdeeds, might retaliate against those not in power, is unpersuasive. At best, this argument is paternalistic and is based upon a fear of confrontation, rather than a realistic assessment of the impact of collective bargaining.” The gendered ground of unionization battles pits a feminized TA worker against a benevolent university father who in this modern-day Victorian family drama generously insists that the TAs be silent and grateful for being taken under the protective wing of a patriarchal authority that grants them the opportunity to learn under the tutelage of masters. But as Judge Tamm again made clear in his rulings and as any TA can testify, “[e]mployment in the disputed titles does very little or nothing at all in meeting the most fundamental objective of all student employees, which is to complete their degree program.” Depicted as hysterical complainers, uppity TAs are scripted by university administrators as lowly apprentices or even spoiled children or ungrateful “wives” for demanding recognition and rights.

In previous generations, white men received doctorates with dissertations typed by supportive “faculty wives.” These faculty wives (or in the case of the bachelor professor—their surrogate wife, the secretary) made up an army of auxiliary academics, whose hidden labor helped produce dissertations, articles, books, and other intellectual tomes. Jobs were gotten through collegial phone calls and brandy sniffing and cigar smoking backdoor deals that constituted “the old boy’s network.” And candidates were not necessarily expected to have published before receiving a tenure-track position. Today’s Ph.D. candidates emerge to face uncertain job markets with expectations for publishing that far exceed those for the previous generations of academics at a
time when paradoxically it is harder and harder to publish because of the economic trends facing that industry. Many faculty mentors are not fully aware of the material realities of earning a Ph.D., of the extent to which students carry enormous student loan debt that can reach a maximum figure of more than $120,000 even in the humanities, where anticipated earnings are modest, and of the high-interest credit debts routinely accrued by students. Indeed, these financial problems result in greater emotional burdens on immediate family members with regard to elder care, the timing of pregnancies, and the struggle to support families and children with small incomes and exorbitantly high insurance costs. At my own campus of UCSB, a history of housing discrimination against gay and lesbian families compounded student’s economic hardships, and fierce debates about meeting the healthcare needs of transgender students insidiously and falsely pitted the need for better dependent health-care against access to hormone treatment, with no one’s needs being met in the end.8

In what became one of the most infamous administrative gaffes, on hearing that TAs considered themselves overworked, one dean remarked that if TAs were overworked they should buy an egg timer that pours sand from one end of an hourglass to another for each paper they graded. In searching for an image of time management, this dean intended to place the blame for overwork back on to TAs, portraying our situation as one of individual incompetence at managing the tasks at hand. Interestingly, in the search to offer a practical solution, this dean revealed an underlying assumption about the work that we do: his domestic metaphor for TA labor placed it squarely where he imagined it to really belong—in the kitchen.

In response to such callous remarks, we held the TA equivalent of a “bake-off,” staging “egg timer races” that signified on these remarks. What would a seven-minute graded paper look like? Visualize that, we said to
our students, faculty, and administration. TAs imagined ingenious ways of answering the demands of "speed-up": reading the first and last paragraph of each paper to assign a grade; reading only the first page; or, simply tossing papers into "scoring zones" of A, B, C, and D. Additionally, we held public grade-ins wearing hard hats with yellow road signs that read "TAs at Work." We literally had to embody our labor and label our work as work for faculty and students to see it. And as feminized pink-collar workers, both women and men, we had to take our "private," invisible, domesticated labor into the public sphere, performing "hard labor" under the universal signifier of the "hard hat." And finally, we had to brandish our pencils as weapons of mass protest—hence our efforts with the "giant pencils" mentioned earlier. The prototype pencil for our protest was a five-foot prop from a local florist's Secretary's Day window display, which we recycled with a certain feminist irony. It is no accident that in the interest of having our work taken seriously we had to move from the hard hat to the symbolic hard-on.

Contrary to theories that left-leaning campuses make for fertile ground for union organizing, the university's romance with the archaic idea of apprenticeship, combined with the frequently unacknowledged class and race politics of campuses, make union organizing a tough battle. Given that only 11 percent of workers in the United States are unionized, organizing graduate students is a challenge. Within the UC system, this structural impediment is reflected in notorious, heavily financed (with public funds) anti-union campaigns in all sectors of its workforce. Compounding these difficulties is the fact that unions themselves have gone increasingly to a corporate top-down organizing model.

For academics to become unionized, we first have to acknowledge that we are indeed workers. When confronted with graduate students' desire to unionize, faculty often respond that they themselves once performed these labors without compensation (and without complaint). However, for many of us entering graduate school with the model of civil rights movements, our ambitions lie not in perpetuating paternalistic gatekeeping models, but in opening the doors of public education to others. This means fighting for the right to fair compensation, which makes getting an education possible for many, rather than just for the elite.
The class and racial segregation of graduate and undergraduate programs and the resegregation trends in secondary education are visibly apparent. The majority of my peers in the humanities at this “Research 1” institution were young, wealthy or upper-middle class, highly educated, and white, as were our professors. This demographic fact and the attendant whiteness of the institution may account for the collective inability of the institution to conceptualize the existence of workers in its midst, as well as its refusal to acknowledge intellectual activity, teaching, and research on teaching, as labor.

The choice of visual semiotics in this particular series of posters is self-consciously parodic and intentionally designed to appeal to and to comment on the peculiarities of our particular campus. Within the town of Santa Barbara privilege and poverty coexist in extraordinary proximity. Thus, as a TA, one is liable to have the daughter of an “industry” worker—that is, the Hollywood motion-picture industry—and the daughter of a strawberry picker or sweatshop garment worker in the same class. And, unless one chooses to work with an outreach program, one is more likely than not as a TA in the English department to teach to the predominately white and wealthy student population. How then to educate those of our students who have no experience with labor unions, how to challenge their sense of the world order in which my labor becomes their consumer entitlement?

These posters were intended to respond to such questions and to counter the image of TAs as apprentices, by making visible both the work that we do and our struggle to unionize. They served to represent for our students, our faculty mentors, and our teaching supervisors the value and reality of our labor. They helped a community steeped in a paternalistic logic to visualize something that seems so difficult to imagine as real work: academic labor. Combining humor and basic facts with a sense of feminist camp and style, these posters educated the community about the issues at stake, getting across root messages such as “Our working conditions are your learning conditions.” In retrospect, I see now that the posters reflect dominant images of white privilege, partially because we drew on and recycled mainstream advertising culture. This is ironic, given that our target audiences were privileged white students and faculty. Nevertheless, these
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Posters served a purpose. Over these images boldface text cuts into the commercial veneer with labor activist messages such as “VISUALIZE A CONTRACT.” There are gentle subversive moves: two male figures to represent a message about dependent healthcare or the quintessential beer-drinking guy (signaling UCSB’s reputation as a party school) ironically plastered with “OVERWORKED.” Two of the images use declaratives to model solidarity for the viewer: “My Faculty Mentor Supports My Right to Unionize” and “UNDERGRADS SUPPORT OUR TAs.” The image used to represent undergraduate support for the union is intentionally utopic—visualize a diverse campus—that is, we were also trying to imagine a racially diverse campus, signaling the intersections of labor and institutional class and racial segregation.

During the campaign for unionization in the late 1990s, another battle was fulminating in California: affirmative action was effectively ended both internally by the regents of UC and publicly by a statewide ballot proposition. In the fall of 1998, along with the majority of my students, I walked out of class to protest the dismantling of affirmative action. In December, I would again walk out, this time as a union member and shop steward for the English Department, in a UC systemwide strike. My pay would later be docked when I was asked by the administration to self-report that “I did not meet the obligations of my appointment for [December] 1-16, 1998, on all or some of the days.”

There is still a need to document and analyze how people of color, both queer and straight, organized in response to a series of threats against the community in the form of Proposition 209 (eliminating affirmative action programs), Proposition 22 (the antigay marriage initiative), and Proposition 21 (aimed at trying and sentencing juveniles as adults) during this period. As a gesture to this issue, the “3 Strikes and You’re Out” poster rhetorically redirects the threat of California’s three strikes law against the university administration.
For a few years graduate students at UCSB tried to encourage incoming colleagues not to apply for funding that had been formerly earmarked as affirmative action grants geared to first-generation students and students of color, if they did not in fact fit those criteria. Of course, as the graduate student population became whiter and more privileged, new cohorts (even ones researching race and social justice) believed protesting scarce funding sources to be something they could not afford. Additionally, graduate students worked to demand greater transparency in hiring practices and to request specifically that positions be announced publicly and not be parceled out behind closed doors. These grassroots internal efforts worked toward creating a local culture and ethos around labor, funding, and competition that tried to acknowledge the structural (class, race, sexual) inequalities of the institution. This idea of fostering "a culture" as opposed to simply fighting for specific rights became an important local organizing tactic.

In 1999, the courts ruled against UC's last legal appeal, determining that in fact graduate student TAs were not apprentices, as UC had claimed, but employees covered by California labor law. This effectively ended UC's legal case and the union gained recognition for more than 9,000 graduate student employees. However, the labor struggles continue to this day as the union tries to negotiate fair contracts with the university, and the threat of renewed strikes looms in the face of UC's repeated unfair labor practices at the bargaining table.

Simultaneously, an important struggle within the academic labor movement continues, as pro-union academic workers actively seek to create better, more democratic unions responsive to rank-and-file needs and leadership. These posters appeared just as tensions between local member-organizers and the UAW began to erupt over issues of organizational power not dissimilar to those fought by the New Directions movement within the UAW in its hometown of Flint, Michigan. Increasingly, UCSB's local ASE union leadership was concerned about the UAW's anti-
democratic organizing model, its poor communication with membership, its refusal to listen to the needs and input of rank-and-file membership, and its lack of concern with active member participation. These posters were not given an official stamp of approval by the UAW, neither were they banned, as were other materials generated by local member-organizers. The UAW would eventually respond to these internal critiques by taking the draconian step of labeling the core campus organizers at UCSB "counter-organizers" and "dissidents," shutting union members out of critical strike-planning meetings, firing campus-based paid organizers, raiding their homes for membership lists and other "union property," and replacing locally grown leadership with professional outside organizers. Union members found themselves working within an organization that, similar to the university, operated out of a fear of dissent and open dialogue. As Corina Kellner, a union activist from the anthropology department aptly put it, "We've traded one paternalism for another."

The posters reproduced here reflect the consciousness-raising that sustains union participation and membership, thus creating a strong local union culture. Their feminist activist methodology of creative collaboration, rank-and-file spontaneity, and quick response to local issues by local workers reflect an oppositional labor consciousness that seeks to change the patriarchal culture of the university, corporate unionism, and also the racism, sexism, and heterosexism within our own labor organizing. At a time when the number of women faculty being hired and tenured is in decline at one of the largest state educational systems in the country, these posters signal the potent intersection of feminist social movements and the pink-collar sector of workers at the university. Emerging from the gendered battleground of TA unionization, these posters reflect women's organizing efforts both to have their labor recognized by the university and to be heard within their own union. These posters testify to the existence and possibility of a feminist and queer labor movement that works to create a collective "union culture" that advances the formation of a more democratic, socially progressive, member-led union. By inventing an activist archive, we can have a fuller accounting of the labor that goes into a campaign for unionization and what it takes to create the coalitions we need to truly have a radical vision of "union."
Notes
In memory of Shafali Lal (1971-2003), TA union organizer at Yale, Radical Teacher editorial board member, and scholar of race and education in the United States.

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1. More than 16,000 graduate students in the nation are now members of the UAW, representing an increase in numbers following the recent landmark case (2000) to organize students at New York University. The UAW's chief competitor is the American Federation of Teachers. See Scott Smallwood, “United Academic Workers,” Chronicle of Higher Education, 17 Jan. 2003, A10.


3. In my courses, “Radical Women Writers of the 1930s” and “Gender and Modernism,” I use a range of materials to discuss this imaginary: from the T-shirt for my brother’s Union Ironworker’s local to Industrial Workers of the World cartoons from the 1930s (courtesy of John Baranski’s archival research) all of which depict union strength through super-heroic images of white masculinity.


5. The union primarily represented graduate student TAs, but it also covered other student work categories, including tutors; therefore, there were undergraduate members. Increasingly undergraduate student workers are beginning to organize. See WSWS.org: “Students who monitor dormitories at the University of Massachusetts have notified the college administration that they intend to organize a union. If approved by the Massachusetts Labor Relations Commission, the bargaining unit would constitute the first undergraduate resident assistant union in the U.S.” “Resident Assistants Organize at University of Massachusetts,” www.wsws.org/articles/2001/apr2001/lab-a17.shtml.

7. Ibid., 80.
8. See “Update on Transgender Issues,” University of California Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex Association Steering Committee Minutes, 27 Oct. 2001, www2.ucsc.edu/uclgbtia/minutes/2001.html. A heated debate took place at UCSB in 2003 at a Graduate Student Association meeting approving the new student health contract, which did not cover hormone therapy for transgender students. In 2005 the exclusion for treatments associated with sexual reassignment surgery was quietly removed; apparently the insurance company’s lawyers discovered they in fact could not enforce the exclusion because the treatment is medically necessary.
10. Graduate Division Pay Docking Form mailed to Teaching Assistants/Teaching Associates by Dean Charles N. Li, Graduate Division, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2 Dec. 1998.
11. See Steven P. Dandaneau, A Town Abandoned: Flint, Michigan, Confronts Deindustrialisation (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996). Dave Yettaw (1947-2005) President of Flint’s UAW local 599 and New Directions leader passed away on 14 April, while I was making the final revisions to this article from my then-home in Flint, Michigan.
12. For detailed sociological accounts of UCSB’s “dynamic pro-union culture” and the conflicts from 1998-2000 between local organizers and the UAW’s “business unionism” model, see Richard Sullivan, “Pyrrhic Victory at UC Santa Barbara: The Struggle for Labor’s New Identity,” in Cogs in the Classroom Factory, ed. Deborah M. Herman and Julie Schmid (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003), 91-116. However, Sullivan does not address the gendered components of this struggle, or the use of visual culture in creating an alternative union culture, or gender politics within ASE.
13. This movement for union democracy at UCSB has been strategically labeled “internal squabbling” in the media and used to fuel anti-union organizing at other campuses. See Smallwood, “United Academic Workers,” who quotes graduate students at Cornell voicing their fears of unionization.