

Hope for Labor at the End of History

Amid the bleak political landscape of Clinton's America, a 1996 summit of union organizers and intellectuals proved a surprise success. It also showed the weakness of left ideas without a strong labor movement.

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Richard Rorty, Cornel West, Steve Fraser, Eric Foner, Ira Katznelson, Manning Marable, Betty Friedan, George Rupp, Patricia J. Williams, Joshua Freeman, & John Sweeney. (Columbia Archives)

It was “the end of history”: America in the 1990s. Francis Fukuyama published a book with that title in 1992. Things would continue to happen, according to the philosopher, but the underlying story line had come to a finish with the triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism. As the decade wore on, Fukuyama's prophecy seemed practically clairvoyant. At the turn of the millennium, Bob Dylan captured the zeitgeist: “I used to care, but things have changed.”

Yet how could that be? Talk of a second Gilded Age of gross disparities in income and wealth was already commonplace. Homelessness, declining wages, a reemergence of sweatshop labor, an explosion of a contingent and deeply insecure labor force, a population of the working poor numbering in the tens of millions, industrial ghost towns, the surgical removal of a whole occupational species of middle managers—on and on went the litany of what the “market republic” had accomplished. CEO pay had grown to 500 times that of the average worker.

This was the high noon of bipartisan neoliberalism in the United States. Bill Clinton was the new president, and by the time he had finished taking his inaugural oath he had jettisoned the faintly populist aroma of his campaign. After failing to extend healthcare to millions of uninsured, Clinton responded to a Republican triumph in the 1994 midterm elections with punitive workfare reform, ending, as he said, “welfare as we know it.” Talk

of labor-law reform was silenced. Republicans and Democrats found common ground when it came to shrinking the welfare state, and the Democrats took the lead in accelerating mass incarceration through a crime bill in 1994. A systematic deregulation of Wall Street would come later during Clinton's watch.

All of this was good for business. A galaxy of business-oriented foundations, think tanks, magazines, policy ateliers, television and radio commentators, newspaper editorialists, and megachurches applauded the new wisdom, formed its programs, lobbied for its interests, lent it intellectual ballast, and rationalized its social unconsciousness.

Nothing resembling a social opposition of any muscle was in sight. Organized labor was nearly comatose. It had once represented a third of the labor force; now that was down to a sixth, and only 10 percent in the private sector. When strikes happened, which was less and less frequently, they usually ended in failure or, at best, preserved the status quo. The last great social movements to disturb the equanimity of American life—the civil rights movement especially, but also the antiwar and feminist insurrections—had taken place decades earlier and were receding rapidly from view. Trace amounts of that unruly era were detectable here and there. But, for all practical purposes, the labor movement was dead, the Black liberation movement was dead, the anti-imperial movement was dead, the feminist movement was dead.

News from Nowhere

Then, on a crisp October evening in 1996, something totally unexpected happened. Somewhere in the neighborhood of 2,000 people showed up at Columbia University to attend an event called “The Fight for America’s Future: A Teach-In with the Labor Movement.” People came from up and down the East Coast. Busloads of students arrived from area colleges. Professors mixed with transit workers and schoolteachers. The young, the old, and the middle-aged rubbed shoulders. There were about 1,500 more attendees than the organizers of the event anticipated. The rotunda of Low Library, where the opening plenary of the two-day teach-in was to convene, was packed; fire marshals ordered it closed to further entrants. Improvising, organizers set up loudspeakers outside, and two auditoriums were commandeered, one with an audio feed and the other with a closed-circuit television, to accommodate at least some of the overflow.

Inside the grand hall, its dome rising ten stories high—the organizers secured the space only because Columbia mistakenly double-booked a much smaller auditorium that they had reserved—proceedings began with a standing ovation celebrating a recent victory of a Barnard clerical workers union against the university. An announcement informed the gathering that they were not alone; nine other teach-ins were happening that month across the country, from the tiny Clinch Valley College in Virginia to the sprawling University of Texas at El Paso. The activist Betty Friedan, her voice rasping from the wear and tear of years of agitating, alerted everyone that what she called her “historic Geiger counter” was ticking again, as it had in 1963 when her book *The Feminine Mystique* ignited the movement for women’s liberation. A one-time labor journalist, she

told her listeners that she sensed the recent revival of the labor movement could and would become the magnetic center of a movement for “the common good.”

Friedan was referring to the election of John Sweeney as the president of the AFL-CIO the year before. He was the first challenger since 1894 to defeat a top incumbent of a major labor federation. Sweeney and his allies, disgusted by the inertia and political failures of labor’s old guard, committed themselves to mass organizing of the unorganized and openly embraced the causes of racial and gender justice, acknowledging that labor’s insularity had cut it off from a working class that increasingly consisted of women and people of color. The AFL-CIO presence at a gathering put together by liberal and left-wing academics signaled its eagerness to heal the breach that had opened up during the upheavals of the sixties. Indeed, the Sweeney slate—which included Linda Chavez-Thompson as the AFL-CIO’s executive vice president (the first woman and first Hispanic to hold the office) and Richard Trumka (a veteran of the coal-mine wars as the head of the United Mine Workers) as secretary-treasurer, both of whom spoke at the teach-in’s other plenary sessions—had even stepped away from the lockstep support of U.S. foreign policy that was characteristic of labor’s old guard and a cause of deep estrangement between labor and both the student movement and progressive intellectuals.

The wounds were still raw. Richard Rorty, then perhaps the country’s foremost political philosopher, spoke after Friedan, and reminded those in attendance of the long tradition of solidarity binding American writers, artists, and intellectuals to the cause of labor. Lapsing into a professorial mode, however, the angular-faced philosopher also lectured the audience on how the more antic outbursts of sixties radicalism (spelling “Amerika” with a “k,” for example) were to blame for the break with labor, sparking a volley of boos for his one-sidedness.

Patricia J. Williams, who followed Rorty, cut through American cant about work. Williams, a Columbia law professor, talked about how Clinton’s workfare policies were only the latest and most hypocritical iteration of work as punishment, of work as shaming by a government and a society that alleged to honor it. Echoes of the “labor question”—for a century the question *ne plus ultra* of progressive politics—were detectable in her intensely moving soundings of the depth of work as degradation. In Clinton’s America, in the America of the “market republic,” Williams suggested, John Henry was a role model.

Thunderous applause rolled through Low Library as the next speaker, John Sweeney, took the stage. But he looked wrong. He was a white man in late middle age, portly, and with his jowls, red cheeks, and blue eyes might have passed for an Irish foreman on a construction site. He could even have been mistaken for George Meany, the one-time plumber who had presided over the AFL-CIO from its founding in 1955 until 1979, and who had been the sorry personification of the labor movement’s retreat into interest-group parochialism, racial privilege, and anticommunist paranoia. But Sweeney was different. Like most every other trade unionist, he practiced the business of collective bargaining, but unlike Meany he didn’t believe that the labor movement was a business. Soft-spoken and avuncular, he nonetheless raised the roof of the rotunda by declaring,

“Labor is back.” Sweeney committed the AFL-CIO’s 13.1 million members to fight the “gang of thugs” that called themselves members of Congress, and to lead the struggle against “corporate welfare as we know it.” Organizing the legions of the unorganized meant extending the reach of the labor movement to embrace minorities and immigrants, civil rights, and women’s organizations, in a collective struggle of the “bottom against the top.”

Cornel West was the evening’s final speaker. “Capitalism is killing us,” one of the country’s best-known theologians warned. Capitalism was weaponized with phobias: white supremacy was “suffocating us”; male supremacy was “stifling” us; homophobia was “crippling” us. He saluted “brother Sweeney,” recalling Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* and the long struggle for Irish liberation. A revitalized labor movement was essential, West said, but it was not a panacea. There was no such thing. Only “audacious democracy” could contend against the “gangster culture” in the United States. West was hopeful, but not optimistic. The point was, if we must go down, to do so fighting. The rotunda crowd stood and roared, and the night was over.

During the next twenty-four hours, the teach-in was punctuated with hard arguments about the relationship between class and identity politics, the proper role for intellectuals, how to treat immigration in a labor market overrun with contingent workers and the industrially dispossessed, how to effectively confront the consequences of globalization, what could be expected or demanded of the labor movement in the political arena, and more. The audience heard from prominent intellectuals such as Orlando Patterson, Katha Pollitt, Todd Gitlin, Derrick Bell, Michael Eric Dyson, Herbert Gans, Heidi Hartmann, Lillian Rubin, and Eric Foner. Labor leaders were chastised for the movement’s ignoble tradition of excluding Black workers; from the standpoint of the new national officers, that already was past history, but at the local and regional level doors were still often bolted shut. At other workshops, the AFL-CIO was held to task for its weak-tea opposition to Clinton’s welfare reform, and for not embracing those excluded from the workforce.

The electricity generated by these debates could burn, but it also gave the whole undertaking a sense of urgency and purpose. The presence of representatives from the labor movement—local, regional, and national—as well as people of color, women unionists, welfare activists, graduate-student organizers, academics, and writers helped embed a conviction that the debate, if sharp, mattered, that something might be breaking the deep freeze.

It was standing room only for the final plenary. Titled “Organizing the Unorganized,” it was chaired by Manning Marable, the founder of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia and the future Malcolm X biographer. Karen Nussbaum, the director of the AFL-CIO’s Working Women department and the founder of 9to5, made clear that organizing women was imperative at a time when the gender composition of the workforce had shifted decisively. Women workers remained second-class citizens in the workplace and outside of it. David Montgomery, the academy’s premier labor historian and a onetime labor organizer, reported, directly from the picket lines, such as they were, that “the magical appeal of the free market was already

burned out.” The scholar and welfare-rights activist Frances Fox Piven reminded the labor movement that it was in its self-interest and part of its duty to organize the reserve army of the unemployed, to champion the poor and outcast. The Teach-in with the Labor Movement ended with Richard Trumka telling its participants and the wider world that might be listening that “what our country needs is a soul transplant.”

And the world was listening. Most major metropolitan dailies ran stories about what had occurred. They treated it like a happening, like something unexpected, like an apparition from the past come to life. Stories also appeared in the *New Yorker* (a snotty piece by Malcolm Gladwell), the *New York Observer*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, and *Lingua Franca* (a short-lived but widely read magazine about the trials and tribulations of the academariat). All of the usual suspects from the left-wing press—the *Nation*, *In These Times*, the *Progressive*, and others—covered the teach-in, as did some of the labor press, including the newspaper of District Council 37, the New York City affiliate of AFSCME, which had provided critical logistical help in staging the Columbia event, along with the needle-trades union UNITE and the American Association of University Professors. Local papers in Clinch Valley, Tallahassee, and other places where small teach-ins had occurred took note that their hometown colleges were involved. Scholarly journals dealing with labor matters would later dissect the event. Naturally, the *Columbia Daily Spectator*, the student newspaper, ran multiple stories and pictures. Less expected was coverage abroad, in Spain’s *El País* and in smaller publications in the Netherlands and Germany. C-SPAN filmed it all.

Under the Radar

The small group of academics who had organized the event were in a state of shocked euphoria. Others felt the same way. Bill Fletcher Jr., who was then running the AFL-CIO’s education department, remarked that “something was in the wind.” The sociologist Herbert Gans compared the opening night to “a prayer meeting, a prayer for a labor movement that never existed, a prayer for a welfare state that in the United States never existed.” Yet as surprising as the size, energy, and reception of the teach-in turned out to be, the event had roots in an ongoing resistance to the American market republic.

Before being elected as the AFL-CIO’s president, Sweeney had been the head of the fastest growing, most multicultural, and most militant union in the country, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). With its origins in local service unions that predated the Great Depression, SEIU proved better able to adjust to the collapse of the New Deal order than the industrial unions that had been born out of it. SEIU’s Justice for Janitors campaign, which began in 1990, was one of the rare bright spots on labor’s otherwise gloomy recent résumé. In 1996, the AFL-CIO, with Sweeney newly elected, launched “Union Summer,” a successful effort to mimic the Freedom Summer of 1964, by recruiting college students to help organize in the South. Some of those students showed up at the teach-in, where there was a workshop devoted to “Union Summer and the New Generation of Organizers.”

One need not romanticize Sweeney to appreciate his significance. When he left his post running the New York City SEIU building service local, he turned it over to an old pal who proved deeply corrupt and was eventually forced to resign. Sweeney was a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (such an affiliation was so inert at the time that nobody cared) but otherwise was a trade unionist, first and last. He had published a book in the months leading up to the teach-in, *America Needs a Raise* (a phrase repeated over and over again at Columbia), that helped add fuel to the fire by announcing the labor movement's new esprit. It was meant literally—the relentless drop of real wages during the previous quarter-century made it a no-brainer—and was very much within the parameters of normal trade unionism. But the message was also metaphorical, meant to target the demoralized and depressed state that the country was in. Sweeney's labor movement, then, was both old and new at the same time. Most important, it was open and had energy.

And that energy was not strictly confined to the formal labor movement. Independent worker centers and community organizations addressing the plight of the working poor were springing up along the East and West Coasts. Student labor-action committees had begun mobilizing on campuses. Studies of the shifting labor market and the legal assault on unions were coming out of university-based labor resource and research centers. Something called the New Party was actively trying to provide an alternative to Democratic Party orthodoxy; one of its founders, Joel Rogers, addressed the second plenary session at Columbia. To the left of the New Party, labor-movement veterans and intellectual activists announced tentative plans to start a Labor Party.

The buzz in the atmosphere before the teach-in helped inspire a letter, published in a February 1996 issue of the *New York Review of Books*, that welcomed the new labor leadership, seeing in it real hope for a more democratic and egalitarian society. The letter was signed by an extraordinary range of prominent intellectuals and writers, from Arthur Schlesinger Jr. to Barbara Ehrenreich. It became an entrée for a small group of academics to meet with Sweeney, Chavez-Thompson, Trumka, and their senior aides in the AFL-CIO headquarters, where the idea of a teach-in was first broached. For many of the academics, it was jaw-dropping to walk into the top-floor conference room of the federation building, from where they could look down on the nearby White House—an inner sanctum in which, until recently, their presence would have been unimaginable.

The Past Imperfect

In planning the Columbia event, and thinking about how to build on it, the teach-in organizers looked to the past as well as the future. A disproportionate number of the mostly white, mostly male organizers were historians, predominantly labor historians but not exclusively. They self-consciously saw themselves as echoing earlier efforts to ally labor with artists, writers, and intellectuals.

More often than not, most of those belonging to what might loosely be called the American intelligentsia were servitors of power rather than champions of the disempowered and dispossessed. Nonetheless, there were many cases of the opposite. During the nineteenth century, artists like Herman Melville and William Dean Howells,

journalists like Jacob Riis and Henry Demarest Lloyd, and, later on, academics like Charles Beard and John Dewey made their sympathies for workers known. But they rarely convened as an organized body to confront the labor question.

Denizens of Greenwich Village in the years leading up to the First World War came closer to what the organizers of the teach-in had in mind. People like John Reed, Max Eastman, and Emma Goldman mobilized their left-wing compatriots in the worlds of art and journalism to support an insurgent labor movement. Solving the labor question, these intellectuals believed, would address everything from imperial war and patriarchal subordination to racial oppression and sexual repression. It was in that context that the Village intelligentsia and artistic community mobilized to support the great mass strikes led by the Industrial Workers of the World in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and Paterson, New Jersey, among other labor battles. But their efforts were largely ad hoc, with little organizational structure, and they didn't get much backing in the ivied precincts of higher education.

Communists were the first group to be seriously committed to forging some kind of institutionalized alliance. John Reed Clubs, created by the Communist Party in 1929, were modestly effective in engaging a range of intellectuals and artists in labor-oriented activities. In theory, such people were conceived as proletarians themselves; the clubs, as they announced in the November 1929 issue of *New Masses*, were to include "all creative workers in the arts, literature, sculpture, music, theater, and the movies." The idea was to bring creative workers together with "the revolutionary labor movement." This was a period of rigid sectarianism, however, when the Communist Party pursued a policy of dual unionism that, although successful in a few instances, left it cut off from the labor mainstream. The John Reed Clubs remained small, but they did establish music, dance, and graphic-arts schools; put on plays and exhibitions; and attracted a stellar array of artists and writers, including John Dos Passos, Langston Hughes, Meridel Le Sueur, William Gropper, Josephine Herbst, and Richard Wright.

The clubs dissolved by 1935, when the Communist Party embraced the Popular Front. It was what one historian has called the "plebian sensibility" of the Popular Front era that the organizers of the Columbia teach-in had most in mind. Whatever the more fundamental objectives of the New Deal, it was indissolubly bound to the labor movement.

During the period of the New Deal through the years immediately following the Second World War, it is hard to exaggerate the extent to which American culture (from folk to highbrow) was saturated in a kind of attentiveness to and celebration of the proletarian everyman. This interest and empathy were not confined to literature but showed up everywhere: in dance recitals and musical compositions, in the theater and movie houses, in cartoons and art galleries. This broad and pervasive cultural persuasion lent the whole era a certain democratic confidence.

Formal structures to house this popular front between the labor movement and its cultural fraternity appeared near the end of the Second World War. The National Citizens Political Action Committee (NCPAC), an adjunct of the Congress of Industrial

Organizations (CIO), was not really so much an “action” committee as it was a propaganda arm of the Roosevelt wing of the Democratic Party. Something called the Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions (ICCASP), also created by the CIO, in 1945, was closer to what the Columbia group saw itself replicating. The ICCASP invited the cultural and intellectual community to join labor’s crusade in its own name and as a collective body. And, when it came to lining up luminaries, it far outdid anything within the reach of the Columbia teach-in. Its board of directors consisted of Olivia de Havilland, Van Wyck Brooks, Albert Einstein, Moss Hart, Lillian Hellman, Archibald MacLeish, Paul Robeson, Carl Van Doren, Duke Ellington, and Linus Pauling, among others. Everyone from Bette Davis to Frank Sinatra—even Ronald Reagan and Groucho Marx—made appearances, gave speeches, or wrote supportive articles for the ICCASP.

The committee found itself at odds with the Truman administration not only over the incipient Cold War but also over its anti-labor practices and its complicity with the southern wing of the Democratic Party. Soon enough, however, the ICCASP, which had merged with the NCPAC, was folded into the ill-fated presidential campaign of Henry Wallace, Roosevelt’s onetime vice president, in 1948. The Communist Party, which had from the outset played a formative role in the committee’s brief existence, increasingly determined the ICCASP’s fate and constrained its independence, which had always been limited. Forgotten by almost everyone, it nonetheless served as an inspiration for the teach-in organizers.

What to Do

During the opening session at Columbia, there was an announcement promising that the teach-ins happening around the country would be followed up by a more enduring organization. Early the next year, a large gathering at AFL-CIO headquarters created Scholars, Artists, and Writers for Social Justice (SAWSJ). Although it was formed in the “house of labor,” SAWSJ was conceived as a wholly independent organization. No one from the AFL-CIO held any official position in the group—though, when it came to selecting campaigns to pursue, SAWSJ consulted with AFL-CIO officials, and the labor leadership appointed its own people to liaise with SAWSJ. The SAWSJ budget was always miniscule, but now and then the AFL-CIO supplied some nickels and dimes. While some artists and writers did join SAWSJ, it was dominated by academics, including some in fields like labor studies, who already had strong union ties, but also others new to the issue.

SAWSJ led an active life for about four years. During that time, it staged two more national teach-ins, along the lines of the one at Columbia. The first took place at George Washington University, in the spring of 1998, and was moderated by the civil rights leader Julian Bond. The theme of the gathering was “Democracy and the Right to Organize”—and the “right to organize” became SAWSJ’s first national campaign, in concert with simultaneous efforts on the issue by the AFL-CIO. A statement in support of the right to organize was signed by Ed Asner, E.L. Doctorow, Jonathan Kozol, John Sayles, Martin Sheen, John Edgar Wideman, and Henry Louis Gates Jr., among others. The campaign dovetailed with what the AFL-CIO was pressing to accomplish in the field

and in legislative chambers. It also converged with an uptick in attempts by graduate students and adjunct faculty to unionize. The casualization of academic labor was well under way; in twenty years, from 1977 to 1997, the percentage of faculty working part-time rose sharply.

The next and last national teach-in took place in 1999, at Yale, where the Graduate Employees and Students Organization (GESO, now Local 33 UNITE HERE) remained embattled with the university's recalcitrant administration. The teach-in, called "Challenging Corporate Control," began with a march through the Yale campus. The marchers included not only academics but Yale's maintenance and clerical workers, whose unions supported the GESO drive and the teach-in. (John Sweeney had been arrested at Yale in 1996, during an action for clerical and maintenance workers.) Barbara Ehrenreich, John Wilhelm (the head of the national hotel and restaurant union HERE), Alec Baldwin, Hazel Carby, and others addressed the gathering. Turnout at these events was healthy, but it didn't approach the size of the original Columbia event. Other local teach-ins continued to crop up sporadically; roughly thirty more took place in the two years following the Columbia event.

SAWSJ was full of ideas for other campaigns and other forms of collaboration. The organization played a role in the developing movement against sweatshop labor, especially in the struggle to get universities to stop stocking clothing made in Central American and Southeast Asian hellhole factories. United Students Against Sweatshops led this work. SAWSJ also participated in—and in some cases organized—public "code of conduct" hearings designed to take testimony from workers and publicize their findings. Prominent intellectuals were enlisted to endorse this work and to serve as judges. The codes committed institutions to honor the right to organize, to affirmative action in their hiring, and to cease buying the products of prison labor.

SAWSJ also engaged in joint efforts with a growing number of Student Labor Action committees. Where they could, SAWSJ members mobilized to support strikes, in particular the UPS strike of 1997. They joined demonstrations for cafeteria workers to have the right to organize at Goldman Sachs and the Metropolitan Opera. SAWSJ also tried, with limited success, to form op-ed-writing teams to flood local and national print media with pro-labor opinion. A speakers' bureau was created. Briefly, it collaborated with what the AFL-CIO dubbed its Union Cities campaign, to revitalize central labor councils. The two organizations put together a "toolbox" pamphlet about how to organize a teach-in and aid the labor movement more generally. A couple journals emerged in these years, *New Labor Forum* and *WorkingUSA*, indirectly birthed by the Columbia teach-in, and a book of essays drawn from the teach-in, *Audacious Democracy*, was published in 1997.

Estimates vary, but at its height SAWSJ had about 600 dues-paying members. But numbers are not the real story. SAWSJ failed to cohere as a national organization. It tried to establish local chapters, but they didn't last. Campaigns flared and died out. By the turn of the millennium, SAWSJ was left with a small treasury and a hardworking coordinating committee with nothing to coordinate.

What Went Wrong

Looking back, the appeal to New Deal models in the 1990s reflected a misreading of the times. The widespread “plebian sensibility” that made all the specific instances of the labor-cultural alliance possible had been vacuumed away by the time of the teach-in. If the labor question was alive and well and insistent in Roosevelt’s day, it lived, at best, an underground existence in Clinton’s America. A labor-intellectual alliance, virtually synonymous with the New Deal, was profoundly antithetical to the neoliberal order that had supplanted it.

Between the creation of the ICCASP and the Columbia teach-in, two things foreshortened what was possible in 1996: the Cold War and the sixties. Much attention was paid to the latter during the teach-in, but not so much to the former (except to note the slavish obeisance of the old labor leadership to the dictates of the national security state). But the two were closely linked. The domestic Cold War waged an all-out assault on every variety of progressive politics and caused the CIO to purge itself of some of its most militant, egalitarian, and anti-imperial elements. The labor movement was domesticated and gave up a good deal of its active commitment to broader social reform, and the intellectual and cultural communities were intimidated and cleansed of ideas, books, movies, artwork, and also the people who made them, if they deviated from the narrow range of what Cold War America found acceptable.

The breach that opened between the labor movement and the New Left had its roots in the darkest days of the Truman loyalty oaths and the anticommunist hysteria that consumed both liberals and McCarthyites. It is remarkable that enough remained of the old labor affiliations to give birth in 1960 to Students for a Democratic Society, which became a leading vehicle of student and antiwar action, and that the civil rights movement of the early sixties was so closely linked to the more progressive unions, especially but not only the United Auto Workers. But, more generally, the hidebound AFL-CIO of George Meany, with its chauvinism, racial exclusivity, apoplectic denunciations of the counterculture, and elemental failure to energetically organize the unorganized, was an improbable ally of the cultural world that had once found a home in the labor movement.

In a hope to recuperate that long-ago fellowship, the SAWSJ founders also may have romanticized and overestimated what had transpired during the New Deal years. The cultural and intellectual communities back then barely achieved, nor sought to achieve, a separate identity and formal institutional structure, because it seemed almost beside the point; when they did, they did so as adjuncts of an already empowered movement, and of the federal government itself. The Columbia organizers were attempting to reproduce an institutionalized alliance that had barely ever existed, and to go beyond a politics of celebrity to create an organization of rank-and-file academics and cultural workers. And they did so at a time when the government was at best indifferent—and, more often, hostile—to any interference with the free market. Public intellectuals of the dissenting left were overshadowed by rightists and neoliberals like George Gilder and Francis Fukuyama. While it was possible to produce a showcase event by assembling luminaries of the left intelligentsia, the broader world from which they came was far

more inert and, not counting some exploited graduate students and adjunct faculty, not any more aware or interested in the labor question than anyone else in the United States.

More fatal still was an implicit faith that the labor movement could again be—as it once was—something more than a movement narrowly defined by collective bargaining. The phrase commonly used to capture this yearning envisions the trade union movement turning into a “social movement.” There have been instances in which this was true, if briefly and under specific conditions, such as the CIO during the apex of New Deal reform. The hope is in some sense distinctly American; because there has never been a sustainable labor party in the United States, the trade union movement has been asked to carry the burden of a political party—to speak against capitalism and on behalf of our common lives, rather than to restrict its concerns to negotiating the best terms possible in the labor market for its members.

Under any circumstances, that is a heavy charge. In 1996, it was a wholly improbable one. Organized labor faced an all-sided assault from corporate America and its various political and juridical enablers. The AFL-CIO continued to hemorrhage members during Sweeney’s first year in office, just as the Columbia teach-in was happening. Although new members did join, union density was in decline; just to keep up with the growth of the labor force and the steady erosion of once-unionized jobs, the labor movement needed to recruit half a million new members each year, and that proved undoable. All of which is to say, what ultimately did SAWSJ in was the failure of the labor movement to become what its new leadership hoped it would be. There simply was not enough excitement, enough breakthroughs, enough promise coming out of organized labor to sustain a robust movement among students and professors and artists.

Looking inward to find the sources of this failure is useful, but only up to a point. A good number of the unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO never bought into the Sweeney perspective, including a call for unions to spend 30 percent of their income on new organizing. Plenty of union bureaucrats were content to collect dues and service their members; some were corrupt. Rhetoric aside, many unions were slow to adapt to the new labor force, remained overwhelmingly white and male at the top, and only tepidly addressed, if they did at all, social justice issues both within and outside their organizations. But, given the tidal drift of the neoliberal political economy, no labor movement, not even one cleansed of all its impurities, could have reversed labor’s deep decline. And without that, SAWSJ, too, was doomed.

The Long Ago Now

It is striking how much of what drove the Sweeney palace revolution and inspired the Columbia teach-in continues to disfigure American life. New torments have emerged, such as the explosion of the gig economy. Other distempers, like the corporatization of the university and the casualization of academic labor, which were already showing themselves twenty-five years ago, are far more advanced and ubiquitous. Union density in the private sector, then at 10 percent, is now down to 6 percent, and the right to organize is in even greater jeopardy. Inequalities became uglier, and then uglier still

during the pandemic. To recognize that the original call for the Teach-In with the Labor Movement, which catalogued the inequities and indignities of late-twentieth-century America, might be reissued today without much need for amendment is not a happy thought.

While the labor movement—or at least the official, organized labor movement—continues to diminish, the left has revived. In some ways, the distance between them has lessened; at least some unions have supported movements like Occupy Wall Street and Bernie Sanders’s campaigns. But would anyone say now what was said twenty-five years ago, that no social transformation is possible without the central participation of the labor movement? Ironically, the labor movement, which was supposed to double as a political party, has been replaced by a political uprising of “audacious democracy” that does not include a nationwide labor movement of any consequence. Young people tend disproportionately to identify with the opening on the political left, not as students or academics but as part of a precariously positioned generation with no particular future worth looking forward to.

What would a teach-in about all this look like today, and who would attend? No doubt media, tech, gig, and education workers, along with students, would figure prominently. Among young workers in select sectors of the economy, unions are again cool. But it’s questionable whether these workers see a revived labor movement as the central axis for social transformation, which was the underlying premise of the Columbia teach-in. Many progressives, privately if not publicly, see unions as, at best, able to help some low-wage workers improve their lot a bit and, at worst, atavistic. Work itself is viewed by many intellectuals and pundits as yesterday’s news. Once again, the fantasy of a workless society has made its periodic appearance, as visions of a renewed welfare state and guaranteed income increasingly are divorced from the workplace. For a broader range of leading intellectuals and academics, not to mention celebrity artists and writers, the labor question long ago lost its preeminence, and struggles to retain any eminence at all.

All of this is noteworthy because these same milieus are intensely concerned with inequality. Once, the linkage between class and inequality was so organic as to be practically axiomatic. Now, however, the focus of concern has shifted to matters of race and gender especially. So, on the one hand, the issues of race and gender addressed a quarter-century ago at Columbia would command even more emphatic attention today. But labor would not figure so centrally, nor would Betty Friedan’s passionate call for class unity. Remedial measures to assure equity—that is, access to opportunity free of ascriptive forms of discrimination—are entirely compatible with ongoing economic inequality. Indeed, such inequality may actually worsen alongside advances in equal opportunity. “Woke capital” makes it clear that corporate America can survive, and even thrive, by enlisting in the anti-discrimination crusade. American capitalism was the principal nemesis confronted at the Columbia teach-in, but it’s not so clear that would be the case at such a teach-in today.

On the other hand, however, it is very likely that today’s teach-in would spend a lot of time talking about socialism. Except on the margins, socialism had no presence at

Columbia. In hindsight, this is remarkable, because the labor question traditionally arose alongside, and was embedded at the heart of, the socialist movement. That it was absent from the Columbia teach-in is striking evidence of how far the labor question had mutated into a matter of fair collective bargaining and social welfare. And it is equally remarkable that a new teach-in would, given the considerable growth in socialist sentiment, bring socialism back into the picture, despite the frailty of the labor movement. When the last of the audience drifted away and the cleaning crews came in to straighten up the mess, the labor question would still be present.