

USA: Support Worker Education at CUNY - Response to Corey Robin - Still Another Perspective on Worker Ed Program

Monday 12 August 2013, by [NESS Immanuel](#) (Date first published: 31 July 2013).

Today Portside is posting another comment on Brooklyn College plans for the Graduate Center for Worker Education. This response comes from Manny Ness to his BC colleague Robin Corey's statement, posted yesterday [see below on ESSF]. The focus for the debate on what is the nature of workers' education programs, who is admitted to them, and how they are run, is at Brooklyn College. However the issues have ramifications for the broader education and labor movement.

Here are the facts and history about the Brooklyn College Graduate Center for Worker Education (GCWE) that I hope will provide an accurate portrayal of the program and correct the distortions of Corey Robin's blog post that serve management interests rather than students and faculty.

1. The GCWE is not a labor research center and never was intended to be but a worker education program. What's the difference? Worker education is intended to impart intellectual and scholarly training that expose working class students to important literature in a range of academic disciplines. All courses cover a range of topics from the perspective labor and social justice. For example, a class on international human rights would include an examination of labor rights violations. As a worker education program, the GCWE imparts broad knowledge while working class students earn MA degrees to better serve the people of New York, on the model of Ruskin College at Oxford University. Worker education is not a labor studies program like the Murphy Center. Labor education centers typically provide courses in collective bargaining, pension plan management, organizing 101, labor-management relations, trade union organizing strategies, and corporate campaigns.
2. The worker education serves union members and worker activists. Many of the students are members of unions and worker organizations. Many students are members of unions and other worker organizations.
3. The GCWE has had a consistently strong relationship with labor unions and continues to do so. Most recently, the GCWE hosted the Labor and Working Class History Association (LAWCHA) conference at 25 Broadway with over 600 registrants. The conference included an exhibit 'Sandy Stories' that was sponsored by the Workforce Development Institute, with a photo exhibit from many unions in New York City. The exhibit was comprised of photos taken by union members from the Utility Workers, Transit Workers United Local 100, RWDSU, UFT, UNITE-HERE, among others that helped save New Yorkers and restore services during the hurricane last year. Trade unionists from throughout New York City attended this conference, the largest in LAWCHA's history. Robin did not participate in the conference and so conveniently omits this from his narrative.
4. Robin's assertion that "You can't restore a program that never was" is a revisionist denunciation

of all full-time and adjunct faculty who have taught classes at the Graduate Center for Worker Education for more than 30 years and, in general, university-based worker education programs and adjunct faculty, who are so often not rehired. What is obvious to all of us who have spent our lives to promote working class access to public education is that we are living at a time of austerity where programs like the GCWE, which provide essential educational services to working people, are under attack. Critics of these programs believe that a university education is for the privileged few rather than available to working people.

5. The program was situated in Manhattan since 1983 to serve working New Yorkers. By definition, moving an evening program from a central location in proximity to public servants' jobs and union halls to main campuses out of Midtown or Downtown Manhattan effectively eviscerates a vibrant public institution of higher learning that permits workers to advance their careers. By asserting there are no students fails to address a central plank of the petition: provide rolling admissions like all worker education programs.

6. In fact, to close yet another worker education program in a union city reveals an anti-working class sentiment and the same neoconservative doubletalk that has been used over 35 years to downsize programs such as labor education centers, close factories and lay-off workers in the US and throughout the world, and reduce public services to a minimum. At a time when labor unions require support and educated worker intellectuals, Robin along with the CUNY administration seek to retrench this program.

7. As a faculty member who has taught at the GCWE for over 15 years I have seen many working students thrive in the program. The GCWE has served workers in and out of unions, the children of union members, and graduates have gone on to careers as union leaders, heads of government departments, lawyers, professors, elected office, and public health professionals. Most recently, a graduate of the program received a Fulbright Scholarship and another alumnus was elected president of a DC37 local union. These are just two examples of the accomplishments of our students.

8. To say that the program has no students is disingenuous. The program stopped accepting students in February 2012 and has no public presence. The website was taken down by the college and the program has no advisor on location. No wonder there are no applicants. When I suggested the program to a gifted graduating student last February, he told me that application closed on February 1. Moreover, Robin severed the excellent relationship between the City College of New York Center for Worker Education, which conferred bachelors' degrees and allowed students to go on to a masters' degree through GCWE. Relocating the program out of downtown Manhattan will prevent the predominantly African American, Caribbean American, and Latina/o students who have benefited from a program near their workplaces from advancing their education and professional careers.

9. Robin refers to a report that he forwarded to Brooklyn College administrators. To my knowledge, no one was aware that such an evaluation was conducted and no one has seen the findings or recommendations. This act is uncollegial, at best, and most certainly an attack against faculty governance. Without seeing a copy of the report, it is impossible to respond to whatever is contained therein. Is Robin advocating for decisions to be made based upon secret evidence?

10. If the program is being dismantled on the basis of a secret report that no one has seen, aside perhaps CUNY management, it is one that contradicts external evaluations of Middle States, one of the GCWE and the other of the BC-Department of Political Science. Both concluded that the GCWE was serving an excellent function and fulfilling its mission, even if it required more funding. That's because faculty members stayed overtime to work with students even though no full time faculty was

assigned. I, for one, worked happily advising students four or five days a week. I challenge anyone to weigh the external reports against the secret report, where, apparently, no one who worked or was associated with the worker education program was interviewed.

11. The Middle States reports are available and in the public domain. One of the three external evaluators for the report on Political Science was Robin's own dissertation sponsor, Rogers Smith. People should ask Smith, now at the University of Pennsylvania, why he thought the GCWE program in political science was doing a good job, despite its lack of resources. In fact, perhaps the department that is dismantling the program now more than 30 years old isn't interested in fulfilling CUNY's mission to educate working people but seeks to compete with Columbia, NYU, Yale, and Princeton for students. But if that's the case, even Harvard has an excellent worker education program that is administered by Elaine Bernard, who signed the student and alumni petition.

12. Furthermore, so far as academic freedom, I don't recall any vote in the political science department that the GCWE should close and turned into a campus-based urban and public administration program. In fact, the department rarely met in the spring semester, and, when it did, only for a few minutes, to the chagrin of frustrated faculty. Taking the program away from where our students work, is nothing less than closing another worker education program. When and where was that decision made? Certainly not at the regular department meetings. Indeed I received a press release from the administration indicating the plan. So it isn't about faculty governance after all.

13 Robin states that an 85-90 percent acceptance rate is tantamount to a poorly-run program and unprepared or incompetent students. I am not aware of the statistic, but even if true, he is misinformed. The department had three members of the faculty admissions committee and vetted students before they applied. Admissions were mainly through word of mouth, regular trips to union halls, and the website. In addition, the CCNY-Center for Worker Education program, which shares our floor at 25 Broadway, provided advanced education for many graduates.

14. The admission charge of \$125 at CUNY is high for working class students, so we advised students not to apply until they were prepared. The common practice among elite universities and colleges of encouraging applicants to raise funds to apply to increase the standing and prestige of colleges on the ranking charts is disgraceful for a public university like CUNY and especially a worker education program. In fact, this practice has been brought to light on a national scale as elite colleges compete for students to reject.

15. For these and many other reasons, I unequivocally support our students' and alumni efforts to save the GCWE program, as do all who are aware of the facts. The students' petition was released to mobilize support for the program. The faculty to whom the students refer are the adjuncts who were dismissed over the last two years, plus some retirees who teach not for the money but out of a commitment to working-class education. The full-time faculty in political science can always teach in the program. The blog is inaccurate in addition to implying there is some kind of cabal seeking to return for unknown perks. This is simply untrue.

16. As Robin admits in his blog, during his tenure as the interim director of the GCWE, he has done little beyond the report, of which no one seems to have any knowledge. During Robin's tenure as director, he eagerly supported the retrenching of classes, presided over the dismissal of adjunct faculty who in some cases were let go for their political perspectives, support for various causes, and associations.

17. He has openly used confidential information he gained as the interim director and member of the political science appointments' committee and circulated it in his blog. It is highly inappropriate to discuss a case of financial malfeasance that should remain confidential, even if observers consider it

to be baseless. But even if it were the case, why should working students be punished or deprived of an integral program on the basis of unproven allegations?

Robin's attack is based on a secret report (we await Edward Snowden's release from the NSA archives with eager anticipation). Is this what members of the academy and their supporters want?

This is why students and alumni, as well as the New York City labor movement support the GCWE and other worker education programs and urge you to sign their petition.

Manny Ness

Portside

July 31, 2013

Add your name to the petition -

http://petitions.moveon.org/sign/save-brooklyn-college?source=s.fwd&r_by=4645131

Committee of Concerned Students, Alumni, Faculty & Staff and more than 1400 signers, including:

Lee Adler, David Barkin, John Borsos, Stephen Bronner, Gene Bruskin, Leslie Cagan, Cathleen Caron, Stephen Castles, Lynda Day, Mark Dudzic, Michael Fabricant, Silvia Federici, Barbara Foley, Fernando Gapasin, Jeff Goodwin, Michael Honey, Gerald Horne, Sarah Jaffe, Julius Getman, Michael Lebowitz, Liz Mestres, Jack Metzgar, Kim Moody, Priscilla Murolo, Liz Rees, Joe McDermott, Jeff B. Perry, Zaragosa Vargas Joe McDermott, Mojúbàolú Olúfúnké Okome, Bertell Ollman, Leo Panitch, Frances Fox Piven, James Grey Pope, Marcus Rediker, Andrew Ross, Vishwas Satgar, Jane L. Slaughter, Roger Toussaint, Nick Unger, Gregory Wilpert, Victor Wallis, Peter Waterman, Cal Winslow, Richard Wolff

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<http://portside.org/2013-08-01/support-worker-education-cuny-response-corey-robin-still-another-perspective-worker-ed#sthash.K3aTMr2F.dpuf>

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Corey Robin: Please Do Not Sign Brooklyn College Worker Ed Petition

A few days ago, Portside shared with its readers a request to sign a petition protesting the elimination of funding for the Brooklyn College Graduate Center for Worker Education. Today, we are sharing a response to that petition from Corey Robin, a political scientist and interim direct of the center.

A petition titled “Save Brooklyn College Graduate Center for Worker Education” is currently being circulated on the internet. As the interim director of that center, a former union organizer, a vocal advocate of labor rights, and a firm believer in worker education, I am asking people NOT to sign this petition.

By way of background, the Graduate Center for Worker Education (GCWE) was historically run by a small group of faculty in my department (political science). In 2011, the department elected a new chair and a new executive committee, including myself. We discovered that the GCWE was suffering from severely compromised academic standards. We also found evidence of financial wrongdoing.

The Brooklyn College administration took immediate action and removed the director of the GCWE. I was appointed interim director in 2012 by Kimberley Phillips, then dean of the humanities and social sciences and a prominent labor historian in her own right (Phillips is also a past president of the Labor and Working-Class History Association). As per my agreement with the administration, I will be stepping down from this position at the end of August so that I can finish my sabbatical, which I had to interrupt in order to take on these responsibilities.

CUNY has since conducted an investigation of the GCWE and pursued disciplinary charges. The Attorney General’s office of the State of New York has also launched an investigation, and I have been questioned by members of that office. I am not privy to the details of these investigations and charges, so I won’t speak about them here.

But here is what I can say about the GCWE prior to my tenure.

The centerpiece of the GCWE is a masters’ program in urban policy and administration (UPA), which is housed in the political science department. Prior to the election of our current chair and executive committee, that program was run with no oversight by the chair or the executive committee. There was no formal admissions committee constituted by the chair and comprised of department faculty. Admissions rates ran from roughly 85 to 95%. The UPA program had no exit requirements such as a masters’ thesis or comprehensive exam, as is the case with other masters programs at Brooklyn College and elsewhere. The program’s curricular offerings and adjunct faculty were not vetted or evaluated by the chair or the executive committee.

Since the election of our new department leadership and my taking over the Center, we have taken the necessary steps to address these problems, including tightening our admissions standards.

Though the GCWE is described by the creators of this petition as possessing an “incredible legacy” of worker education, the fact is that it has not been a worker education center for some time, if ever. In 2000, an external evaluation report, which was co-authored by one of the leading labor scholars in the country, declared that “the program itself has little labor emphasis or worker education components....There is no clear focus around the implicit labor and worker orientation of the program.”

Despite that report and its recommendations, little at the GCWE changed in subsequent years, as I discovered when I became interim director. A report in 2012 that I co-authored with nationally recognized labor scholars Dorian Warren, Stephanie Luce, Josh Freeman, and Carolina Bank-Muñoz found that:

None of the six course requirements of the program has anything to do with labor or workers. The GCWE does offer two labor-oriented courses, but only infrequently. Any student could get through the MA program without having read, written, or spoken about a labor-related topic.

Unlike other labor-oriented programs—for example, the Murphy Institute [at CUNY]—the GCWE

does not have an agreement with labor unions to recruit and help fund potential MA students from unions or government agencies. And unlike Murphy, the GCWE does not have a labor advisory board that would help inform and guide curricular decisions to benefit workers.

Though nearly 90% of GCWE students are over 25 and thus probably work (almost 100 percent are part-time students), Brooklyn College's political science masters' program as a whole has an even higher ratio of over-25 students, and more than 80% of all Brooklyn College masters students are part-time students. There is little in the demographics of the UPA masters program that could be characterized as worker-oriented and that distinguishes it, in that regard, from any other masters program run by Brooklyn College.

Whether the issue is curriculum, demographics, recruitment, or governance, there is no distinctive labor dimension to the MA program.

Our report went onto make several recommendations as to how the GCWE could be reconstituted with a stronger labor focus; those recommendations were given to the Brooklyn College administration.

In the past year, the political science faculty has had to make some difficult decisions about our involvement with the GCWE. It is our belief that, given the interests and strengths of our department, the UPA program, for which we are responsible, ought to focus on urban politics (indeed, we have just hired a specialist in urban politics). Although academic disciplines like history and sociology have flourishing sub-fields in labor studies, political science does not, which makes recruitment of full-time faculty in that field difficult. Given the troubled history of the center itself, we also believe faculty and students would be better served if our UPA program were housed on the Brooklyn College campus rather than at 25 Broadway in lower Manhattan, where it is currently housed.

These decisions, it should be stressed, are the decisions of the political science faculty. They are not, nor should they be, the decisions of the Brooklyn College administration.

By calling on the Brooklyn College administration to "fully restore the Urban & Policy Administration...programs at the Downtown Manhattan campus of the Brooklyn College Graduate Center for Worker Education," this petition and its signers are asking the administration to overturn the faculty's deliberations and decisions, to force upon us curricular and admissions policies we have foresworn, and to tell us who we must hire.

That such a petition is being circulated by union activists and faculty who in any other circumstance would decry—and rightly so—such administrative interference as a violation of academic freedom is troubling. For that is what this petition is: a call to compromise the academic freedom and educational integrity of my department.

The petition also claims that the "dismantling of this long-standing program ranks with other attacks on working people across the country." As someone who has watched that attack and reported on it here, who has close friends and colleagues in other worker education centers across the country—which are being attacked by anti-labor politicians—I find this language cynical in the extreme. It uses people's legitimate concerns about the status of workers and worker education as a cover under which to smuggle a call for the restoration of a worker education program that has long since ceased to be a worker education program (in fact, the petition explicitly and repeatedly uses the language of restoration).

If people wish to have a discussion about the creation of a legitimate worker education program at

Brooklyn College—rather than the restoration of a program that never was—I would welcome that. I'm sure that many of the individuals who signed this petition sincerely believed they were contributing to that end, which I share. Indeed, throughout this past year I have tried to have such a discussion.

But that discussion will not be advanced by this petition, which is far more concerned with restoring the lost privileges and prerogatives of a few individuals (“Reinstate the quality faculty members who previously taught at the center”; “Restore a full-time academic advisor”; “full restoration of the educational and support services”) who benefited from the old regime than it is with the creation of a genuine labor studies program or worker education center.

I urge you not to sign this petition, to ask MoveOn.org to remove your name if you have, to declare publicly that you wish to remove your name if MoveOn.org can't or won't, and to circulate this statement widely.

I'm told that if you email petitions@moveon.org and ask that your name be removed, they will do so promptly.

Corey Robin

Corey Robin's Blog

July 26, 2013

* Posted by Portside on July 31, 2013

<http://portside.org/2013-07-31/corey-robin-please-do-not-sign-brooklyn-college-worker-ed-petition-0#sthash.oFSKEF8a.dpuf>
