Activism and the Academy in Ireland: A Bridge for Social Justice

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ABSTRACT *This article is concerned with the working relationships between progressive academics, students, left activists, and trade unionists in Ireland, and with the apparent division between theory-led and action-led perspectives. We reflect on our efforts to draw progressive forces in Ireland together through a number of initiatives: reading groups, conferences, educational seminars, workshops, the publication of a quarterly paper, and the organization of precarious workers in higher education. We argue that although activism and academia are sometimes treated as separate spheres, there are spaces for academia in activism and for activism in academia. Finding and filling those spaces means resisting efforts to limit academia to interpreting the world, and finding ways to demonstrate the emancipatory potential of education among activists whose time is taken up with struggling against immediate structural inequalities and attempting to mobilize people into a political force. We argue that scholar-activists should play an important role helping to assemble the collective resources of the working class, as well as organising for longer-term social transformation. We call on scholar-activists to collaborate in constructing a counter-hegemonic narrative and developing a collective strategy for social justice.*

KEYWORDS scholar-activism; emancipatory education; academia; social justice

Introduction

It could be argued that while academics focus on interpreting the world, activists mobilize people to change it, but there is no strict dichotomy.

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Activists engaging in scholarly work realize that successful campaigns invariably see the value in research-based activism. Likewise, professional scholars who move beyond interpreting the world can play important parts in progressive social change. Some academics are quite visible in the class struggle, as Greece's program for social salvation demonstrated in early 2015 (Wall Street Journal, 2015). However, as scholars and as activists we are concerned that the increasing corporate influence in the management of colleges and universities, together with a shift in academic discourse to suit "vested interests with a great deal of power" (Tadajewski et al., 2014, p. 1760), threatens scholars' ability to engage in initiatives geared toward social change. Prevailing institutional practices are creating an environment of intolerance toward anything that is potentially disruptive to existing power relations (within or outside of academic life), generating a culture of deference and silence, particularly among the growing number of precariously employed educators (Gill, 2009).

Drawing on our own involvements as academics and activists in Ireland, we argue that there remains a space for activism within academia, as well as for radical education and scholarship within activism (Freire, 1996). Scholar activism has been defined as scholarly work that resists dominant discourses, and questions social, political, and economic power relations (Fuller & Kitchin, 2004). Scholars such as Russell (2015), McAlevey (2012), Gill (2009), Mason (2013), Hearne (2015), and The Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010) have demonstrated that a link bridging academia to activism is not only possible, but necessary.[1]

One of the key problems facing progressive forces in Ireland is the lack of on-going working relationships between left academics, left activists, and the organized working class. To help remedy this, we are concerned with rebuilding the institutions that make possible some degree of self-rule among the working class – the first step being to develop a continuing dialogue between workers, trade unionists, academics, independent researchers, activists, and the general population. In this article we focus on the reciprocal relationships that have developed between left scholars, trade unionists, and activists, through our own scholarship and activism.

An interesting realization we derived from writing this reflective article is the extent to which our activism (re)shapes our scholarship and vice versa. Our long-standing relationship with the trade union movement in Ireland led us to bring trade union activism into our own academic workplace with the specific aim to raise awareness about conditions of temporary, part-time, and hourly-paid workers in higher education. In so doing, we discovered that the task of building relationships of solidarity, or of "raising expectations and raising hell" (McAlevey, 2012, p. 12), is increasingly difficult as neo-liberal university governance uses insecurity, fear, and isolation to exploit and deter

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[1] The Autonomous Geographies Collective is a group of academics collaborating and supporting the development of scholar activism with the view to progressive social transformation.

resistance (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015). This realization was brought home to us when we started agitating on the issue of hourly-paid teaching contracts at the University of Limerick (UL). Inspired by Third Level Workplace Watch (https://3lww.wordpress.com/about/) a campaigning group organized by and for precarious staff in Irish universities, we formed UL Workplace Watch with the purpose of organizing and campaigning for better working conditions for precarious faculty and staff. We discovered that of the 30 hourly-paid lecturers who contacted UL Workplace Watch in the first few months of its existence, only one felt confident enough to claim for the hours s/he spent preparing for class; none were claiming for all of the hours worked. Moreover, apart from one (the same colleague), none were prepared to publicly express dissatisfaction about their conditions of employment to the wider campus community. This inspired us to further examine the experiences of precarious employment among academics, and to incorporate precariousness into our own research agenda.

Drawing on the work of the Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010), Mason (2013), and Russell (2015), this article reflects on our actions and standpoints as scholar-activists working collectively to resist the further neo-liberalization of third level education in Ireland and abroad. We hope that it will encourage others who are trying either to incorporate activism into their academic lives or strengthen their activism through individual or collaborative academic work. Our experiences/stories are presented narratively in chronological order, to demonstrate the development of our efforts, and to consider them in their relevant socio-political and economic contexts. Our narrative unfolds as follows. We begin with a 'Marxist Reading Group' we organized at University of Limerick between 2010 and 2013 to create a space for an alternative reading of the post-2008 austerity crisis. In our efforts to open up a dialogue that extended beyond the academy, we included trade unionists and members of various activist groups who were attempting to resist the austerity measures imposed by the government, the European Union, and the International Monetary Fund. This led to collaboration with the Limerick Council of Trade Unions (LCTU), focused on designing educational activities with emancipatory potential. Our work with the LCTU is discussed in the second part of our narrative. We then turn to a quarterly publication that resulted from that collaboration, called *The Bottom Dog,* which endeavours to provide an independent voice for workers and activists. The dialogue that developed through our involvement with the trade union movement led us to begin organizing precarious workers in our own workplace within the university setting; this is the focus of the final part of our narrative reflection.

Reading Group: The Early Days

The background to our activism at University of Limerick was the collapse of the Irish economy in 2008. In the initial years of the crisis it was generally accepted that a relatively small number of developers, speculators, financiers, and politicians had ruined the economy (O'Toole, 2010). Conditions worsened when, as McCabe (2011, p. 169) explains, the government put up "the entire Irish State as collateral for the crushing liabilities of six private banks ... approximately €400 billion in leveraged loans." It was not long before the politicians, economists, and media pundits who had facilitated the expansion of the preceding property bubble stepped back into the limelight to mis-educate the population about the nature of the crisis. They developed the narrative of 'we all partied' to legitimize the neo-liberal attack on public services, and to redirect blame toward the general population, including the most vulnerable groups in society, such as the long-term unemployed and single mothers (O'Flynn, Monaghan & Power, 2014; Mercille, 2014). Experiencing life and work amidst the austerity measures, we, as scholar-activists, felt compelled to take a position; Howard Zinn's (2002) dictum "you can't be neutral on a moving train" appeared more and more apt.

Control of the narrative of Ireland's economic collapse has been more-or-less ceded to the interests of economic and political elites. In retrospect, it is perhaps not surprising that efforts by academics to alter the narrative or challenge austerity measures vis-à-vis higher education and in society at large have been weak, especially given increasing pressures on those hoping to secure permanent contracts or promotion to conform to the dominant neo-liberal agenda (Great Lakes Feminist Geography Collective, 2015). In pursuit of their careers, even radical scholars are likely to be transformed into conformists.

In an attempt to highlight the apparent absence of a thorough critical academic discourse on Britain's political economy, Guardian journalist Aditya Chakrabortty (2012) searched for the terms "finance", "economy", and "markets" – as well as for "any articles dealing with the financial crisis in even the most tangential sense" – in the abstracts of three main sociology journals from 2000-2012. According to Chakrabortty (2012), the relevant articles totalled "nine in the *American Sociological Review*, three in *Sociology* ('the UK's premier sociology journal'), and one in the *British Journal of Sociology.*" Chakrabortty (2012) put it simply: "Look at those numbers, and remember that the BSA [British Sociological Association] has 2,500 members – yet this is the best they could do." He was similarly unimpressed with the discipline of political science, having searched the program of a conference in Belfast attended by Britain's top political scientists (held in the weeks before Chakrabortty published his article). Chakrabortty expected to find in-depth, critical analyses of the crisis, debates about the technocrat governments installed in southern Europe, or the political implications of the banking crises in Britain and Ireland, "[b]ut no: over the course of three days,

they held exactly one discussion of Britain's political economy. There was more prominence given to a session on how academic research could advance dons' careers" (Chakrabortty, 2012). Implicit in these observations is an apparent disinclination among many academics to openly challenge relations of power, question prevailing orthodoxies, or play a role in democratizing debates around crisis and austerity, at least in academia's preferred venue: the refereed journal.

In order to address the lack of Irish academic response to the crisis we set up a reading group in University of Limerick at the beginning of 2010, hoping to facilitate a free and open dialogue among the progressive forces of the academy. The reading group provided an opportunity for students, academics, and non-academic staff to come together once a week to consider the work of various Marxist writers and their relevance to current events. The meetings revealed a widespread unease about the neo-liberalization of higher education, and concerns that the increasingly conservative ethos of academic life is suppressing critical thought; many participants suggested that they were finding it increasingly difficult to develop critical scholarship or to devote themselves to the public good within an academic setting.

Nevertheless, the group agreed that scholar-activists must actively defy the neo-liberal agenda that university administrations impose on them, specifically the practices of researching for audit and conforming to research agendas and activities that are most likely to yield large numbers of publications. Instead, our discussions concluded that scholar-activists should focus on producing research that actually makes a difference: consciously committing to public discourse, along with political and organizing work; and engaging in slow scholarship (the recognition that intellectual growth and personal freedom are crucial scholarly processes that require time) (Great Lakes Feminist Geography Collective, 2015). We regarded slow scholarship as a political act in the sense that it refuses to facilitate the neo-liberal transformation of higher education, or at least to submit to the self-auditing culture that characterizes it. Looking back at the activity of our group, we realize that we were fumbling in the dark, attempting to break through neo-liberal assumptions, and somehow realize "the emancipatory potential of education, research and publications" (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010, p. 263).

Galloway (2012, p. 165), building on the ideas of Freire and Ranciere, suggests that the aim of emancipatory education should be that of exposing power, rather than socializing people "into what is considered to be an intrinsically oppressive society." Elsewhere she argues that emancipatory education should be based on trust and equality between teachers and students (Galloway, 2015). To succeed it needs to build on people's capacity to think and act collectively, which means creating an environment of dialogue that is as free and open as possible. With these principles in mind, we worked toward creating a space in which the distinctions between support staff, various levels and categories of faculty, and students were relatively

unimportant. We attempted to develop a space that could facilitate radical understandings of the workings of power; one that could lead to developing alternative ways to think and act.

Our efforts led us to organize a two-day conference in October 2010, which saw significant numbers of activists and scholars from Ireland and the UK drawn to University of Limerick to discuss papers that used a Marxist perspective to critique the status quo in higher education, as well as in the national and international political and economic systems. We produced an edited publication from the proceedings, demonstrating that there are alternative ways to think about Irish political economy, Irish history, Irish society, and possibilities for the future (O'Flynn, Clarke, Power & Hayes, 2012).

The group continued its work in the area of Marxism and radical education. Two years later, in April 2012, we organized a second conference (again at University of Limerick) under the title *Crisis, Austerity and Resistance*, providing further opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to exchange views and test their ideas against the knowledge of trade union activists, community groups, and leftist political organizations. These events helped participants to build the networks necessary to inform each other's struggles and to pool resources that would make organizing more efficient (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010).

The Limerick Mechanics Institute: Linking Activism and the Academy

The aforementioned activities focused on opening up discussions on campus. While this was occurring, the Limerick Council of Trade Unions was beginning to seek a more active role in opposing austerity (e.g., they organized a rally against austerity in February, 2013), as well as in making efforts to organize workers' political education in Limerick (e.g., by facilitating a Mayday/Summer School that focused on Irish labour history and political economy).[2] After some discussions, and a decision to coordinate a seminar series for local activists, we began to question the suitability of the university as a space that could attract trade unionists and activists, given that audiences outside academia sometimes see the academic environment as distant or even hostile. If there was any emancipatory potential in the kind of education we were attempting to practice, we reasoned that it should find its right audience. This was the start of our collaboration with trade unionists at the Mechanics Institute, home of the LCTU. In a talk we gave to the Council, we made it clear that our main aim was to discover how to facilitate the development of confidence among workers in terms of their abilities to

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[2] The Limerick Council of Trade Unions (LCTU) is composed of trade union activists living in and around the Limerick area, who join together to promote and implement the policies of the trade union movement in the local community and with local authorities (see http://www.limerickctu.com/who-we-are).

generate analyses and strategies, and to see if we could play some role in helping to strengthen the labour movement more generally. Adhering to the idea of emancipatory education as a practice, as well as a theory (Galloway, 2012), we hoped that participation in workshops at the Mechanics Institute would encourage workers to take control of their own education. Furthermore, we found that open dialogue between academics, trade unionists, and activists was critical in order to better understand the world and to develop viable alternatives to neo-liberalism.[3]

In our discussions with the LCTU at the Mechanics Institute, we put forward the view that the workers' movement could only progress concurrently with the *self-education* of the working class. Originally established to facilitate training and education for workers, the Mechanics Institute has been central to every movement of the organized working class in Limerick for over a hundred years (Cahill, 1991). Moving our activities to the Institute (and thus away from university venues), and assisting in the facilitation of educational activities, including seminars, workshops, and public talks appeared to be the next logical step toward developing a network and opening space for dialogue between scholar-activists, trade-unionists, and activists (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010; Mason 2013). We hoped that this network would allow participants to collectively decide the content of their education, to produce knowledge and understanding of relevant issues, to develop tactics to build their struggle, and to encourage each other to take part in campaigns and joint actions (Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010).

The politicization (particularly the radicalization) of the workers' movement is of course no straightforward matter. The Irish economy's collapse left in its wake an environment in which people's time is spent simply trying to survive. Full-time employment has steadily declined in Ireland since the start of the millennium (Loftus, 2012). In the year 2000, seven in ten workers had at least 35 hours of work a week; by the end of 2011, this number had fallen to six in ten (Loftus, 2012). Although workers' lives are being impacted, they get little education about what is really happening in the local and national economic and political spheres, and instead receive much mis-education from mainstream media, as well as from the political establishment and academia (particularly from the economics profession) (Chakrabortty, 2012).

In an attempt to reverse this trend we began to develop participatory forms of education, with workshops geared toward the requirements of the activists and workers involved. To this end, the content of the workshops was partly determined by the participants themselves. After the first series of seminars and workshops on political economy, the participants asked that the group continue to meet and proposed a series of topics they wanted to address.

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[3] According to Friere, this kind of dialogue is the driver of emancipation (1996, p. 53; Galloway, 2012).

Among the events that followed, a workshop on collective bargaining, a talk on the EU crisis and the Euro, a discussion with peace activist Margaretta D'Arcy on neutrality, and a talk on Palestinian political prisoners, were among those best attended. Each meeting was organized to facilitate the development of counter-hegemonic narratives and unity among progressive labour and social movements. Although we found the seminars, talks, and workshops very valuable in terms of creating a space for dialogue, we saw that there was little outlet for the analyses and perspectives developed. As a result, again in collaboration with the LCTU, we revived *The Bottom Dog*, a historic newspaper of the organized labour movement.

The Bottom Dog: Dissemination of Academic and Activist Work to the Labour Movement

The Bottom Dog was a publication of the LCTU, first issued in 1917-18, and later revived in the 1970's and 1980's under different editorial teams. Throughout its history, 'the dog' worked to expose social injustice and to highlight the plight of those whose stories are generally hidden. An early editorial for the newspaper insisted that the "bottom dog would only come into his own when every worker, male and female, was thoroughly organised" (Flynn, 2013). Consequently, the publication always attempted to give voice to the oppressed, highlighting issues such as bad housing, low pay, unemployment, and poor working conditions.

As described above, our involvement with *The Bottom Dog* derives from the workshops, seminars, and talks that we helped to organize at the Mechanics Institute. It had not been published since the mid-1980s, but we decided that it should be resuscitated when the attacks on the working class appeared relentless. Out of respect to the quarterly's history and spirit, the new editorial team took the 1975 editorial statement as our starting point:

> The Bottom Dog is not a platform for any political party or faction. It is rather a forum open to all workers who wish to contribute articles or ideas etc. The paper covers issues where the working class is under attack or on the advance e.g., redundancies, unemployment, wage freezes and attacks on workers' rights, repression, sex discrimination and women's rights, strikes, sit-ins and trade-unionisation, especially when they relate to, affect, teach lessons or show the way forward for workers in this country. (Flynn, 2013)

We envisaged a publication that would be a voice of and for the working class; a space where workers, activists, scholars, and all others committed to furthering the interests of the working class as a class, could develop and disseminate ideas, and prepare for the struggles ahead. The publication hosts articles and analyses on various matters, and from a range of perspectives. Given that radical ideas are routinely dismissed or demonized by the dominant media, we think it is necessary to continue to create new spaces for

alternative perspectives from activists and trade unionists, as well as to disseminate research conducted by progressive academics in a language and an outlet that is more accessible to the labour movement than are academic publication venues (primarily peer-reviewed academic journals).

This engagement with the Mechanics Institute and *The Bottom Dog* brought us closer to the trade union movement and helped us create additional networks within the academy, as well as with activist groups. Our sense became stronger that something apart from academic discourse needed to be done in our workplace. As precarious lecturers, we started looking into what being a precarious worker actually meant to us and to our peers in the same position. It also led us to question more deeply what a shift toward greater reliance on precarious labour in the academy meant for the organized labour movement and for universities.

Organizing Precarious Workers in Higher Education: Activism within Academia

The more involved we became with the trade union movement the more we were able to appreciate that the entire working class was being restructured for the benefit of employers, with permanent full-time jobs being increasingly replaced by precarious forms of employment. As Guy Standing (2011, p. 32) argues:

> [People] on temporary contracts can be induced to labour harder, especially if the jobs are more intense than regulars have been doing ... [temporary workers] can also be put in forms of underemployment more easily, paid less for fewer hours in down periods …[and] controlled through fear more easily. If they do not put up with demands placed on them, they can be told to leave, with minimal fuss and cost.

Standing (2011, p. 183) also points out that the traditional working class is in decline everywhere, suggesting that the rising 'precariat' – a *portmanteau* combining precarious with proletariat - is actually a new class in the making.

Standing's legitimate insights about precarity notwithstanding, it is important to note that precarious employment has been the norm throughout the history of capitalism; the three decades following Second World War are a noteworthy anomaly (Kalleberg, 2009). Since the 1970's, the return to precarious employment has resulted in greater desperation, which often leads workers to tolerate exploitative conditions in their attempts to earn a living (Kalleberg, 2009). This disciplinary process is not confined to low-skilled jobs (Lynch & Ivancheva, 2015). Much of the work carried out in universities, for example, is being proletarianized, performed on a temporary, part-time, or casual-hours basis by academic labourers with little or no job security (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015).

Academics resisting the neo-liberalization of higher education are motivated by several concerns: declining job security; inadequate support for teaching; greater responsibilities (e.g., increasing student/teacher ratios); restrictions on the development and free expression of ideas; expectations of monetizable and quantifiable outputs; and, for some, attacks on their very existence as scholars (Apple, 2005; Karran, 2007; Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010; Loxley, 2014). The struggle for social justice is therefore not just about promoting egalitarian values; it is also about identifying and acting on immediate material concerns. With respect to higher education, this struggle is bound up with the values of emancipatory education, scholar activism, the development of collective knowledge and collective strategies, and producing "tools you can fight with" (Russell, 2015 p. 1).

Universities in Ireland are publicly funded and are expected to operate in the public interest. However, they are increasingly dependent on private funds and increasingly compelled to accommodate the educational needs of the corporate world. This circumstance has led Lynch & Ivancheva (2015) to pose the question, "If academics can only study, research and teach subjects that are corporatively funded, and can only educate those who work for, or service the commercial sectors, how free are they?" There is a lack of transparency and accountability in this regard. University administrations make much of the pursuit of 'excellence', but the elite group of managers entrusted with operating universities in the public interest increasingly apply market principles in their governance. Consequently, there is a diminution of collegiality, integrity, trust, care, and solidarity. Education is increasingly treated as a commodity, and academic freedom is increasingly subordinated to regulation and control (Lynch, Grummell & Devine, 2012). The struggle for academic freedom, however, does not mean we should romanticize the past. Unfortunately, as Gill (2009, p. 231) has pointed out, much of the critical work on the neo-liberal transformation of academia is merely "nostalgic for the era of elitist values", which is problematic given that historically faculty and students have been overwhelmingly wealthy, male, and white.

The neo-liberal transformation of university life is characterized by a democratic deficit, and in terms of working conditions Irish universities have become leaders in the race to the bottom. Cuts to funding for higher education have been introduced yearly (2005-2014), and precarious academic positions have increased commensurately (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015). With fewer funds available and the number of students entering higher education continuing to rise, there has been an increasing emphasis on ensuring that departments and schools are self-funding. In this context, university management attempts to justify on-going efforts to normalize short-term and casual-hours contracts in third-level institutions, while the public interest role of higher education continues to be eroded for the sake of corporate interests (Apple, 2005; Ivancheva, 2015; Lynch, Grummell & Devine, 2012).

Realizing that third-level institutions are leaders in the shift toward precarious employment, and that these precarious conditions were part of our own lives, we began to consider why it was so difficult for non-permanent academic staff to recognize and organize around their common interests. In our initial attempts to organize precarious workers at University of Limerick, we took part in in-depth discussions with our peers. These meetings revealed some difficulties around status identification; those working precariously did not appear to see themselves as fitting neatly into the categories of 'professional' or 'worker'. Many of those on short-term and casual-hours contracts did not feel that they were fully part of the faculty to which they contributed. They described how this isolation, sometimes including exclusion from departmental meetings, undermined their professional identity. In the hope of gaining the acceptance of their peers and a secure position, they continued to accept unpredictable conditions and poor pay. We realized that through our silence we were part of this process, inadvertently condoning the exploitation of ourselves and our peers. We felt compelled to form a campaigning group for precarious workers in University of Limerick to demonstrate that by thinking and acting on a collective basis we, as academics, could develop a strategy for resisting precarious conditions in higher level education.

We acted in the hope that we would encourage others to act. We had been inspired by an acceptance speech given by the 2012 Irish Secondary School Teacher of the Year. A young teacher named Evelyn O'Connor accepted the award, but used the opportunity to speak out about the attacks on the pay and conditions of teaching staff in second-level (O'Connor, 2012). She pointed out that on "receiving this award for teacher of the year, I have no idea if I'll have a job in a year's time." In addition to noting the obvious stresses of precarious employment, she stressed that the government was doing real damage to education. According to O'Connor (21012), by cutting career guidance teachers, abolishing language support for foreign nationals, and reducing special needs hours for students with learning difficulties, the government's actions could only make teachers like her worse at their job:

> When we elected this government they proclaimed that 'even in our country's crisis, we can make progress in education and protect frontline services'. They promised to 'recruit, train and support the highest calibre of teachers'. Well I don't feel very supported and nor do the talented and experienced teachers up and down the country whose jobs are disappearing. Not to mention the new entrants to the profession who thanks to pay cuts will become like second class citizens in our staff rooms.

O'Connor's speech rang a lot of bells for those of us precariously employed in higher education, as did her challenge to others to speak out. She spoke of being "afraid that if we make ourselves visible we might lose our jobs", but then went on to say that she was "tired of saying nothing and ... tired of being afraid. Non-permanent teachers have to stop going quietly because our

students and our schools are suffering" (O'Connor, 2012). When we raised the issue of precarious employment at University of Limerick, we found that many others were likewise 'tired of being afraid'. These were faculty and staff without any collective voice (very few of the non-permanent employees in University of Limerick are unionized). We considered it necessary to organize people into a group, and to work in collaboration with Unite the Union to highlight the impact of precarious work on individuals and on academic life more generally.[4]

As we worked to establish UL Workplace Watch we found that although people had real grievances (e.g., not being paid for all of the hours they work), they were hesitant to organize. The majority of our peers believed that if they were seen to join a union it could have negative consequences. We discovered that the non-permanent faculty and staff who did join Unite were unlikely to be active or even to voice concerns about issues that directly impact them. When we raised the issue of precarious employment on University of Limerick's campus, it was mostly permanent faculty and staff who took part in the ensuing discussions. The non-permanent staff claimed that there was no "safe place" for those exploited in the university to express their views freely. When we set up a clandestine group to co-ordinate a campaign on the issue, there was still reluctance to participate. Many non-permanent staff expressed a desire to speak out, but would not do so due to fear of victimization. We proceeded in the hope that if we became more vocal ourselves, and generated enough discussion around the issue on campus, then more people might be willing to express their views openly. We understood that conditions would not improve until these workers realized that they were not alone, that the university could not function without them, and that the way forward was to organize a collective voice and act on a collective basis.

A consequence of lacking collective voice is a lack of respect for one's work. Many precariously employed staff in University of Limerick described the lack of recognition and general disrespect that they face from administration and faculty as "soul-destroying." A study carried out by Third Level Workplace Watch, with which UL Workplace Watch remains affiliated, found that feelings of isolation were widespread among precariously employed academics throughout Ireland. When referring to their working experiences, respondents to the group's nationwide survey regularly used negative descriptors like "depressed", "frustrated", "worried", "despondent", "hopeless", "disillusioned", and "exploited" (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015, p.58). Among respondents who are paid by the hour for their academic labour, one individual felt that "departments do not see you as their colleagues"; another said that "colleagues don't feel that they need to greet you." Another respondent stressed that "it is not just about money. It is about

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[4] Unite the Union is the only union recognized in the university as having the right to collective bargaining. It represents both faculty and staff.

treating hourly-paid workers as colleagues, providing support, including them in meetings, treating them with respect" (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015, p.58).

Our group, UL Workplace Watch, continues to highlight and organize around the issue of the casualization of labour. Our efforts in Limerick were initially geared toward highlighting deteriorating conditions, and showing that these conditions were damaging teaching, research, and morale. We argued that the prevalence of precarious employment in higher education should be a concern to permanent members of staff as precariously employed lecturers would eventually be used to undermine conditions for everyone. As soon as we began to hold regular meetings, working groups were formed to concentrate on specific issues and propose actions. We elected a representative to the union on campus (Unite) so we could have a voice. The group was unanimous that its involvement with the organized labour movement was important for collectively organizing this struggle and making our voice heard (Irish Times, 2015).

The task of uniting people around these issues is made more difficult by the government's policy of continued reductions in public funding to higher education, which leads to intensification of competition for a job in a declining labour market (Loftus, 2012; Courtois and O'Keefe, 2015). The shortage of funding plays a key part in legitimizing the expansion of labour casualization, and the increasing pressures on both casual and full-time staff to work harder for less (O'Flynn, Monaghan & Power, 2014). Furthermore, re-shifting almost every political discourse to 'fixing the economy' allows very little space for critique of the dominant austerity narrative, and helps to account for the relative absence of strong dissenting voices.

A Bridge for Social Justice

The activist work we have discussed in this article has aimed to forge strong links between the academy and activism, and open up new possibilities for real progressive change both in third-level education and society at large. It has been motivated by our conviction that there is space for academia in activism and space for activism in academia, in which one informs the other, challenging power structures, removing obstacles to open dialogue, and challenging inequalities in a direct way for the benefit of those immediately concerned and for the sake of progressive social transformation.

Ireland needs a movement of workers and activists, capable of drawing on every available resource to think, organize, and act on a collective basis. It is ever more necessary to shift away from our *compulsory individualities* (Cronin, 2000; Gill, 2009), and toward thinking and working collectively. To facilitate such a transformation, progressive academics must defend their existence as activists, regardless of the pressures and expectations of academic life; as "someone critical of the status quo, who possesses intellectual autonomy" (Wacquant, cited in Tadajewski et al., 2014, p. 1758).

We endorse Tadajewski et al.'s (2014) call on academics to form bonds with groups like the Occupy movement or the Zapatistas or, in our case, the Right2Water campaign,[5] and the organized labour movement.

The different strands of our work, especially our efforts to harness the emancipatory potential in education, dovetail with the Autonomous Geographies Collective's (2010) strategy for scholar activism. Our reading group meetings and conferences, the publication of *The Bottom Dog*, and the workshops/seminars held at the Mechanics Institute are all part of one process, which involves drawing scholars, social movements, and organized workers together to facilitate a more collective understanding of the particular conditions and challenges that we now face. To us it appears obvious that for the workers' movement in Ireland to take its destiny into its own hands it must take control of its education. It is necessary to develop a wider educational infrastructure with a focus on activist/worker education, linking together the various isolated educational initiatives that have emerged in recent years. As a first step this means forging links between these groups, and determining what might be done to facilitate worker/activist education on a nationwide basis.[6]

There are certainly more steps to be taken in the coming years. We have started working toward establishing a pool of scholar-activists willing to take part in educational activities designed for, and controlled by, local workers and activists. We hope this will be done in collaboration with other councils of trade unions, and with groups dedicated to activist/worker self-education, such as Trade Union Left Forum[7] and Trademark Belfast[8]. The emerging links with precarious academic groups and with the trade union movement have yet to lead to coordinated action, or even to a workable strategy for the coming year(s). Nevertheless, some of the foundations have been laid, and being part of an organized collective of precarious workers, sharing knowledge and helping each other, is helping us develop new strategies. It is now time to build a bridge for social justice.

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[5] The Right2Water campaign is a campaign against the privatization of water in Ireland, comprised of trade unions, political organizations, and community groups; it is the largest resistance movement since the beginning of the crisis in 2008.

[6] See Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010), for their related discussion of a *global knowledge commons*.

[7] The Trade Union Left Forum operates aims to stimulate class-based critical debate within the trade union movement and to foster trade union and community organizing for a meaningful transformation of Ireland towards socialism (see http://www.tuleftforum.com/about-us/).

[8] Trademark Belfast offers a range of education and training courses for trade unionists and activists (see http://www.trademarkbelfast.com/training-and-education)

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