

Aca-Media Ep43 VerySpecialEpisode

[Start of recorded material 00:00:14]

Christine: [00:00:14] Welcome to Cinema Journal Presents Aca-Media. I am Christine Becker.

Michael: And I am Michael Kackman.

Christine: And we are in summer mode now so we are once again separated by many miles.

Michael: Many miles indeed, probably a thunderstorm or two.

Christine: [00:00:29] Right, good old summer times. We have for you I think what we could maybe call our very first Very Special Episode.

Michael: It is kind of a very special episode but it doesn't have like happy, fun things in it, does it?

Christine: [00:00:42] No, well, it's not going to have the happy ending, right, like at the end of Very Special Episode of a sitcom where we've – you know, we've all learned our lesson and life will be OK from here on out. That's, I guess, our initial warning. We don't end with thinking about life is going to be OK from now on. In fact it's sort of a call to – not so much a call to arms – a call to attention issues, and specifically we're talking about labor precarity in academia and from our media study's vantage point. So yeah, we're trying to bring attention to these key issues.

Michael: [00:01:17] And in order to do that we are taking a bit of a broad path through some of the issues that are going on right now., We're looking at some things that are happening within SCMS and the efforts by some SCMS members to create a precarious labor organization, as well as looking at a couple of high profile examples of difficult labor struggles that are happening in the universities around the world.

Christine: [00:01:41] Yeah, so we're trying to give you here both an overview and then some specific stories, although the specific stories are applicable to the overviews, so trying to give you some good information here. In preparing for these interviews I've tried to do a lot of research and cover the main stories, you know, happening in places like Wisconsin and Montana and North Carolina, and so we'll put links to a bunch of those articles that I've come across and that I found most informative, on our website, aca-media.org – there we go.

Michael: Oh, yeah, that's it.

Christine: [00:02:12] Yeah, so after this episode, if you want to further educate yourself we will have links on our links on our website for some of the key stories that are going on.

Michael: So Chris, it's always fun to start with big data.

Christine: Uh-huh.

Michael: [00:02:26] So in the 1980s one in five faculty members at American universities were contingent in some kind of way. They were adjuncts or part time or in unstable positions. By 1998 that was up to 43 percent. Want to guess what the current percentage is?

Christine: [00:02:46] I could guess because actually –

Michael: You probably know.

Christine: Yeah, like I said, I've done some of this research and I believe – I want to say 70 percent, is that where we're at right now?

Michael: [00:02:55] Yeah, close to it; somewhere between 65, 70 percent.

Christine: OK.

Michael: More than two thirds.

Christine: [00:03:00] Yeah, stop and think about – you know, people do this on Twitter all the time and it gets annoying, but like stop and take that in. Stop and take that in. Think about our country and how many faculty, and especially think about what contingent labor means and it's a broad swath of positions, but especially it means oftentimes you are working fulltime hours, not getting paid anywhere near commensurate with that.

[00:03:28] You're not getting benefits. You don't have job security. Your year to year – oftentimes you're working more than one job and then think again about that 70 percent or 65 to 70 percent figure.

Michael: [00:03:39] Right, and of course this is at a time when it's clearly obvious that a university education is one of the most powerful predictors of future earning possibilities, and both the economic and the cultural value of higher education are pretty robustly defensible, but apparently the value of university educators is not so robustly defensible.

Christine: [00:04:07] And of course these are – this is part of larger trends happening, and especially the buzzword to describe a lot of this is near liberal trends,

right, and treating higher education like it's another form of business and literally putting CEOs in charge of universities. That's not what we do and that's not how we think it's best to be done, and it's getting increasingly frustrating as no one seems to listen to us saying that.

Michael: [00:04:35] But on the upside, as we learn from I believe it's Southern Illinois University, you can pursue teaching in a university as a hobby.

Christine: [00:04:44] Oh, that's right, yeah.

Michael: [00:04:45] You know, so you could sign up to be – you know serve on committees, serve on dissertation committees, advise graduate students and that kind of thing, just for the sheer pleasure of engaging in the intellectual pursuit.

Christine: [00:05:01] Yeah, if you're not familiar with what Michael is talking about, a couple of weeks ago, a month ago SIU advertised for – and it was specifically for – I think they were targeting alums but it seemed to be they would take anyone to kind of come back, just for the love of it, right? For the sheer joy of being able to work with students for free and do all these things.

[00:05:21] And that's another component – we love our jobs, this is partly why many are willing, especially the teaching aspect of it, to do more for less, is because we love these jobs but that can so easily be taken advantage of.

Michael: Yes, again. OK, so now are we sufficiently in a dark place?

Christine: I think, yeah, if you've not all turned off yet we do have more content other people talking about the sad state of things.

Michael: [00:05:46] Yeah, so to kick things off we wanted to share a conversation that I had recently with three of the many folks who have been working really hard at creating a new precarious labor organization within SCMS. This is an issue which is at the heart of our discipline, as it is with many others, and a lot of folks have been working very hard to brainstorm about how it is that the organization can respond better to the needs of contingent faculty and to think about ways in which we can build resources and build solidarity.

[00:06:23] So in pursuing that conversation I spoke to three folks who have been hard at work on that effort, although they are just three among dozens who have been working to make sure that this issue gets some attention

Michael: [00:06:49] So we are joined today by three of the scholars who have been working within SCMS to create a new precarious labor organization and so we thought we would take some time to talk to them about it and see just what that might mean.

[00:07:02] The three people we have joining us today are Jamie Rodgers, who is a PhD candidate in Comp Lit at UC Irvine who is doing research on African Diasporic Literature in Film and is, as I hear, just a couple of weeks away from finishing.

[00:07:17] Jennifer Wang, who is PhD in Media and Cultural Studies, is from UW Madison. She's a broadcast historian whose research focuses on gender radio and daytime programming, among other things, and also Bruce Brasell, whose PhD is from NYU. He is a film scholar who does work on race, sexuality and region and he's the author of "The Possible South: Documentary Film and the Limitation of Biraciality." All of you, welcome. Thanks for joining us.

Jamie: Thank you.

Jennifer: Thank you.

Bruce: Thank you.

Michael: [00:07:47] So I was wondering if one or all of you could talk about how this effort to create a precarious labor organization got started?

Bruce: [00:08:00] Well, if I hadn't put out the call for precarious labor organizing, someone else would have. Now, I think it's – it's just another [role] given the times – but on a personal note I would not have had the courage to pursue it without the encouragement that I received from [Pam Walshdeck], the President of SCMS, and that was real important. Of course in hindsight, she may regret what her encouragement has brought forth.

[00:08:30] I think the thing to think about is that this is not one thing, but many things happening simultaneously, so the idea of the organization is just one item of a number of things that are happening with the Women's Caucus, the Caucus on Class as well and so it's not really – it's not coming out of a vacuum but rather really the zeitgeist is where it's coming out on, just what's happening in general.

[00:08:58] Even though you said you just want to focus on this kind of like organizing – the organizing has been taking multiple forms, and I think that's an example of the way that – this is an issue that kind of spreads throughout all of the membership. It's not limited to certain sort of groups.

Michael: [00:09:16] Right, and I right in noticing from the notes that you had prepared for the board that this is an issue that obviously has really clear socioeconomic class ramifications, but also is pretty strongly gendered? Is that right?

Jennifer: [00:09:34] I joined in here coming from a different perspective of some of the other people who are involved in – or who constitute precarious labor organization in that situation, as a person who took some time off for family responsibilities. It's 60 percent I think – roughly, the conservative estimate is 60 percent of contingent faculty are women and roughly the same amount, around 60 percent of tenure track faculty are male.

Michael: [00:10:04] There's a neat symmetry to that?

Jennifer: Yes, there is.

Michael: [00:10:07] Jen, do you have a sense of how strongly that generalization holds within media studies? I would suspect that it might even be more exaggerated there but I'm not sure.

Jennifer: [00:10:21] It's possible. I mean, I can only think about it, you know, being in grad school and there were very few people who had children in grad school and very few people, even who were professors, who had children who were young when we were studying, so I think that it is a system that is set up for one person, right, to be extremely devoted to their career.

[00:10:52] And the only responsibilities for either a man or a woman are not really considered, and so I think I personally have felt kind of alone for many years, and was so grateful that Bruce put together this group because I felt like I was the only person with independent scholar on my SCMS nametag, and I was so grateful that there were some other people who could join together to talk about some of the issues and problems we're facing.

Michael: [00:11:18] There is so much taboo about that, right? I mean it feels like this sort of scarlet letter to be identified in that way, and I've been identified that way in the past. A huge proportion of the members of our organization have been, and are, and it seems like it's so difficult to get beyond – just to get beyond that kind of stigma about talking about the disconnect between somebody's scholarly or intellectual legitimacy and their institutional affiliation, as if the institutional affiliation is the thing that certifies your work.

Jamie: [00:11:51] Well, I was just going to say that I think there is sort of a vicious cycle there as well because, you know the belief is, or the hope is that you earn your affiliation by your scholarly work. But given the way that – you know, from the very beginning from graduate school on it's all dependent on the kind of resources and support that you're given. You can't do the kind of work that you need to do to get these positions if you aren't financially supported to do it or given the time to do it.

[00:12:24] And once you enter into the sort of precarious labor force you are wholly denied access to the resources you need to do the kind of scholarship

you need to get the jobs, and like you said, it is sort of you get the scarlet letter. I think actually, in the precarious labor group proposal there is some statistic that is mentioned about – you know, once you’re on the market for three or four years as an adjunct you basically get cut off from the hiring process in general. You’ve been marked as somebody who has already been passed over all those years.

Bruce: [00:13:01] Can I pick up on something that Jamie said and kind of go a little – [unintelligible] to a danger zone.

Michael: Go there.

Bruce: [00:13:07] There is this thing that we don’t want to talk about, which is that in many ways – well, first of all, as an openly gay man growing up in the south we always had to just think about when you did certain things like the radio shows you would use a pseudonym or something. And in many ways it’s like – one of the things was should we be using pseudonyms because we’re on the job market and we’re talking about this issue, how is this going to affect our ability?

[00:13:33] It’s sort of like when we did the proposal for the precarious labor organization, we specifically left off names. We did it as a group of concerned people, although many people said, “Yeah, I would like to include my name,” we felt that it was better to keep it anonymous as far as that piece goes because of the sort of fear of repercussion.

[00:13:55] And so then, jumping off from there from what Jamie was saying about precarious labor in terms of the cycle – I think, unfortunately, many tenured professors are not really as enlightened on the issue as they think they are, and I know that’s a dangerous thing for me to be saying, but I think it holds up.

[00:14:21] And you see this where when you think about tenured professors are actually beneficiaries of the system, and this is the system that is kind of in a sense – we have a structural problem I guess you could say here – so in many ways when the issues comes up about precarious labor tenured professors always can kind of absolve themselves of this problem by claiming institutional structures. And it is an institutional structure issue, and of course, that it is the larger university system and the education system. So I’m not saying that that’s not a legitimate reasoning to absolve oneself of responsibility for the problem, but it is a structural feature.

[00:15:06] But think what happens from an experiential perspective for people that are in the precarious labor market, is this thing that once you’ve been there four years you’ve kind of past your expiration date, you’re no longer

good, and so it becomes an issue of not because of institutional structures, but because of personal failings.

[00:15:27] So there's this claim on institutional structures until it becomes to the actual precarious labor, and then when it [unintelligible] the people that are in that category it gets approached as being personal deficiencies of why you're in this position. Whereas, no, it's institutional structures; just like your inability for you that are tenured, the inability to change the system.

[00:15:50] And so I think that – and I guess it goes back to kind of [unintelligible] is common sense and the idea that common sense is contradictory, and this is like one of those major contradictories of the situation where people can absolve themselves climbing the [judicial] structures, but yet precarious labor or in terms of place it's personal deficiencies and failings. And I think that's something that people don't want to hear and it's something that's uncomfortable to hear, but I guess that's my take.

Michael: [00:16:24] It sounds like it's something that people really need to hear?

Jamie: [00:16:26] Right, and I jotted down a couple of little notes before we hopped on just to remind myself of some points I wanted to make. And that's exactly one, Bruce, is that tenured faculty – and I'm not talking junior faculty or people who are just leaving precarious situations or still feel precarious – but tenured faculty have to be the ones that are advocating for change within the institutions and can't, like you said, Bruce, just point to, well, it's the structure and isn't that a shame, because the folks that are in the precarious positions can't do it.

[00:17:02] You know, we could advocate for ourselves all day long and discuss the situations that we're in and, you know, provide the information and all of that, but as far as change within the system itself that's got to come from tenured faculty.

Michael: [00:17:18] It often seems to me that virtually everyone in academia feels like they are an outsider and feels like they are not in any kind of position of power, even though they may well be. And of course, people have different sorts of power and different kinds of circumstances but this sense of being unable to intervene in the operations of the machine I think is pretty – it's pretty widespread even among people who are, you know, maybe endowed full professors in leading graduate programs.

Jamie: [00:17:50] One thing that I think these groups – the precarious labor group, the Women's Caucus, the Caucus on Class – is taking up is trying to create some sense of how to approach this issue, and so the Women's Caucus has created a best practices document that they're presenting to the SCMS Board.

The Caucus on Class considered writing one as well but then we decided, instead of having a bunch of documents floating around let's support the ones that are out there.

[00:18:20] Whereas, the precarious labor group proposal, there is this best practices proposal and I think that might be a way – once these things start to become part of the public record, to have this place for tenured faculty who are sympathetic but haven't known what to do typically, and take a look.

Bruce: [00:18:38] We had the planning group at the conference where we had an organizing group, which was very well attended I thought. I mean the room was packed, and as a group we believe – and again, this goes back to this issue of self-representation. How do you feel as a group, what will empower you as a group, not those that are in charge think what's best for you in a paternalistic manner.

[00:19:02] And I think we all agreed that we feel we need an organization similar to the graduate student organization as the means for organizing ourselves. That's the best structure. Not a caucus-type structure, and so that's what our proposal is.

[00:19:18] We're proposing that there be a similar type organization to that, which would mean you would get board representation the way students do, because right now the way the system is sort of set up there hasn't in the last ten years – as far as I know from looking back through the records – somebody from the precarious labor on the board, so it's been non-representative, the way students used to be non-representative.

[00:19:43] And so that's why the group feels that that's the way to go. Whether the board will go that way or not, I have no idea of telling but I do know we told them, and we made a strong argument about why we think that this is the best way for us to organize. So it comes down to, are they willing to empower us through the means that we think is best for ourselves, and they want to tell us what to do.

Michael: [00:20:06] So an organization would be – that's essentially one of the three different types of organizational units within SCMS, right? We have special interest groups which are scholarship-focused, that are orientated around a topic area. We have caucuses that are a little closer to what this group is dealing – the kinds of issues that this group is dealing with in that they are focused more on identity issues related to the members, but the organization makes it a more kind of forceful unit that is recognizing this as a really important, distinct constituency within the institution as a whole. Is that a fair characterization?

Jamie: [00:20:57] Yeah, I think so.

Bruce: [00:21:00] And I think also it's because just as students cross all caucuses and [things] are crossed by students, precarious labor crosses all caucuses and things as well, as a group. I think that's why we think that it – because remember, it's such a big group, I mean students are probably around 25 percent of the membership or over 20 percent of the membership, depending how you define it because we don't really have the category being – the data is not collected so it's kind of an estimate.

[00:21:35] And also, if you're considering precarious labor you're just – income is just one way of looking at it because visiting professors are precarious labor. You may get a good salary for one year but your one year, and then you're back – who knows where you are the next year, so your income can go up and down very much, so it's just one of the factors.

[00:21:55] The group kind of I think came to the conclusion that the key issue is not how much income one earns, but rather the permanency of one's position.

Michael: [00:22:07] I think that's a really important thing to draw attention to. Speaking for myself, I am in a permanent – I'm a teaching professor, associate teaching professor which means I don't have tenure, I have what I feel is quite good institutional support and a pretty stable position. In that sense I am not contingent, but at the same time I recognize within my own institution, not within my department but within the larger university, that there are other people whose job title and occupational status is ostensibly the same as mine but they are in a much more sort of contingent place in terms of the roles that they fill within their departments or the place they have within the intuitional system. And so the title doesn't explain it, right, and income doesn't necessarily explain it. There are a lot of different ways to be precarious, it sounds like.

Bruce: [00:23:12] Yes, and it can be different from one national context to another as well, and I think that's one thing – you know, we're all United States scholars in this case right now, but one thing that the precarious labor organization wants to do is to make sure that we're aware of these differences within different national contexts. That precarious labor can take very – not only are there very many different forms in the US in which it takes place, it can [align] itself in different national contexts, it takes different shapes as well.

Michael: [00:23:45] Right, and one of the things we're talking about in this episode is what's going on the UK, as well as some of the issues that have arisen at institutions in the US where even tenured faculty are finding themselves to be a lot more contingent that they might have expected. These are issues that ripple all through our institutions in too many cases.

[00:24:07] A question – I'm wondering if you can summarize some of the key things that SCMS could do, either through this organization or more broadly things that you'd like to see the organization doing to support that large chunk of the membership who are in precarious positions?

Jennifer: [00:24:26] I think there is – I just want to kind of jump off of a previous point – I think there is a real disconnect, and this is getting to a dangerous place, but there is a real disconnect between our progressive politics and our work, and the progressive politics that inform the structure of the system in which we're working.

[00:24:42] And you start to think about issues like why don't we have job sharing? Why don't we have part time positions? Why aren't we able to – as independent scholars we can't access [NAH] grants, we can't access grants from universities, we can't get institutional support for our own sort of research.

[00:25:07] And so I think, first and foremost, if members of SCMS can recognize the extent to which people who are contingent laborers do not have the mentorship – are not getting enough opportunities to have the mentorship, the institutional support, the ability to do their own research or even the service opportunities that other kind of faculty are given. And so recognizing – I think those are four or five different ways in which a tenured faculty can help.

[00:25:42] Can you mentor a contingent faculty member? Can you help them gain access to institutional research support? Can you advocate when you're hiring for different kinds of positions that might suit different kinds of people? Really there is no reason why this institution or this idea of a tenured faculty was set up for one – you know in one economic situation, for one reason, but we've continued it and maybe we can talk about how we can reframe this issue together.

Jamie: [00:26:20] I want to jump on and say, you know, that that's something that we talked a lot about in the Caucus on Class, also is creating some sort of formalized mentorship program for contingent laborers, networking programs. Other ways of helping with this would be to invite contingent laborers to edit a journal or to – you know, this adding more free labor but it's also adding the kinds of – you know, service activities that need to be done to be able to keep yourself viable on the market if you want to go back on the market, or just to enjoy the intellectual life that we went into this field for.

[00:27:00] And also, another way that SCMS itself could contribute or help with the situation is make the conference affordable for the under-employed, and there are [unintelligible] payment systems for different things, but even

that can be out of reach so, you know, a category in which people can attend the conference for free maybe or that kind of thing.

[00:27:27] Jennifer, you were talking about childcare and I also have two kids and through the caucus I've been trying for three years to figure out a way to set up some sort of childcare system for the conference. The National Women's Studies Association provides free childcare throughout the entire conference and it's not been something I've been able to get off the ground at all. There is no support for it for lots of reasons, but there has got to be a way for us to work around something like that. Yeah, so that's two things I could think of.

[00:27:58] And in a similar vein we had several people who wanted to attend – the Caucus on Class put together a seminar on the crisis of economic labor and several people wanted to participate in or attend the seminar. At least two people pulled out because they were contingent faculty and unable to get any kind of funding.

Michael: [00:28:20] And in the same way that somebody who has a research account can donate to SCMS for the graduate travel awards; it would be nice to be able to do exactly the same thing for contingent faculty.

Jamie: [00:28:34] Oh, one thing I did kind of want to mention also is – you know, this kind of goes back to the discussion about tenured faculty – but to support unionizing efforts on campuses. There are a lot of grad student unionizing efforts and that's really important. More difficult is unionizing lectures, all lecture unions out there and so providing support for that also in whatever manner people are able to I think is really important.

[00:29:02] And we've talked about trying to use SCMS as a place to create some networking across campuses and across unionizing and organizing efforts.

Jennifer: [00:29:10] I just wanted to something about how important it is. I think that this issue has been framed, that this is a problem about those people. You know, it's been placed sort of on individuals when, if you look at what's happening around the country right now and how academic labor is getting more and more precarious. If you think about the fact that we have something like 65 percent of faculty are contingent faculty, and I think this number is growing.

[00:29:42] And so this is an issue that directly affects tenured faculty; it's going to increase and it's coming for you, you know? So can you join with us now in trying to kind of come up with a system that works for universities and works for individual professors?

- Jamie: [00:30:05] One more point also, is the way in which contingent labor – we’ve already talked about how it disproportionately affects women but also the kinds of pressures that it winds up affecting faculty of color, women of color especially is also disproportionate and needs to be something that is taken into consideration, and how that follows on through to junior faculty and expectations of junior faculty members as well.
- Michael: [00:30:32] These are all terrific suggestions and I really appreciate that you’re all willing to take some time to profile this really terrific effort that so many people have been working on, on behalf of literally hundreds upon hundreds of members of this organization. This is not a small group and it’s not a small issue and so I’m really, really grateful to all three of you for taking the time to talk about it.
- Jamie: [00:31:00] And thank you for covering it.
- Michael: [00:31:11] One of the things that really struck me in pursuing this conversation was a recognition that so many of us have experience with this issue, whether it’s ourselves personally or working with colleagues or with spouses, with close friends. Virtually every academic has some kind of pretty significant interaction with this issue and we’re all pretty attuned to it, you would think. But at the same time we don’t do a very good job of trying to respond to the structural issues that are at stake.
- Christine: [00:31:46] Well, I think it’s both personal and institutional. I think personally we need to put ourselves on the line and [unintelligible], and especially if I am one of the 30 percent of non-contingent faculty who are working, I am sort of in that [privileged cast] and we need to do more personally to pay attention.
- [00:32:03] But then also institutionally work through, and it seems like some of our systems are, as part of larger issues in politics, are against us, and figuring out how do we fix a broken system and what power do we have within the system to fix it?
- Michael: [00:32:20] And the answers to those questions change, right? I mean there are people with endowed chairs and who are chairs of departments, and deans listening to this podcast. Now they have a certain kind of institutional power, although their power is also constrained; as we know about power it always flows up and down, right?
- [00:32:38] And there possibly strategies and tactics that are available to people in those kinds of positions but there are also ways in which the rest of us, who maybe don’t have quite that kind of institutional clout can still work hard to make sure that we are trying to be as inclusive as we can be about contingent faculty.

[00:33:00] I think things like if you're building a panel proposal for a conference, increasingly there has been more and more conversation about making sure that there is gender equity and that there is some ethnic and racial and national diversity in how we construct panels, making sure that academic rank and institutional affiliation is one of those things that we also deal with, and make room for independent scholars so that we try to evacuate some of the stigma from that term.

Christine: [00:33:33] Yeah, I think that's a great point to, as you say, handle not just then structures but also the kind of cultural stigma attached to them too.

Michael: [00:33:42] Right, because we are a part of the structures, right? I mean, even you know in the ways that we reference work and the ways that we invite people to collaborate with us. We do have some control, even if we have no official control.

Christine: [00:33:56] And something Bruce Brasell said in your interview, that tenured professors are probably not as enlightened as they think they are, I think that's an important point as well, that we can be rather insulated. And so that said I want to present – our next two interviews are with tenured professors – a key thing is though, these are people who are best positioned to speak out about the issues they're going through because they do have at least a certain amount of security.

[00:34:21] Although we have to now even qualify that, and that is the subject of the next interview here with Alex Russo, who is Associate Professor in the Department of Media Studies at Catholic University of America in Washington DC. We want to bring attention to what's going on at Catholic University just real quickly. Alex will fill us in more detail but in response to enrollment declines and a budget gap the university administration has proposed some dramatic changes, and that includes the potential for layoffs of tenured faculty, essentially firing faculty, tenured faculty without cause.

[00:34:55] Right now it appears there are enough voluntary departures, they don't have to do that, but they essentially kind of put into place a plan to do that. There is going to be a net 6 percent reduction of faculty. There are other changes coming, including consolidation of some arts departments and an increase in teaching loads for undergrad instructors.

[00:35:10] So this again just kind of one example of things happening to faculty, including tenured faculty, so we wanted to bring some attention to that and have Alex give us the inside scoop on what's going on there.

Michael: [00:35:21] Let's give it a listen.

Christine: [00:35:32] Alexander Russo is an Associate Professor in the Department of Media Studies at the Catholic University of America in Washington DC. He received his PhD from Brown University. He is the author of “Points on the Dial: Golden Age Radio beyond the Networks,” from Dukes University Press and he has published on localism and radio formatting in satellite radio, considerations of aural attention in the reception of post-war transit casting, the idea liveness in sound-on-disc transcription, and the role of race in “The Green Hornet.”

[00:35:59] I am joined by Alex Russo. Thanks so much for taking time out to talk with Aca-Media, Alex.

Alex: [00:36:04] Thanks. Good to be here, I guess.

Christine: Yes.

Alex: [00:36:09] I wish I could appear on Aca-Media under better circumstances but I think it’s important for us to talk about what’s going on at Catholic University of America right now.

Christine: [00:36:18] And there is a lot going on, unfortunately, so we’re glad to have you here to help explain this to us, and I think it’s probably going under the radar for a lot of our listeners. There has been some coverage by The Chronicle of Higher Education but not too much else, so it would be great for you to fill us in on what exactly is happening at the university and what proposals are on the table.

Alex: [00:36:37] The coverage that we’ve been getting in The Chronicle is about what is sort of euphemistically called a proposal for academic renewal. We have sort of colloquially been calling it the proposal for academic removal because it purports to provide a template for improving a number of aspects of the university, but there’s a tremendous disconnect in the proposal in that the areas that purport to strengthen are financed by the removal of about 9 percent of the total faculty, so that’s about 35 faculty members.

[00:37:15] It looks in the most recent version of the proposal, almost all of those – I think there are only about four or five outstanding involuntary departures, you can use the language of the proposal – and the rest of the folks have either had – contracts have not been renewed or they have taken buyouts that have been offered. Supposedly about 80 percent – sorry, 80 faculty members, including several members of the Media Studies Department – received those buyouts, myself included, right?

[00:37:46] So this has been a multiyear process. We had a number of budget cuts and staff layoffs a couple of years ago, which has all sort of [creep] and

created by the fact that we are a fairly tuition-dependent institution and there has been a significant decline in the size of incoming classes.

[00:38:08] About ten years ago we had, I would say, close to 1,000 incoming freshmen and this year the budget target is I think 840, so that's a significant decline. And there was a particular bad year, the fall of 2016 when I think we were down around 700-and some, 725 or something like that, and so that has created – at least what the administration describes as a hole in the budget of about \$3.5 million.

[00:38:43] There is some debate around the extent of those budgetary woes. The faculty handbook [unintelligible] notes that for individuals or programs to be terminated the provost can declare a financial exigency, but he has not done that. In fact, he very much said when asked about this, "I'm distinctly not doing that."

[00:39:09] Likewise, the Board of Trustees gave the administration the ability to deficit spend for a couple of years as that smaller class sort of moved through their time at Catholic, but again, the administration declined to do that. And we're also doing things like moving our sports division that we play in, which involved creating two new sports like [croke]. It cost about half a million dollars, both in terms of equipment and coaching and scholarships.

[00:39:41] So one of the reasons why faculty are somewhat skeptical or confused is that there is, on the one hand, a massive budget cut coming out of the academic side, but on the other side there is spending for other priorities, and the administrative costs of the highest level of administrative salaries has nearly doubled over the last ten years.

[00:40:07] Part of that is endemic to I think higher education as a whole, but you know, clearly the types of raises in salary increases that the highest level of administrators are getting, in comparison to the faculty where we had very few, very small raises over the last decade.

[00:40:27] So this precipitated – I guess to give context here – Catholic University of America has always been one of the more conservative Catholic institutions in the country. This was started under the predecessor to the current president, Father O'Connell, now Bishop O'Connell, but there was a very different kind of relationship to the mission of the university under O'Connell than under President Garvey.

[00:40:54] I guess it was sort of more accepting of a wider range of views, right? There were some incidents around questions of the mission under O'Connell, but it's just a different level in its entirety under John Garvey who came in, in 2010. He instituted a number of policies to increase this focus on a particular narrow vision of Catholic identity.

[00:41:26] He did things like removed even the possibility of alternate sex floors in dormitories and went to sort completely single sex dorms, and instituted a number of changes in faculty hiring process whereby faculty or potential candidates have to sort of give a statement about how they will contribute to the mission of the university, even before they're able to come to campus.

[00:41:53] And then this sort of focus on, again, a kind of pretty conservative Catholic identity is one that has created I think a narrower funnel, right, for the number of potential students who are interested and you can see that in our declining enrollments. The tragedy of this is this is a sort of self-inflicted wound, right, and one where in part I think the ideological orientation of the president has sort of been put into practice in a way that is creating this situation and it doesn't necessarily have to be that way.

[00:42:29] Now, the administration likes to sort of speak to much wider kind of demographic shifts as the college aged millennials have decreased, but other institutions and other peer Catholic institutions are not having the same problems with enrolment. So that's the sort of general context here.

[00:42:50] So specifically, this program for academic renewal has been making its way through various committees with some fairly strong objection through a significant number of the faculty. And also, a significant number of students who were sort of recognizing that the things that make Catholic a special place, the sort of close relationships that we develop with our students, smaller classes and things like that, would be reduced if you reduce the number of full time faculty and replace them with adjuncts.

Christine: [00:43:30] So in what ways might your department, the Department of Media Studies, be potentially affected by this?

Alex: [00:43:35] One of the more controversial aspects of it, at least from our perspective of the proposal, that our students rightly objected to, is they wanted to move media studies and art into a new performing arts school with music and drama. One of the things that has made media and communication studies successful is that our curriculum integrates theory and practice.

[00:44:01] And we have both critical – we have a sort of critical thinking size of media analysis as part of the curriculum but everybody – every student takes at least one media production class and some students choose to have an emphasis on their electives on production, but that's a subset of our majors, not the entire thing.

[00:44:23] And I think the idea there was, A, based on a misunderstanding of what we actually do, and then there's also the suggestion that the provost

made to our students is that there is a donor in the wings who wanted to create a Catholic [film] school, but it's not clear what that actually means, right? Catholic in content? How does that get defined? It was all very unclear and amorphous.

[00:44:52] And I think that sort of speaks to one of the questions that a lot of the faculty have around this process, is to what extent is this being driven by other kinds of ideological donors? In recent years Catholic University has developed ties with a number of very conservative Catholic groups like the Legatus Fund and the Becket Fund for Liberty, as well as taking significant amounts of money from the Koch Brothers.

[00:45:23] The Koch Brothers are underwriting our business school. They've established – you know to the tune of \$10 or \$15 million. They've given several million dollars to the politics department to create an institute for the study of statesmanship, which if you follow the Koch Brother's controversy in Arizona State there is also an Institute for Statesmanship there funded by the Koch family foundation and it's sort of viewed, at least by some, as a kind of proxy way to return to studying political literature cannon that focuses – that is sort of very Euro-centric, as opposed to a kind of more multi-ethnic or multinational kind of curriculum.

[00:46:13] The sort of question about whether these decisions are in part being driven by that sort of fundraising orientation. There are other ways in which that sort of plays out. The university has just established another center in the law school for defending religious liberty, and again the university was one of the plaintiffs in challenging the Obamacare birth control mandate, so that orientation suffused many of the areas of the university.

Christine: [00:46:47] Part of what you're saying is that it seems very unique to Catholic University and its situation and its president and its Catholic character and so forth, but so much of the rest of what you're saying is this is part of this larger movement. We're seeing it in states like Wisconsin and Montana and it seems like this is – maybe [Canary and the coalmine] is not the proper word – but sort of seems like they've come for Catholic University and who is next?

[00:47:11] You know and especially kind of hearing how all this is fusing together and how the administration then can come up with these proposals and all of their buzzwords and just sort of push this through, this isn't just about Catholic University.

Alex: [00:47:22] No, absolutely not. It's something that we have seen in other institutions and it's something that I think all academics need to be aware of, and sort of recognize the need for solidarity between tenured faculty, contract faculty and adjunct faculty because these are precisely along the fault lines that are being exploited here.

Christine: [00:47:46] Well, and keeping on that line of both micro and macro, so on the micro level what do you think faculty at Catholic University right now have to do, like how are you all mobilizing? And then broadening out on the macro level what should the rest of us be doing?

Alex: [00:48:03] The faculty responded in a couple of different ways. First of all, it's important to note that there are many committees with faculty on it, which I'm on one of them, but committees on budget and sort of faculty economic welfare and the faculty handbook, all came down strongly against this proposal precisely because the proposal insists upon the provost's right to terminate tenured faculty without [cause]. So that has been the strongest and most unified kind of response across the university to that aspect of the proposal.

[00:48:42] There has been a website called savecatholic.com that has been created where there is a lot of background and an extended comments section where people have been chiming in. The other thing that the faculty has done is to reconstitute something called the faculty assembly, which is a forum to represent the voices of the faculty.

[00:49:07] One of the oddities of faculty governance or university governance at CUA is that the university's senate has 14 administrators, 19 faculty representatives and five student representatives. So when you see something like the most recent development when that body voted to advance the proposal to the Board of Trustees, who will be meeting in a couple of weeks, it's important to recognize that that body is nearly majority administrators.

[00:49:40] And so that sort of creates an inherent conflict of interest, right, when you have those individuals who are serving at the pleasure of the president and they don't have the same ability to pushback or to speak out, that tenured faculty have.

[00:49:57] And so this group, the faculty assembly has issued – come together, there were over 100 people at the last meeting when we came together, which is a good third of the faculty, and we voted to reject the provost's proposal and affirmed our commitment to tenure, something that the provost would not do in the university senate meeting that occurred on May 9th.

[00:50:27] And so depending on how this plays out we're going to meet again next week and there will be sort of questions around whether there will be a faculty vote of no confidence in the administration. It's not clear what the outcome of this will be so we're sort of right in the middle of it.

Christine: [00:50:44] Well, and as you said, we're still kind of in the middle of this and both, as you say at Catholic University but also I think all of these larger changes happening in higher education, and it seems to me at least we have to be very vigilant and pay attention and be outspoken and try to be advocates for ourselves.

[00:50:59] I think that's maybe something that's difficult for academics. We're very focused in our own classrooms and our own research, and having to speak for our profession and higher ed is seemingly more vital than it's ever been before.

Alex: [00:51:10] I agree, and I think it's also one of the things where we have to, again, have solidarity across different levels of institution. You make reference to what's going on in Wisconsin and Montana, right, so you're sort of seeing I think this play out in the teaching orientated state school, but I think it's sort of creeping up into all kinds of institutions, and eventually I think will reach up into the highest tiers of research [unintelligible] institutions.

[00:51:42] While to see what happens to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, right, or Milwaukee, and if they can maintain those kind of research standards and the kind of faculty that they have historically had, you know under the Koch-funded, Scott Walker attack on tenure. I think this is something that's probably of interest to the SCMS community, right, because Wisconsin plays such an outsized role in the field as a pipeline for – or as a graduate school in the pipeline for many of the faculty and scholars in the field. So I think that has some sort of specific implications for media studies as Madison goes, so goes for SCMS.

Christine: [00:52:32] Well, that's a pretty powerful point to end on, so we'll do so. I don't know how to sign off, good luck. What do I say, good luck to you? We're thinking of you, we'll be watching out for you?

Alex: [00:52:42] Yeah, you know I think that kind of support matters. You know, one of the things that we – you know, when we organized our students and we sent messages to the administration sort of testifying to what we did and why we mattered to them, and that kind of public pressure is the kind of thing that academics need to do. Where we need to sort of show what our work is, the hard work that we do, and why that matters to both the field in terms of research, but also to our students in terms of the teaching that we do.

Michael: [00:53:19] Chris, that was a great interview. I'm so glad you were able to connect with Alex about that. Now, this was recorded a couple of weeks ago, right?

Christine: Right.

Michael: [00:53:27] So things have changed a bit.

Christine: [00:53:30] I don't know if anything has changed; we've had things that have happened. So on June 4th there was a collection of faculty called the faculty assembly that presented to the university trustees a vote of no confidence in the university leadership. So saying that President Garvey and Provost Andrew Abela had pushed through their proposal, which included the right to fire tenured faculty without cause and the letter wrote, quote, "All the while they dismissed the input and perspectives of the faculty. Indeed, they seem unconcerned that an action like breaking tenure would do irreparable damage to the reputation of the university," so that was their no confidence statement.

[00:54:02] The very next day the university's governing board affirmed its support for the administration, so according to The Washington Post the board said it has great confidence in President Garvey but acknowledge that the faculty complaints showed that the university faced, quote, "Some sort of communication problem we've got to fix."

[00:54:20] And also quoted in the article Steven McKenna, Associate Professor and Chair of the Media Studies Department, he sees more to it than that. He told The Washington Post, "Professors have questions about finances, governance, management, executive salaries, lack of transparency and candor and communication. The whole direction and conduct of this leadership," so that's more than just communication.

[00:54:41] And then one last kind of kick in the shins, at the same time the governing board announced our confidence in the administration. We also learned the Koch Foundation is giving yet more money to Catholic University, so this is a \$2 million donation to help open a branch campus in Tucson in 2019, with an eye towards reaching underserved Latino students in Arizona because it's a market that has many Latino Catholic students.

[00:55:04] And literally, this article used the word market, right, and all of these words of, again, sort of treating this like it's a business. So as they're offering buyouts to faculty to save \$3 million, here is \$2 million from the Koch Foundation to open a new market in Tucson, so that's the update. Long pause and sigh.

Michael: [00:55:27] Yeah, long pause and sigh. One wonders – this is a kind of moment that's kind of tailor made for the disembodied third person – one wonders, doesn't one, about the kind of mix of teaching credentials and employment models that Catholic would be likely to use on campus that they established in Tucson. Doesn't one wonder?

Christine: [00:55:56] One does wonder. They did insist that the Koch Foundation will have no say in hiring, but again you know, what is the saying – like he who pays the piper calls the tune, right? It's just a fundamental principle and there are always strings attached there. And so yeah, one wonders.

Michael: [00:56:13] OK, we need another segue.

Christine: We do need another segue.

Michael: Speaking of the marketization of higher education you've been busy? You've been talking all around the world?

Christine: [00:56:25] Well, I have. Well, just across the ocean, although that is kind of far, but we wanted to consider also what's happening in the UK so we didn't want this to be only US focused. But in March of this year a number of UK universities saw faculty strike actions guided by the University and College Union or UCU in the UK.

[00:56:42] The strike was over pension, so just one issue, but it reflects again larger issues in faculty labor and administrative relationships, so I wanted to know more about what was going on. And I especially was intrigued by faculty going on strike and kind of acting as a force, and literally walking out of classrooms, so I wanted to know more.

[00:57:00] So I sought out Brett Mills, who is Senior Lecturer in the School of Art, Media and American Studies at the University of East Anglia, and he is also President of East Anglia's University and College Union Chapter, so he was a strike leader, so he seemed like a good source to go to find out what happened with the strikes.

[00:57:16] One intriguing thing that comes up in our conversation is the notion of the UK system is different than the US system, but one of the fears is that the UK system is becoming Americanized, and I don't mean in good ways.

Michael: [00:57:29] So you're not talking about like McDonalds?

Christine: Right, no.

Michael: Maybe actually you are talking about McDonalds.

Christine: [00:57:36] Right, more McDonalds; McDonald sponsored something, yeah. Well, listen and see what I mean by that.

Michael: Right.

Christine: [00:57:51] Brett Mills is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Art, Media and American Studies at the University of East Anglia. He received his PhD from Canterbury, Christ Church College, with a focus on television sitcom, and he's published widely on comedy and popular television, including three books, "Television and Sitcom" from the BFI, "The Sitcom" from Edinburgh University Press, and "Creativity in the British Television Comedy Industry" from Routledge.

[00:58:13] His interest in teaching in pedagogy has also resulted in co-authoring the textbook "Reading Media Theory: Thinkers, Approaches and Context" from Pearson, now in its second edition. Thanks a lot for taking time out to chat with us, Brett.

Brett: [00:58:24] You're welcome. Thank you.

Christine: [00:58:25] I am assuming most of our non-UK listeners didn't hear much about the recent academic labor strike in the UK, and you took on a leadership position during the strikes. You're President of East Anglia's University and College Union branch so you're a good person to fill us in. So what was the strike about; how did it all play out?

Brett: [00:58:42] The strike was about pensions. There was a new deal offered to us to do with pensions which would significantly affect the amount of money that everybody was going to get in their pensions at retirement, so that's what it was kind of formally about.

[00:58:58] The ways in which the British system works is one where we have to have our pensions kind of reviewed by a government regulator every three years, so we kind of have this fight every three years. We were on strike sort of three years ago connected to this.

[00:59:10] But the key thing that was happening was we currently have a system which is defined benefits, i.e. as an employee you know what your pension is going to be when you retire. You know what amount of money you're going to get, and they wanted to move over to an entirely defined contribution system, which was basically you know how much you're paying in, but what you actually get when you retire will be based entirely upon the stock market.

[00:59:32] And obviously what people want is certainty in their pensions, and many staff were saying, "Well, I'm happy to pay more in my pension as long as I know exactly what I'm getting at the end." Employers were saying that they couldn't afford this and the union and lots of other people were doing their own math numbers saying, "Yes, you can, plus as an employer you choose what you can afford."

[00:59:50] And this is particularly within the context of – a very live debate in the UK at the moment is the pay of our Vice Chancellors which has skyrocketed over the last kind of decade or so, and so universities are spending lots of money on very senior management, and also on very shiny buildings, but don't seem to be kind of investing in staff in the same way.

[01:00:11] It was also playing out actually as us arguing for the protection of the profession. These changes that were going to come in to do with pensions were – are not retrospective, so they were going to impact upon junior members of staff far more than older senior members of staff. And so I didn't think, and lots of other people didn't think that it was fair that I would get a better pension, somebody who is mid-career, than somebody who is just starting out now. Well, that doesn't seem fair, so that's what the dispute was about.

[01:00:43] How it played out was we carried out what was the kind of largest industrial action in the history of the UK higher education – 14 days of strike across four weeks. It was escalating action, so two days the first week, three days, four days, five days of strike action, and the employers had said they would not negotiate with us. Within two days of us going on strike, when they saw the size of the picket lines across the universities in the UK they came back to the negotiating table and various offers were made during that time.

[01:01:16] The first offer they made we rejected and actually what we've ended up with – so the kind of issue is still sort of ongoing but what we've ended up with is a joint committee that's going to be set up between the union and the employers to look at pensions overall and try and work out a way forward, so that we're doing it as a kind of discussion, and it's quite interesting that we've had to fight in order to actually say can we have a negotiation and discussion about this.

[01:01:43] So it's ongoing because it depends what that committee – what decision that committee comes to, but hopefully we can come to a set of conclusions which mean – I said earlier we have to go this rigmarole every three years – if we can come to an agreement now, hopefully we can kind of settle this for a good ten, 15, 20 years, and then when the review comes around in three years it will just be a much more straightforward thing.

[01:02:06] So I think we've come to a good solution. We haven't come to the end yet and we have to see what happens, but it's the start of kind of taking seriously the issue of pensions and sort of going, let's come to a solution that has a long term outcome, but lots of people are nervous about where we've kind of ended up and we have to kind of keep an eye on what's happening.

[01:02:24] In terms of what happened here and the kind of industrial action, we had kind of massive picket lines here at UEA, so did kind of every other

university that was involved in the action. We had students on the picket line. We had student unions on the picket line. The student union nationally in the UK supported the action. Our student union here at the University of East Anglia did as well, and we're amazingly grateful for that. It obviously makes it much easier for us to carry this out if our students are supporting us, because obviously they're the ones who are being affected by teaching being cancelled and other things.

[01:03:01] And the very interesting thing was, the number of people we had on the picket lines and the number of members of the union we had, went up during the industrial action. Obviously, 14 days we were worried that it would kind of drop off; that people would be excited about industrial action at the beginning but then it would start to drop off.

[01:03:18] It did the exact opposite, and I think this is fascinating because obviously, to join a union you're paying a membership fee, and what that meant was people were paying a membership fee to go on strike and have their salary deducted. It's an interesting decision but it just shows the strength of feeling that existed.

Christine: [01:03:35] Well, I was just going to say, it's sort of interesting then to hear that notion of that building support, and I'm curious about then what you sensed from across the university hierarchy. I would assume, because this is union action, you find some resistance from the administration? Was faculty totally on board? You said students were supportive? I'm also curious about public sentiment? What was the range of resistance and support you got along the way?

Brett: [01:03:57] We have been used to significant amounts of resentment towards strike action, particularly from the media and from the public, and so actually we were geared up for that and were expecting a kind of backlash. Interestingly, we got pretty much the exact opposite. The media in Britain, where it did cover it; I mean you know strike action doesn't get covered by the media a lot – where it did cover it, it covered it positively.

[01:04:22] It did say that the sets of questions that we were raising and the issues we had with the methodology about how our pensions were being calculated, they were saying we had a point. And so actually, a lot of the things that we put in place in a very defensive way to try and deal with the flack we thought we were going to get, we didn't have to deal with because it didn't happen, as I say, and it's within the context of much broader questions about universities and university funding in the UK, particularly to do with Vice Chancellors' salaries.

[01:04:50] And so because that story has been rolling on for so long I think the media did sort of think, well, actually, it's quite clear universities have got

money because they're paying senior management significant amounts of money, so why are they not able to kind of sort this pensions issue out?

[01:05:06] The responses of Vice Chancellors and senior management was different at different universities. Here at UEA it was relatively benign. Officially, obviously strike action and picketing should take place off-campus. They allowed us on-campus so we were kind of picketing on-campus. That's kind of mainly a health and safety issue, but they do. And we used the student union building for a whole set of activities, so we were on-campus doing some things.

[01:05:33] Other universities were much more resistant and shouty. What was interesting though was that some Vice Chancellors at other universities very publically said that they supported us and that they had a problem with the pensions calculations that had been offered, so there was a very different range of views, so yes, so that was how it worked out.

Christine: [01:05:54] Well, a lot of what you're saying here sounds quite similar to some of the things happening in the US and everywhere. Right now we've got public school teachers going on strike and then, of course, in higher education the administrative salaries going up and we are dealing with state funding declining. At the same time we've got even more political involvement in administration.

[01:06:12] So I'm curious, and I don't know how much you know about the US context, but what do you see is similar happening, trans-Atlantically, and then what do you see as unique to the UK context?

Brett: [01:06:22] What is similar is, over the past decade or so, the ways in which universities have been understood in the UK has kind of moved away from a European model and towards an American model and the idea that we should now understand students as consumers. Students now pay to go to university, whereas when I studied it was free and you got a grant, but that idea that universities are competing with each other for students.

[01:06:46] At the moment, what students can pay is capped by the government, but there's lots of debate about trying to get rid of that and just letting universities compete. Oxford and Cambridge will charge tens of thousands a year and other universities won't be able to, so there's that kind of marketization of education and the idea that we should understand students not as learners or as colleagues or peers or whatever, but instead we should understand them as consumers who are buying a product and a service that we're offering.

[01:07:12] I mean it might be – it probably is I would guess – a gross simplification of the American model, but the concerns that exist in Britain

are that we're heading towards an American model and an American understanding of education, as opposed to thinking of education and universities as a public good that should be funded via taxes and that have benefits beyond simply those for the individual learner and instead should just be that they're a societal good because of the research we do and all those kinds of things.

[01:07:39] So I think we're heading in that sort of direction and that's the big concern. And it was very, very clear during the strike action, even though it was formally about the pensions people were agitated and were on the picket lines because they cared about pensions, but they were also just annoyed about a whole set of things that have happened over the past ten years. And the discussions you ended up having on the picket line were very often about things like the marketization of universities.

[01:08:07] And actually now, as a union at UEA but also nationally, those are the discussions we're having now because we've discovered that there is a whole range of issues which people are very, very animated about. And the pensions were kind of the lightning rod for a set of frustrations and annoyances that have been going on for some time.

[01:08:27] One of the key ones is – and I don't know how this plays out in the States – are issues to do with academic freedom and the extent to which we're being leant on in terms of the funding we get, some kind of research we should do, what the purposes of teaching are? Should teaching just be a thing which trains people to go and get a job or should education have a much broader remit than that?

[01:08:46] So the idea that we are a group of professionals who should be up to an extent – I'm not saying entirely – trusted to do a whole set of things and left alone to get on with it, there has been a kind of much more managerial process in British universities, and I have experienced that over the last ten or 15 years.

[01:09:04] Much more kind of government interference in what education should be for and its social role, and so there's a lot more kind of pushing back against that and trying to reclaim the university, as I say, as a societal good, as a public good which has purposes beyond just purely economic ones.

Christine: [01:09:22] And how do you suggest we do that? Obviously you've got some sense of organizing it, and as a union leader you're going to be able to, you know like you said, negotiate pensions. Speaking to our listeners then what should we be doing? What can anyone who cares about higher education, what should we be doing individually, collectively? What do you think we can do to sort of fight it back against these developments?

Brett: [01:09:45] The key thing to do, which happened a lot here, is joining the union in the first place. It's quite clear that unions function in that way and you can tell let's say here, at UEA but also nationally, we feel revitalized as a union because we suddenly discovered there are lots of people who are bothered about the same things as we were. You sort of think it's just us in the corner, angry about things, and you suddenly discover hundreds and hundreds of people agree with you.

[01:10:09] And the other thing we should be doing is refusing to accept the language that was used to talk about education. So it is now quite common, as I say for students to be referred to as consumers, and I am refusing to use that language. They're not, and I accept I have responsibilities towards students.

[01:10:25] This isn't me saying I should just be able to teach whatever I like and if they don't like it who cares. It's not me saying that but it is me saying they are not consumers. That's not an appropriate kind of pedagogical or educational relationship to be setup.

[01:10:40] Collective action quite clearly – and as you've already said, these things are happening in an American context as well – collective action scares the hell out of people in charge. It really does. I think, as a union, we had sort of forgotten that, but when you've got hundreds of people standing together, particularly during a strike action where you're saying I'm willing to give up my salary because of a set of beliefs I've got, it really does have a very sort of significant force.

[01:11:10] And so unions are kind of one of the key ways of doing it, so I think that's kind of a key thing, which might sound a bit kind of nebulous, but actually that kind of collective action, which if you think about it is what managers do, that's what a university management is. It's a collective group of people deciding a set of things and they have power because they come together as managers and agree with each other. Well, if we do exactly the same and pushback.

[01:11:33] I think one of the things that we need to do – I think it's been easy for unions to be perceived as simply complaining about things and not offering solutions, and we've done a lot of work I think at a local level of trying to say here are a set of solutions, so we're not just complaining about everything.

[01:11:52] Here is a set of things we think that could resolve this. We're doing lots of work at the moment on workload stress and mental health and so you offer up a solution. Of course, by doing that, one, you know, that's ways in which management work. They like that kind of productive dialogue rather than just complaining. But two, you're then forcing management to come up

with reasons to reject your solutions, which is different from going here is a problem, what are you going to do about it?

[01:12:15] If you go here is a problem, here is the solution to it, they either have to agree to it or they have to come up with a very good reason not to do it. I mean again, I don't know the United States context, but I think historically that's kind of been one of the problems with our union, that we've looked as if we just complain about things.

[01:12:31] And instead, if we can kind of go here is a route out of that problem, that can be really, really powerful, and is a form of language and a form of dialogue which management are used to doing. You know, they like when somebody gives a report with a set of recommendations. That's a discourse that they're used to. Well, we can do that.

[01:12:52] And the other thing we can do is – and I think which was very noticeable during the strike action – is of course, people who work in universities are smart people and so you take advantage of the fact that you've got really smart people. What was really noticeable during the strike action was – so it was about pensions – well, of course, you'd got loads of academics on strike who work in economics, who work in business, who are pensions experts so they were producing loads and loads of data and doing lots of analysis which was kind of rejecting the arguments which management were presenting, and so take advantage of the fact that the people you've got on site are smart people who know what they're talking about, who know how to construct arguments, who know how to deal with data.

[01:13:30] And also, really noticeably, once you're on strike those people have got their days to fill. They come on the picket line and go, "What do you do in the afternoon?" Well, what they end up doing is going home in the afternoon and pouring through data and doing loads of research and that became amazingly powerful because you suddenly had thousands of people up and down the country working collectively, doing loads of research to produce information which just showed that the case we were making was a convincing one. So don't forget that we're clever and we should capitalize on that.

Christine: [01:13:59] I like the slogan, don't forget we're clever; I like that. Well, thanks so much, and especially for giving us some specifics and guidelines to follow and we'll be paying attention now to see where the pension fight goes and other things in UK education, so thanks so much.

Brett: Thank you.

Christine: [01:14:22] So there we go, another story, this one from the UK. And one, I think, thread through all of this is how important organizing is, and again, not

just we're each our own little dot on the map or each are one person in our office – although increasingly we're apparently losing our offices too, there's an article in The Chronicle about that, I'll post that – but organizing.

[01:14:44] Communicating with each other, advocating for each other, and if it takes doing what has happened in the UK, striking for each other, and maybe not for something that's personally affecting you but someone, you know, who is in a similar position and we're kind of striking on behalf of the profession, advocating for our positions.

Michael: [01:15:04] Yeah, and obviously we've got some really great examples, really hopeful examples of people who are doing precisely that. As you brought up in your conversation with Brett, there are increasingly efforts outside of the university to organize on behalf of education too.

[01:15:24] I mean, when you have K12 teachers in Oklahoma of all places, standing up and going down to the legislature and insisting that they're being undervalued, that's not a small thing. And they have parents along with them, they have students; it's not just teachers showing up.

Christine: [01:15:42] Mm-hm, and I think that's – you know we said we weren't going to end this Very Special Episode on a happy note, but we have to give ourselves something to hold onto, right?

Michael: Darn it.

Christine: [01:15:50] I think we have to look to that, the power of organizing, the power of individuals and the power, again, of combining forces of students, teachers, people who aren't teachers but care about higher education and secondary education and public education. We need to be more active, more visible, more vocal about what matters to us and why we think it should matter to more people.

Michael: [01:16:13] Yes, and you know, we are all so used to feeling ourselves as subordinate, from our first grad class to being on the job market, to being junior faculty, you know all the different sorts of circumstances we find ourselves in. Powerlessness is a kind of – it's endemic, right, but it is not the only experience of feeling ourselves implicated within systems of power.

[01:16:42] One of the things that this conversation has reminded me of is I have virtually always been more personally enriched by networking out – and I'm going to use the word down even though it's not really the word; I mean it sounds pejorative, right – but out and down, not to people who are below you but who maybe don't have – who are not as credentialed or don't have the institutional affiliation that you have.

[01:17:09] But that building connections with students, with people who are relatively more on the outside – that’s almost always better than trying to find the fancy person to talk to, you know, and always trying to build relationships upwards. And of course, we’re always doing that too but that kind of reaching out and building community by building relationships and paying attention to what’s happening to people who aren’t as fortunate as oneself.

[01:17:35] It’s personally enriching and I think it helps to build the kinds of communities that can be a little bit more supple in responding to some of these really, really difficult circumstances.

Christine: [01:17:47] And I also think we’re in a time now where everything – I’m going to swear, we don’t swear much Aca-Media podcasts – but everything is shit right now. Everything just feels like shit and especially the notion of powerlessness over politics, like over what my senator is doing or what the President is doing. It’s so easy to get paralyzed.

[01:18:05] And so maybe one solution is to, within our world, what we can control or what we can have an impact, kind of pull on that thread, and if we’re all pulling on our threads maybe that – I’m mixing my metaphors at this point – maybe we can build in some change, but sort of finding a place where you can have an impact.

[01:18:25] I feel like I can’t do anything to stop anything Donald Trump is doing with our federal courts, but if there is something I can do, as you say, even assist one person and help one person in academia or convert a student to our cause, something like that, then that’s something.

Michael: [01:18:40] And just the other day – I’ll make sure we post this article, I was reading an article that I think was in The Guardian – but it was an Op-ed by an academic about – thinking about what it means to serve on a hiring committee and being faced with dozens upon dozens of incredibly smart, qualified, talented people and trying to figure out, OK, who is the – you know how are we going to come up with a short list here?

[01:19:04] And he said, “Well, maybe what we should ask ourselves is who needs the job the most?” which seems like a radical thing but it’s worth thinking about.

Christine: [01:19:13] And speaking of thinking about that, that’s actually a nice segue to the last point we wanted to get across here, because this is going to be a topic of a future episode. So Stephanie Brown, one of our producers, she just got her PhD like two days ago, three days ago –

Michael: Woo hoo!

Christine: [01:19:27] - so yeah, Doctor Brown. And of course, because she is thinking in the terms of we are thinking, of wanting to help others and so she wanted to do a segment on being on the market. You know, the challenges of it, and whether it's from you are the person on the job market or if you are on a search committee and you have advice.

[01:19:45] So she is embarking on that segment but she wants your help, she wants input, she wants questions, she wants advice, tips. You can be anonymous. This is an online survey she's asking you to fill out so you can provide your name and email address if you want, you can stay completely anonymous, and she wants anything.

[01:20:03] Again, if you just have questions, if you're really uncertain about things or if you are, you know, on a search committee, you do a lot of hiring, you have advice for what really gets the attention of a search committee. We want to hear from you. So we've got this survey posted online. To find the link you can go to our website, aca-media.org, or there is also a link on our Twitter which is [aca_media](https://twitter.com/aca_media).

Michael: That's it.

Christine: [01:20:29] That's it, all right, so check out that survey, and again, anything you've got. The smallest of questions, the biggest of tips, go fill out that survey.

Michael: [01:20:38] It's a terrific effort and we really need your help to make it as strong as possible.

Christine: [01:20:42] We do, and so hopefully then that is ending on a positive note, I guess, that we're trying to help spread the word, to help educate, to work together. That's what we're trying to do.

Michael: [01:20:52] I think now is a reasonable time to point out that Aca-Media is produced by one graduate student, one recently finished PhD who is on the job market, one independent producer and contingent faculty member, two tenured faculty members and one faculty member in a permanent but non-tenured position. And I think in that regard our mix is actually pretty typical.

Christine: [01:21:20] And I will say I don't know if any of us get any credit for this. Like I already have tenure; it's a very small thing, it wouldn't help me be – you know I'm Associate Professor – this wouldn't have anything to do with me being promoted to full. I'm sure it helps.

[01:21:34] Like Stephanie Brown having her name out there, someone who helps us out, I'm sure that counts but in terms of like, again, the institutional

system I don't know that it counts, and yet, I love doing this and I would never want to quit doing it.

Michael: Hear hear.

Christine: [01:21:47] All right, so we're not going to quit doing it. We'll be back next month.

Michael: We are Joel Neville Anderson at the University of Rochester.

Christine: Stephanie Brown at University of Illinois, Champaign, Urbana, but not for long. She's on the job market.

Michael: [01:22:00] Todd Thompson, whose magical ears make it all listenable down in Austin, Texas.

Christine: We've got Bill Kirkpatrick at Denison University.

Michael: And I'm Michael Kackman and that person right there is –

Christine: [01:22:12] Chris Becker and we are at the University of Notre Dame. We also have to thank Society for Cinema and Media Studies, SCMS, for giving us money to help keep this thing going.

Michael: We also want to thank those who were willing to be named and who were willing to speak out about the issues that they're facing, including Brett Mills at the University of East Anglia.

Christine: [01:22:33] And Alex Russo at Catholic University of America, and we'll keep an eye on what's happening in those places as we go forward.

Michael: As well as Jamie Rodgers, Jennifer Wang and Bruce Brasell who have been working so hard on conditions within SCMS.

Christine: [01:22:48] Yeah, it's really, really important work and we greatly appreciate it.

Michael: All right, try to get out there and appreciate a little sunshine.

Christine: [01:22:55] Yeah, whatever your summer activities are, no matter what your position is, go find some sunshine, a warm place to sit for a while.

Michael: Put on your sunscreen.

Christine: [01:23:03] Don't forget that.

[End of recorded material 01:23:10]