When I think about Occupy Wall Street, which turned ten years old this September, I think of the chants. My favorites—“Banks got bailed out, we got sold out,” and “Bank of America? BAD for America!”—were diagnostic rather than prescriptive. (Unfortunately, I always feel like a liar shouting “The people united will never be defeated.”) One of the many maladies Occupy diagnosed was our student debt crisis—at the time, the total amount owed hovered just under $1 trillion, and the default rate was 13.7 percent.

Before Occupy, student debt was a personal problem, a high-stakes bet an individual had to make on their own future success. On a blog, Occupiers posted photographs of people holding up pieces of paper listing how much they owed: $25,000, $50,000, $90,000. Seeing the images together revealed each number to be part of a larger whole. Within that whole there was a spectrum of predation—some students made the perhaps unwise choice to study the arts at expensive private schools; others dropped out of shady for-profit institutions. Occupy’s argument was that in either case, there was nothing to be gained from private shame. If they came out of the shadows, student debtors could act collectively and bring down the whole edifice on which student debt rested.

It’s easy to feel cynical about such quixotic notions. A decade later, student debt hasn’t been abolished—the total amount has ballooned to $1.6 trillion—and there still is no large-scale debtor’s union powerful enough to bring the loan industry to its knees. But the seed planted at Occupy has sprouted. The national emergency of student debt is now, as it should be, a political issue. And the idea of free college is more mainstream in the United States than it’s ever been.

For many students, considering their own debt has been a gateway to thinking about the political economy of the university more broadly. If education should be funded differently, what else might we want to change? In this issue’s special section, you’ll find diagnoses of new and old problems with our higher ed systems, as well as glimmers of hope. In their article on organizing during the pandemic, two Rutgers workers—a professor and a graduate student—credit their success in fighting cuts to a particular realization. “At every step,” they write, “groups of workers found that solidarity and coalition building with other categories of workers were key to achieving concrete wins.” Those groups of workers are now building...