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Contingent Faculty Bargaining: Separate but Equal?

Marcia Newfield, PSC, VP for Part-time Personnel

The 8,500 part-time faculty at CUNY, represented by the Professional Staff Congress (PSC, AFT local #2334) are neither separate nor equal, but we are hanging in and hanging on in a world of possibility.

In the 34 years since the PSC formed part-timers have gone from footnote to frontispiece, and our journey has been internal as well as external. What are our services worth? Why are they devalued? What does it mean when we are so fragmented? Why do people in our own departments, whom we have passed in hallways for years, not treat us as colleagues? What does it mean about the profession we're part of that we're not part of its governance? What does it mean that our passion for our subjects has landed us in a situation where we hardly have time for being creative in them? There is no one to support scholarship, no time to nurture professional development.

What do part-timers want? Do we want to be more in or more out? Many of us have other jobs and other compelling interests, yet a large percentage—larger than anyone wants to admit—is very dependent on the income from university teaching. One thing we all have in common is that we're products of the U.S. graduate school system that today turns out 45,000 Ph.Ds. each year. So what does it mean about that system that more than 500,000 of the million and a half higher education faculty teach part time?

Department of Education data from 2003 counts 46% of all faculty as part-time, while 65% are non-tenure track positions; this leaves only 35% or fewer faculty on the tenure track. When graduate teaching assistants are included, the percentage of full-time, tenure-track faculty falls to 29%. Yet Education Secretary Spellings' Commission on The Future of Higher Education does not include even one part-time faculty representative.

So what are our desires regarding the universities we're part of and abandoned by, and the unions that simultaneously include us and ignore us? Are we yet another 21st-century alienated worker—the day laborer, the immigrant, the orphan who has to garner sustenance anywhere and everywhere, who is invited to sit at the table only to watch others feast? Our strongest bond is with our students; for many of us that's why we do this labor. It's honest work—perhaps too honest, as we often do it at great sacrifice.

Like any oppressed group we have first needed to find and support each other before trying to gather momentum. At CUNY, part-timers started working outside the union and then inside the union to find our community. We built our community first through Part-timers United in the 1980s, then in the mid-1990s with the Adjunct Project of the CUNY Doctoral Student Council and CUNY Adjuncts Unite! (CAU!, a spin-off of the New Caucus Adjunct Committee). In 1996, the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor had its first meeting in Washington, D.C. This summer in Vancouver, British Columbia, COCAL will convene its seventh international conference. Each conference has drawn increasing numbers from Canada and Mexico, as well as all regions of the U.S., including those in the 20 right-to-work states. COCAL is the strongest evidence of our growing movement.

The first COCAL conference was a bare bones affair held in a church in Washington, D.C., at the same time as the MLA was convening. The second conference in New York in April, 1998, was heavily supported by the CUNY Adjunct Project of the Doctoral Students' Council. In 1999, the AAUP co-sponsored COCAL III in Boston. Since then, various labor unions and associations—AFT, NEA, AAUP, PSC, the North American Alliance for Fair Employment (NAFFE), and my own local—have contributed funds and resources. Thankfully, these groups are sensitive to the scent of grassroots movement embracing the janitors, day laborers, paraprofessionals, the immigrants—all the people behind the scenes without whom the teaching, the building, the performance, the show will not go on.

Equality is a hard concept, and it gets harder the closer it is to home. For full-time tenured university members, it means opening the gated communities of the mind, letting part-timers in as colleagues.

Gwendolyn Bradley, a staff member of the AAUP, recently put out a question on the adjunct listserv (this forum was started after the first COCAL by Vinnie Tirelli, a Brooklyn College adjunct and CUNY graduate student in political science whose dissertation, “Trench Scholars: Contingent Academic Labor and the Political Economy of Work in the Corporate University,” will soon be completed). Bradley’s seemingly innocent question, “Does anyone have ideas for things that department chairs can do or push for to improve working conditions for part-timers?”, generated a myriad of responses, poignant in their simplicity and reflective of the deprivation contingent academics endure: keys to offices during off-hours, listing in college directories, payment for supervising independent studies, introduction at faculty gatherings, invitations to special collegial functions and celebrations, and on and on.

The PSC New Caucus leadership elected in 2000 included part-timers in our union with agency fee deducted for the first time; in addition, the constitution was changed, placing four part-time representatives on the Executive Council (including the Vice President, formerly the only part-time rep). We subsequently awarded stipends to adjunct organizers at each of our 17 campuses; we also contractually wrested a paid professional hour for adjuncts teaching six credits or more in a college (approximately 51%) and longevity pay for continuing education teachers. We are now working on conversions to full-time lines and professional development funds for adjuncts and continuing education teachers working 30 hours a week.

Demands for the contract currently in negotiation were intensely debated at our Delegate Assembly Committee on Part-Time Personnel and approved by the entire Delegate Assembly in May, 2003. These demands included seniority provisions, accumulated sick days, movement toward parity, and reasons for non-reappointment. These demands were rejected by management, who maintain their need for a “flexible” work force; at the same time they go out of their way to block a legislative bill, endorsed by the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), that allows adjuncts to collect unemployment insurance when not working. Although management insists that we have “letters of reasonable assurance” based on contingencies, they scream our temporary status and ignore seniority. Similar paradoxes exist among many full-timers who resent our claims to professionalism even as they rely on our dedication and teaching expertise.

Where do we go from here? Nationally and internationally, how will the Bologna Process reforms of transportable curriculum credits and faculty status impact American institutions? What effect will an increasingly educated underclass have on graduate schools and employment possibilities? One thing is sure: the contingent movement is gathering strength, and like other movements, as its passion and visibility increases, it will penetrate the public consciousness to unknown ends.