Lessons from universities for precarious sectors: Bargaining for Contract Academic Staff

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Lessons from universities for precarious sectors

BARGAINING FOR CONTRACT ACADEMIC STAFF

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How we got into this...
Precarious Work

Precarious work is characterized by lack of continuity, low wages, lack of benefit and possibly greater risk of injury and ill health ... Measures of precariousness are level of earnings, level of employer-provided benefits, degree of regulatory protection and degree of control or influence within the labour process.

Law Commission of Ontario (2012), Vulnerable Workers and Precarious Work
Organizing Contract Academic Staff in Canada

- Two solitudes: unionizing regular and contract academic faculty
- Reluctant convergence
Challenges in organizing the academic precariat

- Organizing a ‘majority’ of uncertain, unstable and unknowable size and location
- Exclusive representation rights and obligations for diverse membership with high needs
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Bargaining priorities

- Wages
- Job Security
- Fringe and academic benefits
Is there a public sector union advantage?
Why is there such divergence?
Job Security

- 2 collective agreements provide for the possibility of conversion
- 11 collective agreements use seniority-based job security provisions
- 4 collective agreements use periodic assessments
- 2 had only minimal job security provisions
Other bargaining gains

- fringe benefits (8 agreements had decent benefits, most did better than ESA)
- academic benefits (17 agreements had them, some of them comprehensive)
Areas with limited progress

- pension benefits (only 4 agreements had them, all DC plans)
- limiting management rights (only 8 had fairness language)
- academic freedom (only 6 agreements protect the right to criticize the employer and to go outside one’s discipline)
Conclusions

- Unionization of residual groups of nonunionized workers in sectors with great union density is easier than the expansion of unions into new sectors.
- Competition between unions maybe helpful in organizing the unorganized.
- Contingent workers can expect real benefits from unionization, but not transformative change.
- Bargaining power of contract academic unions is weakened b/c contingency of work puts pragmatic limits on the ability of unions to mobilize workers in support of job action.