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The Future of the Contingent Faculty Movement

By Keith Hoeller

Campus Equity Week 2007 has just concluded. Supported by the three national faculty unions, the purpose of the week is to call attention to the exploitation of non-tenure-track faculty members throughout North America and to insist on their equitable treatment. A look at the history of the week and its recent execution suggests that it may not be having as great an impact as it had when it was created in 2001. The national contingent faculty movement itself may have reached a turning point, offering us the opportunity to reassess the goals and structure of the movement and to chart a course for the future.

In “A Brief History of Campus Equity Week / Fair Employment Week,” (http://www.campusequityweek.org/CampusEquityWeek/history.htm) Chris Storer writes that “the threat to quality higher education and academic freedom created by the growth of for-profit colleges, the corporatization of private and public non-profit colleges and universities, and the corresponding increased use and abuse of contingent academic labor (now over 50 percent of faculty positions in the United States), continues to be a growing worldwide problem.”

Indeed, academe has not been immune to the vast changes that have taken place in the workplace since the mid-1970s, when corporate America launched a campaign to reverse the gains the labor movement had made in the previous decades. Kim Moody, founder of Labor Notes (http://www.labornotes.org/), has described the corporate demand for ” lean production” that is dedicated to producing the largest number of units for the cheapest possible price. Consequently, American workers have been subjected to wave after wave of layoffs, downsizing, and outsourcing.

In the past three decades, business and government have pushed for concessions from workers and their unions, including givebacks, reduced benefits, and the increased use of part-time and temporary workers. Consequently, union membership has declined from a peak of 32.5 percent of the nation’s workforce in 1953 to 27.3 percent in 1970 to only 12 percent today.

In distressed industries, two-tiered compensation systems preserve higher wages for existing members, while new employees must do the same work for a much lower wage. Under pressure, unions have sometimes agreed to a two-tiered system. Needless to say, union solidarity invariably suffers when members working side by side are paid at

significantly different rates, with the lower paid workers often feeling their union has not provided them with “fair representation.”

Surprisingly, this denial of the principle of “equal pay for equal work” has become the norm throughout academe, regardless of whether or not the faculty has been unionized. To be sure, the percentage of college and university revenue coming from state and local funds dropped from 35 percent in the 1975-76 academic year to 27.2 percent in 2000-1.

Yet academe has hardly been a distressed industry. From 1975-2001, tuition and fees increased from 20.6 percent to 25.6 percent of college revenue and private grants and gifts grew from 4.8 percent to 9.1 percent, with overall revenue more than doubling from $141 billion to $293 billion (in constant 2005 dollars). And academe has certainly not cut “production” in the past 30 years. Student enrollments increased by 60 percent from 1975-2005. And the number of graduate teaching and research assistants grew from 160,606 to 298,602 in the same period.

Yet colleges and universities have also adopted the policy of “lean production” and created what Rich Moser has called “The New Academic Labor System”: (http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/issues/contingent/moserlabor.htm) “The exploitation of graduate students and the abuse and overuse of adjunct and non-tenure-track faculty is the most prominent characteristic of a new employment strategy sometimes referred to as the two or multi-tiered labor system.” The tenured faculty and their union leaders made a pact with college administrators, who agreed not to lay off tenured faculty, as long as the tenured faculty would allow them to increase the use of contingent faculty. According to Moser, “This multi-tiered approach succeeded because it blunted opposition by promising not to affect existing constituencies. Yes, the evil genius of the multi-tier system is that it enticed tenured faculty with short-term benefits. We cooperated in our own demise.”

In “Contingent Faculty and the New Academic Labor System,” (http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/academe/2004/JF/Feat/brad.htm) Gwen Bradley explains that the dismal employment situation for college professors is the “result not of a job market but of a labor system.” It is not simply a matter of supply and demand since “the same institutions both manufacture and consume the Ph.D. product. There are too few tenure-track jobs for all the Ph.D.’s in some disciplines because graduate students or faculty on fixed-term or part-time appointments teach so many courses. If full-time tenure-track faculty taught most courses, there might not be a job shortage.”

As a direct result of this new labor system, tenured and tenure-track faculty have dropped from 56.8 percent of the nation’s professors in 1975 to 31.9 percent in 2005. Full-time non-tenure-track and part-time faculty grew from 43.2 percent in 1975 to 68.1 percent in 2005. In 2005 there were 414,574 tenure and tenure-track professors and 885,803 full-time non-tenure-track and part-time faculty.

Contingent faculty began to protest as soon as the multi-tiered wage systems were instituted in the 1970s. Nearly two decades ago, the contingent faculty movement achieved two major victories.

In 1988, the Vancouver Community College Faculty Association in British Columbia, Canada entered into mediation with a strong strike vote from its members. As a result, they achieved a contract whereby after two years of teaching at least half-time faculty automatically went from probationary or term status to "regular" or continuing career status contracts. All pay distinctions between part-time and full-time faculty, with the exception of how much each person chose to teach, had previously been eliminated. Salaries of faculty who teach less than "full-time" are now simply pro-rated according to the number of courses or hours they teach. Non-teaching duties are required of everyone as per departmental norms and are also appropriated on a fully pro-rated basis.

In August, 1988 the California legislature passed AB 1725, This bill mandated that 75 percent of credit hours should be taught by full-time faculty, and that only 25 percent of credits should be taught by part-timers. Unfortunately, however, this bill did little to stop the increasing use of part-time faculty in California. Since funding was provided for only the first two years, the state let the colleges off the hook and free to add more part-timers. (See Chris Storer's "Part-Time Faculty: A Principled Perspective." http://www.insidehighered.com/www.asccc.org/Publications/Papers/Downloads/PDFs/Part-Time.pdf)

Regional activities were transformed into a nationwide movement roughly a decade ago with two conferences held concurrently with the Modern Language Association's annual meeting, in Washington. The National Congress of Part-Time, Adjunct, GTA, and Non-Tenure-Track Faculty, which took place in 1996, was organized by Jonathan White, an English student at George Washington University. (See John Hess, "Using the Internet for Contingent Faculty Organizing" http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc46.2003/links.html). At the same convention, the MLA Graduate Student Caucus put together a panel of speakers on part-time faculty concerns called "Making the MLA More Proactive." In February, 1998 Marc Bousquet and a collective of students from the MLA caucus, including Kent Puckett, Bruce Simon, and Christian Gregory, launched the online journal Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor (http://www.workplace-gsc.com/). This led to the first of several North American conferences that would later come to be called the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor
(COCAL), which has met in Washington, New York, San Jose, Montreal, Boston, Chicago, and Vancouver, Canada, and which also has an active listserv.

The new academic labor system has given rise to a new academic labor movement. Joe Berry, author of Reclaiming the Ivory Tower: Organizing Adjuncts to Change Higher Education, has pointed out (http://louisville.edu/journal/workplace/berry.html) that "this is 'do it yourself' organizing. This means it was not initiated by established unions as part of an organizing strategy. Instead it was initiated by groups of workers who came together on their own and only afterward sought out a union affiliation."

To be sure, the three faculty unions have also jumped on the adjunct faculty bandwagon, organizing part-timers and hiring staff to devote more attention to part-time and other contingent faculty. The AAUP set up a committee on part-time faculty in the 1970s. In 1998 Rich Moser was named national field representative, and helped launch the famous multi-campus organizing campaign called the "Boston Project" (http://www.chicagococal.org/CEW/zabel.html), with the AAUP donating staff and seed

funds to get them off the ground. While Moser shepherded the AAUP's 2003 policy document on Contingent Faculty and the Profession, the AFT's Perry Robinson and the NEA's Christine Maitland both worked on contingent faculty issues and helped produce their organizations' policy documents on part-time faculty.

However, with a few exceptions, the primary impetus for change has often come from the adjunct professors themselves, who have either organized themselves into caucuses pushing for change from within the unions or else organized themselves into independent groups and pushed for change from outside the unions. In this, the contingent faculty movement has followed other workers whose best interests have been ignored by their unions. In *Poor Workers Unions: Rebuilding Labor from Below,* Vanessa Tait writes that "Many in the traditional labor movement did not believe poor workers could be organized, either because of their fluctuating job status, or because of prejudices against their race, ethnicity, gender, poverty, or immigration status. It was in this climate
that poor workers themselves began to organize for change."

In any grassroots movement, the question inevitably arises as to whether to adopt a more formal organizational structure. By the time of the second Campus Equity Week in 2003, Chris Como wrote in *The Adjunct Advocate* that "Campus Equity Week Is Growing Bigger: But Is Bigger Better?
(http://adjunctadvocate.com/archive/magazine/article/301/)." Como pointed out that a social movement needs more than just rallies and publicity, it needs results. "If the movement is to succeed, it must first find the grape pickers, organize them, and, finally, better their lives in some tangible way; otherwise temporary faculty may simply shrug their shoulders and resign themselves to an eternity of temporary teaching."

This year's Campus Equity Week did have some notable events, including speeches by Rich Moser and Joe Berry at Central Connecticut State University, the Academic Freedom Forum at Portland Community College, and the showing of Barbara Wolf's two documentary films on adjuncts (*Degrees of Shame* and *A Simple Matter of Justice*) at the University of West Florida. In Washington State, I appeared on the Seattle national public radio affiliate to discuss Gov. Christine Gregoire's declaration of "Adjunct and Part-Time Faculty Recognition Day" and Jack Longmate and Nat Hong held a forum at Olympic College. But there appeared to be fewer sponsors, fewer organized events, less publicity and less enthusiasm than in years past.

For all of the publicity and all of our accomplishments, we have not yet stemmed the still rising tide of exploited contingent faculty. The multi-tiered system remains in effect throughout academe, even where campuses have been organized by one of the big three faculty unions. With perhaps only a handful of exceptions — such as the Vancouver Community College Faculty Association, the independent California Faculty Association, City College of San Francisco AFT, the New School's Academics Come Together (UAW) — part-time faculty are still earning only about 50 percent of what full-timers earn for teaching the same number of courses. Most adjuncts still do not have benefits, and few have any job security whatsoever. And none have automatic promotion to full-time tenure-track positions.

At COCAL VII, held last year in Vancouver, British Columbia, Joe Berry told the participants he thought that the contingent faculty movement had reached a "plateau,"

and that it would take some new strategies to push us to a higher plane. In particular, he raised the question whether or not COCAL needed to move from a rather loose coalition of adjuncts to a more structured organization. If COCAL can continue to bring together multiple organizations — while still maintaining its independence — it may be able to serve some of the functions
of an all-adjunct national union, which we currently lack.

COCAL, and independent organizations like the Washington and California Part-Time Faculty Associations, have been an integral part of what Rich Moser and Joe Berry have called “the inside/outside strategy.” Joining the unions in their state capitals, the Washington Part-Time Faculty Association and the California Part-Time Faculty Association have helped obtain $40 million in Washington, and $57 million in California, to increase part-time faculty pay in the community colleges.

For the unions, however, collective bargaining remains the paradigm, even though it is unlikely to solve all of our problems, let alone quickly. Union contracts last several years, with adjuncts often lucky to achieve even a single
small improvement to their separate but unequal contracts. Indeed, in mixed units, adjuncts may have only one representative on the bargaining team, and this person may have been hand-picked by the full-timers. And bargaining would still leave the unorganized contingents out in the cold. More organizing might improve the situation, but many adjuncts may continue to resist being absorbed into unions they feel are still being run for the primary benefit of the tenured faculty.

Thus far, the national faculty organizations have shown little willingness to restructure in order to allow contingent faculty to more directly represent themselves, and mixed bargaining units are in the majority on the local level. The inequities of the two-tiered systems on our college campuses are mirrored in our unions, where adjuncts, who have no job security, must still struggle for equality with tenured faculty, who often serve as their immediate supervisors.

While strong legislation may also take some time, it has the possibility of solving the problem for many people at one time. And in public colleges and universities it is the state legislatures that will have to provide the money
for increased pay to contingent faculty.

We need legislation to provide 100 percent pro-rata pay, based upon a teaching load, so that we are no longer paid only for the hours we are in class, as if teaching could be broken down into piece-work. We need bills to provide
annual raises comparable to full-time faculty, so that our salaries will keep up with the full-timers and we do not fall further behind. We need to provide for health care and retirement coverage so that we do not live in fear of either sickness or poverty in old age. We should lobby for a lifting of the artificial workload caps which limit the amount of teaching we can do at any one college. We should no longer have to toil as “apprentices to nowhere,” hoping
to win the national lottery should a full-time job ever open up in our department; instead, we should automatically be on a track to move into full-time tenure-track jobs. And we need both state and federal legislation to stop the
colleges from denying us unemployment by claiming we have “reasonable assurance” of

future employment when they in fact refuse to give us continuing employment rights of any kind.

While truly equal pay and benefits are important, job security must move to the front of the line if contingent faculty are ever going to be able to speak out about their oppression — both on campus and within their unions. Job security would give adjuncts meaningful academic freedom and make grievances worthwhile. Right now an adjunct who files a grievance has to weigh the short-term benefit of winning the grievance with the long-term chance of losing his or her job entirely.

I have drafted legislation (http://apps.leg.wa.gov/billinfo/summary.aspx?bill=1452&year=2007) that would give part-time faculty annual, renewable contracts after three years of half-time teaching. In "An Adjunct Bill of Rights" (http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2006/11/2006112901c/careers.html). I wrote that "college professors cannot teach successfully if they are in constant fear of losing their jobs because of something they said in class or wrote in a published article. They cannot enforce high standards, if they fear doing so will cost them their livelihood. It is high time that we extend job security, and even tenure, to contingent faculty members of all stripes."

While we may have to make improvements step by step, simply modifying these multi-tiered systems should not be our long-term goal. Instead, we should be seeking to eliminate them entirely, as Lantz Simpson has written in his article, "A Proposal to Abolish the Part-Time Faculty System in the California Community Colleges" (http://cpfa.org/unify.html). This would bring us true solidarity.

Of course, if we were to succeed in tearing down the wall that separates the non-tenure track faculty from our tenured and tenure-track colleagues, we would be eliminating the system I have called "faculty apartheid." We would no longer be labeled "contingent" faculty; we would henceforth be called simply "college professors."

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