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Contingent Faculty in Chicago and Illinois

By Joe Berry

Like most of US higher education, the majority of teaching faculty working in post-secondary education in Illinois are now working off the tenure track. This means that they have virtually no security of employment and most have no health or other benefits. This “new majority faculty” work part or full time, but their common factor is their lack of assurance of continuing employment, having neither protection of a tenure system nor a union contract with just cause dismissal protection. The consequences of these changes in the faculty workforce over the last 30 years are numerous and overwhelmingly negative for students, faculty, and the portion of society as a whole that depends on higher education to produce broadly educated critical thinkers as workers and citizens.

While no one has ever fully counted the contingent faculty in all the relevant subsectors, I estimate that there are a minimum of 16,000 contingent faculty working in the Chicago area alone. These figures, drawn from my recent Ph.D. dissertation *Contingent Faculty in Higher Education: A Organizing Strategy and Chicago Area Proposal* (Union Institute and University, 2002) are based upon a combination of existing data sets and some extrapolation. In actuality the real total figure might well be twice as high (30,000), while the total tenure and tenure track faculty probably number no more than 10,000. The lower contingent figure omits grad employees and others not considered faculty by their institutions, grossly undercounts the large formal and informal for-profit sector of higher education, and it also leaves out the teachers of non-credit classes, both remedial and adult education, taught through many higher education institutions. Finally, the figure also omits the branches of out-of-state institutions which conduct classes here. What this means is that there are at least 1.5 to 3 contingent teachers for every full-time tenure track (FTTT) faculty member. Though the demographics vary, I would suggest that the lower figure would hold for the rest of Illinois as well.

Illinois, and the Chicago area, are in the middle of the national spectrum in terms of types of institutions. It is neither like California, where the public sector dominates, nor like Massachusetts where the private sector is the vast majority. In addition to traditional institutions, both public and private non-profit, Illinois is a national center of for-profit higher education, with one of the major national institutions, DeVry, headquartered here and others entering the market. These accredited degree granting for-profits are joined by a large number of non-degree-granting certificate programs in a wide range of specialties. Finally, there is a very large, and diffuse, adult education infrastructure that offers free classes in English as a second language, adult basic education and GED prep, among other subjects. There are also numerous teachers working in tuition based non-credit

adult education which ranges from private language schools through corporate education and training, unaccredited trade schools, and private teaching to groups and individuals. Many contingent faculty work at the same time in various places in this complex system and move from one to another in their effort to make a living. Our colleagues have become a flow-through, just-in-time faculty.

In general, contingent faculty are approximately half, or more, female compared to only about a third of the FTTT ranks. They are about the same age and a bit more likely to be African American than FTTT. I also believe the undercounted subsectors would significantly raise the numbers and percentages of female and people of color contingents. In other words, college faculty internally reflect the historic patterns of privilege and discrimination of the society as a whole.

Talking only about credit instruction, these faculty work for wages ranging as low as \$1,200 for a three semester credit class, ranging up as high as \$5,000 in special cases, with the average probably under \$2,000. Outside the Chicago area the figures are generally lower, with some rates well under \$1,000 per class. According to IBHE figures, the median full-time equivalent salary for Illinois contingents is \$14,200 for part-timers, compared to \$62,200 for their FTTT colleagues. The growing number of full-time non-tenure track faculty are paid better (\$49,800) though still well below the FTTT faculty. The large majority of contingents have no employer provided health insurance or other benefits.

Most part-time contingents have other paid work, in academia and elsewhere, and those who do not often have substantial unpaid responsibilities, such as child or elder care. Nearly all contingent faculty now report that their income is needed for their family. The old pattern of contingents being community professional specialists who taught a specialized course occasionally is now a small percentage of the total. Most contingents report that if offered a FTTT position in the department in which they are now teaching, they would accept it. Even those working full-time outside academia often see themselves as underemployed teachers.

This is not the place for a full recitation of the impact of these conditions upon contingent faculty themselves, their FTTT colleagues, their students and the educational mission in society generally. In summary, contingent faculty themselves sustain the instability of their lives, both economically and psychologically, that results from the employers' desire for greater flexibility. This impact upon them and their families is in addition to the much lower pay and absence of benefits. They also must absorb the impact of the lack of respect symbolized at every turn in their employment relationship. The lack of academic freedom inherent in teaching without any job security is really too obvious to need explanation to an audience of faculty.

For FTTT faculty, the growth of the contingent sector means fewer full colleagues among whom to share the non-teaching collective work of the department, since most contingent appointments are paid for teaching only. This has occurred just at the time that requirements for research and publishing are being raised in many institutions while teaching loads remain the same. An even more insidious impact is the collective disempowerment of the faculty as a whole. With the majority now contingent, the power of

faculty to impact administrative decisions is greatly reduced. This is not accidental. It is part of a conscious administrative strategy with the abolition of tenure as a major part. To a large extent, it has already been done. All those FTTT faculty who care about the future of the profession and are not just counting their days until retirement should share this concern.

The casualization of college teaching work is not just a faculty issue. Most students are now being taught by faculty with no freedom to speak the truth as they see it. More prosaically, they often cannot even find their teachers outside of class, and often cannot know before a class starts who their teacher will be. Longer term projects and clearing incompletes become problematic with the employment instability of contingents. Everything dependent on easy faculty-student contact, from letters of recommendation to in formal spontaneous conversations suffers. We are in danger of creating a generation of college educated adults who have never really experienced the full range of what a college education should be, as opposed to mere credit accumulation and job training. For the society as a whole, we are in danger of losing the positive aspects of the traditional mission of higher education. This casualization of the faculty workforce, its progressive disempowerment within the institutions and its increasing need to struggle to piece together a living constitutes a wider opening of the door to the progressive corporatization and commercialization of higher education. With faculty as a group less able to play their watchdog role of over the tendency of administrators to focus all attention upon the bottom line, as if they were corporate CEO's, the actual influence of capital, in the form of large corporations, grows daily. While higher education has never been the undiluted community of equal scholars that legend describes, those very real elements of higher education not subject to the capitalist market (free inquiry, academic freedom, a substantial degree of faculty control, and the value of critical thought) are directly under attack. The transition to a majority contingent faculty is the leading edge of this assault. If it succeeds, our whole society will be the poorer for it.

Joe Barry is a member of the Roosevelt University Adjunct Faculty and Chair of Chicago Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor. He will speak about contingent faculty at the Illinois AAUP Annual Meeting on April 17, 2004 in Chicago.

Conference on Contingent Academic Labor VI:
one expression of the movement for a different future

Not all those adversely impacted by the casualization of academic labor have remained totally inert and silent. Students, FTTT faculty, and especially contingent faculty themselves are increasingly speaking out and organizing for a different future. From grad employees to the full-time non tenure track, and thousands in between, contingent teachers have built a movement, both inside and outside the traditional faculty organizations and unions. This movement, supported by national AAUP, AFT, and NEA, has sparked national, and international, coordinated actions like Campus Equity Week in 2001 and 2003, and has sustained a series of conferences since 1995 that bring together across organizational lines many of those trying to help shape and build contingent faculty power.

The next of these conferences, COCAL VI) will be in Chicago, August 6-8, 2004 at Roosevelt University and Columbia College, sponsored by the Chicago Chapter of the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor. 300 activists from all over the US, Canada and Mexico are expected to exchange experiences, assess the past work and plan strategy for the future of this growing movement. There will also be social events and a march (a “progressive report card”) through downtown Chicago, For further information and registration materials, see www.chicagococal.org, call 312-341-3294, or email cocal6@sbcglobal.net. All contingent faculty and our friends and supporters are invited.