

Global Issues

Organising the Academic Precariat in the United States

Celeste Atkins, University of Arizona, USA¹

Louis E. Esparza, California State University, Los Angeles, USA

Ruth Milkman, City University of New York, USA

Catherine L. Moran, University of New Hampshire, USA

Faculty labour in the United States is increasingly “contingent”, as tenure-track and tenured positions are rapidly being replaced by “adjuncts”, “lecturers”, “instructors” and other faculty who lack traditional protections of academic freedom and job security. In light of this, contingent faculty have been actively organising themselves into unions on many campuses. Unionisation efforts for non-tenure-track faculty have often been highly successful, yet significant hurdles remain.

Although it is common to refer to all faculty outside the tenure-system faculty as “contingent”,² this umbrella term masks enormous variation in pay, benefits, working conditions, job security and inclusion in governance. The diverse range of institutional types within the United States (US) higher education system (community colleges, four-year public universities, for-profit colleges, private liberal arts colleges and elite research universities, to name a few), and its unusual degree of decentralisation, add further complexity to our understanding of precarious American academic labour.

The Growth and Consequences of Contingency

Between 1975 and 2015, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) reported that the proportion of the US academic workforce made up of full-time, tenure-line positions fell from 45 per cent to 30 per cent, while in the same period the share of full-time non-tenure-track and part-time faculty grew from 34 per cent to 57 per cent (the rest were graduate student employees). By 2015, contingent positions of all types accounted for 70 per cent of all instructional staff appointments in American higher education (AAUP, 2017).

For full-time non-tenure-track faculty, job security, compensation, protection of academic freedom and inclusion in shared governance are all inferior relative to their tenure-track colleagues. The chasm is even wider when comparing tenure-system faculty to part-time contingent faculty.

¹ The authors are listed alphabetically and are among the members of the American Sociological Association’s Task Force on Contingent Faculty. Thanks to Luke Elliot-Negri for comments on an earlier draft of this article.

² Contingent faculty are those in non-tenure-track positions that are contract-term bound or temporary. These may be part-time or full-time. The hiring institution makes no commitment of long-term employment to these faculty.

Conditions also vary widely across institutions. Contingent faculty generally fare better at colleges and universities with greater resources and those with elite status, and at some (though by no means all) unionised institutions. In many other settings, however, pay and conditions are abysmal, particularly in part-time positions.

As hiring outside of the tenure stream expanded, so did part-time academic employment, which made up 47 per cent of all US faculty jobs by 2015 (AAUP, 2017).³ A 2017 study by the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2017) reports a survey finding that over 46 per cent of part-time faculty want part-time positions. However, the GAO also reports that another survey found that, among part-time faculty with doctoral degrees, 70 per cent do not want to work full time. Yet, of those 30 per cent who would prefer to work full time, nearly 86 per cent indicate that full-time work is not available. The constriction in the pool of tenure-track positions is at the root of this.

Yet, it must be acknowledged that there is a segment of the academic workforce for whom part-time academic positions are desirable. Some contingent faculty, part- and full-time, accept these positions because they want to focus on teaching rather than on research; in general, teaching-intensive positions are less likely to be on the tenure track. The desire to balance teaching with personal or family responsibilities may make work on a per-course basis attractive. Other adjunct faculty are employed full-time outside of academia. For these “hobbyists” part-time teaching allows them to work with students and share their passion for their discipline. Such faculty are less reliant on adjunct pay to make ends meet.

But for those who have no other employment, adjunct pay rates are an enormous problem. Part-time contingent faculty are paid a small fraction of what their tenure-system counterparts earn. A 2010 survey found that the median pay of part-time faculty at two-year colleges was only \$2 235 per course; part-timers at four-year colleges, doctoral or research universities, on the other hand, reported a median of \$3 400 per course (CAW, 2012). Contingent faculty compensation rarely increases with experience or with improved credentials, in sharp contrast to tenure-system faculty for whom compensation increases dramatically over the course of a typical career. The term “part-time” is often a misnomer: 50 per cent of part-time faculty report teaching three or more classes per semester. Nor does “part-time” mean temporary: 80 per cent of respondents to a recent survey reported teaching part-time for more than three years, and over half for more than six years (Lundquist and Misra, 2015).

There are other significant disadvantages associated with contingent work. Part-time faculty rarely have access to health insurance, retirement plans, life insurance, sick leave or parental leave, and most have no job security. Appointments are often conditional upon sufficient student enrolments, and thus may be terminated on short notice. Part-time faculty typically do not have private office space and often are denied access to other resources on which faculty have traditionally relied to teach effectively (CAW, 2012; GAO, 2017).

Organising to Address the Disadvantages of Contingency

The overwhelming majority of US contingent faculty is not unionised, although that has begun to

³ Computed from AAUP (2017).

change in recent years. Several different unions have been actively organising in this field, which has led to improved compensation and working conditions in many cases.

Unionisation efforts among contingent faculty began in the 1970s, soon after public-sector workers gained collective bargaining rights in many parts of the United States. Unions at the State University of New York and the City University of New York were among the first to gain recognition; and at California State University, lecturers began organising in the mid-1970s as well. By 1976, faculty had union contracts at 38 private and 180 public colleges and universities. This momentum was interrupted in 1980, when the US Supreme Court ruled in *NLRB v. Yeshiva* that full-time tenure-system faculty in private colleges and universities were part of management and therefore were prohibited from unionising. However, that finding did not apply to contingent faculty (Miller, 2015).

After *Yeshiva*, unionisation was largely confined to public universities and colleges, where faculty unions almost always organised “wall-to-wall”, including both tenure-system and contingent faculty in the same unions. Some part-time faculty were dissatisfied with this arrangement and, as contingent academic employment grew, non-union organisations also began to develop. The Coalition of Contingent Academic Labour was founded in 1996, and the New Faculty Majority in 2009. Both are national organisations that advocate for and organise contingent faculty and have done much to expose their concerns to the public. These groups have also put pressure on existing faculty unions to pay more attention to their part-time and contingent membership (Miller, 2015; Rhoades, 2017).

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is the largest single player, representing about 100 000 full-time tenure-track faculty in public colleges and universities, and almost as many (90 000) full-time non-tenure-track and part-time faculty, postdocs and graduate student workers. The other two major organisations in this sector are the AAUP and the National Education Association (NEA). Currently, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU, 2017) is organising adjunct faculty across the nation under its “Faculty Forward” campaign, mostly at private colleges and universities where the AFT, AAUP and NEA are largely absent due to the *Yeshiva* ruling.

Contingent faculty are “low-hanging fruit” for the labour movement, even in a period in which union organising is extremely difficult in the United States. Between academic years 2013–2014 and 2015–2016, unions won representation elections for adjunct faculty at 35 private colleges and universities, and the union won 88 per cent of those elections, compared to only 20 per cent of all US union representation elections in that period (Bertoncini and Dorer, 2016). Contingent faculty are highly educated and many are knowledgeable about their rights as workers; most are also keenly aware of the discrepancies between their pay, benefits and working conditions and those of tenure-system faculty. Indeed, while adjunct faculty in the 1950s and 1960s were typically practitioners working full-time at other jobs and teaching only one or two courses a year, today’s contingent faculty often have advanced degrees and aspire to full-time faculty positions.

Facing low pay, poor working conditions and blocked aspirations, it is hard to imagine a more organisable group of workers than contingent faculty. However, college and university administrators vigorously oppose unionisation efforts, whether among adjuncts, graduate students or full-time faculty. Tenure-track faculty also may oppose unionisation among contingent faculty, whom they see as undermining tenure and eroding the power historically invested in tenured faculty (such as the responsibilities of shared governance). Non-tenure-track faculty may also be reluctant to unionise, fearing the loss of prestige associated with exposing to colleagues and students their low pay, poor

working conditions and lack of job protection (Schmidt, 2014).

Organising contingent faculty faces other challenges as well. Perhaps the most important one involves whether to create bargaining units solely for adjuncts or to join “wall-to-wall” unions alongside tenure-system faculty. There are pros and cons to each approach. For example, higher-education scholar Gary Rhoades found “bump chains” in some union contracts that allow tenured faculty to bump adjuncts out of classes (and more senior adjuncts to bump junior adjuncts) (Rhoades, 2017).

Organising adjuncts independently of full-time faculty can also be challenging. However, the SEIU Faculty Forward campaign has scored a number of successes, winning class cancellation fee provisions, due-process rights and improved compensation at several institutions. At George Washington University in the District of Columbia (DC), SEIU’s first contract increased minimum per-course compensation from \$2 700 to \$3 400, and improved job security. This first SEIU victory in the DC area paved the way for more: soon Montgomery College (in nearby Maryland), then Georgetown, Howard, the University of DC and Trinity Washington University followed. The SEIU claims 3 000 adjunct members and 80 per cent density in the metropolitan DC adjunct market as part of what the union calls a “metro organising strategy”. While DC is the shining star of the Faculty Forward campaign, SEIU has organised in various locations across eighteen states and represents approximately 8 000 adjuncts (Miller, 2015).

Job security has been a focus on other campuses. At the City University of New York, some categories of lecturers have secured increased job security with “Certificates of Continuing Employment” under the union contract. The union representing faculty at California State University has won three-year renewable appointments for some adjuncts. Elsewhere, the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties negotiated a contractual provision that limits the number of temporary faculty a university can employ to 25 per cent or less of the full-time equivalent of all faculty (Cosgrove, 2016).

In 2013 at Tufts University, where over half the faculty are not in the tenure system, part-time lecturers voted to unionise with SEIU. This union contract became a model for the Faculty Forward campaign. All part-timers at Tufts now earn at least \$7 300 per course; those with eight years of service earn a minimum of \$8 760, with additional compensation for work done outside the classroom. Moreover, SEIU has organised and won contracts for adjuncts at several other Boston-area schools, including Northeastern University and Boston University. The majority of SEIU’s successes have been at private schools, which have relatively ample resources from which unions can extract concessions. However, most contingent faculty are in the public sector, where budget cuts have resulted in an explosion of contingent faculty employment and where it may be much harder to win substantial improvements even after successful union organising campaigns (Miller, 2015).

Conclusion

For half a century, contingent faculty have unionised on campuses in the United States, and in recent years organising has picked up steam. While conditions vary widely, contingent faculty are nearly always paid much less than their tenure-system counterparts. Their search for fair wages, benefits and improved working conditions have made them highly receptive to organising efforts, although most remain outside the unionised workforce. One reason for this is that college and university

administrators, like their counterparts in for-profit corporations, actively oppose contingent-faculty organising of any kind.

With the structural transformation that is underway in the academy, and the concomitant declining job security, the appeal of unionism to contingent faculty is likely to continue to grow. Tenure-system faculty also have a stake in their efforts, since the proliferation of contingency threatens to undermine the institution of tenure and the academic freedom it was meant to protect. Unionisation is the only organised force opposing the rapid expansion of contingent employment in colleges and universities. While the wider public in the United States is often unsympathetic to organised labour in other sectors of the economy, concern about the extremely poor pay and conditions facing this highly educated workforce is spreading rapidly, and union struggles to improve their plight have won broad support inside and outside the academic community.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

CELESTE ATKINS is Sociology faculty at Cochise College where she serves as chair of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Department. She is currently in her first year of a doctoral programme in Higher Education at the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Arizona. Her areas of interest are contingent faculty, traditionally marginalised students, and student outcomes at rural community colleges. She also serves as a graduate assistant for the Office of Instruction and Assessment where she supports faculty in building skills in learner-centred education, active learning, and collaborative learning. [Email: atkinsc@cochise.edu]

LOUIS EDGAR ESPARZA is Associate Professor of Sociology at California State University at Los Angeles. [Email: Louis.Esparza5@calstatela.edu]

RUTH MILKMAN is a sociologist of labour and labour movements who has written several books and articles on work and organised labour in the United States, past and present. She has also conducted policy-oriented research on topics such as wage theft, unionisation trends, paid leave policy and the aging workforce. She is Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the [CUNY Graduate Center](#) and at the [Joseph S. Murphy Institute for Worker Education and Labor Studies](#), where she teaches Labour Studies and also serves as Research Director. Her most recent book is *On Gender, Labor and Inequality* (Univ. of Illinois Press, 2016). [Email: rmmilkman@gmail.com]

CATHERINE L. MORAN is a Principal Lecturer in Sociology at the University of New Hampshire (UNH). She is the president and co-lead negotiator of the UNH Lecturers United–AAUP, the union of non-tenure-track faculty at UNH. She serves, with her co-authors, on the American Sociological Association Task Force on Contingent Faculty. [Email: clmoran@unh.edu]