

A New Campus Rebellion: Organizing Boston's Contingent Faculty

by Gary Zabel

Contingent faculty members are a majority of the teaching workforce in higher education, even if we exclude the large number of graduate teaching assistants. In their 1997 strike, UPS workers understood that both morality and self-interest demanded they give priority to the interests of part-timers. Unless faculty members learn the same lesson, we will be unable to stop either the degradation of academic work or the increasing corporatization of colleges and universities.

Eight months old as of the new year, the Boston Project of the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor has developed a multi-campus approach to organizing, a social movement orientation, and an openness to solidarity with other campus workers. Building on an impressive and successful struggle for full benefits by unionized part-time faculty members at UMass Boston, the Project involves a city-wide campaign to educate the public, mobilize students and other supporters, and organize the thousands of adjunct teachers throughout the Greater Boston Area.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, twenty-two percent of faculty members in higher education were employed part-time in 1970. By 1987 that figure had grown to thirty-three percent, and by 1992 - the year of the NCES's most recent survey - to forty-two percent. If, as seems likely, the general trend toward erosion of full-time academic work has continued over the past seven years, the percentage of part-time teachers in colleges and universities may be approaching fully one-half of the total instructional workforce nationally.

Part-time faculty members are not casual visitors at their places of work. The average part-timer has been employed by the same institution for 5.4 years. Although some part-time faculty members hold full-time jobs elsewhere, the majority do not. They are career academics who cannot find full-time work in extraordinarily tight job markets. They struggle to make ends meet by teaching part-time on multiple campuses, so that they often shoulder total course loads heavier than their full-time colleagues. In general, pay for part-time teaching is abysmal. Though there is wide variation, most part timers make around \$2500 per course. At eight courses over two semesters - a heavy load by full-timer standards - that's only \$20,000 per year. Just a handful of institutions provide benefits of any kind. Low pay makes it impossible for many part timers to buy private health insurance, forcing some to depend on welfare programs for medical care. These materially exploitative conditions are matched by more subtly oppressive ones: low status and discriminatory obstacles to career advancement. No matter how excellent their student evaluations or how much they have published, part-time faculty are commonly regarded by administrators and department personnel committees as inferior members of their profession. Once they have been teaching part-time for a few years, chances of landing full-time jobs are negligible.

Part timers do not constitute the only category of contingent, or adjunct, faculty. Nontenure-track full-time faculty comprise seventeen percent of college and university teachers nationally. They normally work at the rank of lecturer or assistant professor, making the same pay, in the latter case, as the beginning tenure-track equivalent. Their institutions generally provide them with medical benefits. In addition, they tend to enjoy adequate office space and other facilities, have access to professional development funds, and participate in department meetings and other forms of governance.

On the whole, their conditions of work are therefore substantially better than those of their part-time colleagues. But unlike the average part-timer, many are genuine temps, forced to move on after one or two years at any given institution. These transient full-timers are not at a single workplace long enough to achieve more than entry-level pay. After chasing temporary appointments for a while, they often fall into the ranks of the part-time faculty.

Together, the two major categories of contingent faculty constitute nearly sixty percent of the teaching workforce in higher education. This enormous mass of contingent academic labor is in harmony with larger social trends.

The substitution of poorly paid, unbenefitted part-time and temporary work for decently paid, fully benefitted, full-time and secure work is part of the response of capitalists and their government supporters to the long wave of economic decline that began in the mid 1970s. Models of lean production pioneered by Japanese automobile companies have been widely adopted throughout the global manufacturing economy. Lean production, with its "just-in-time" methods of supply and delivery, requires manufacturing companies to reduce their core workforces to skeletal proportions, supplementing them only as necessary with temps, consultants, and outsourced labor. The result is speedup for core workers, often under the guise of "labor-management cooperation," and underpaid, unbenefitted, insecure work for everyone else.

With their incessant demands for labor "flexibility," business-oriented presidents and boards of trustees have adapted the ethos of lean production to colleges and universities. In addition to outsourcing campus bookstores, food services, and custodial work, they have reduced the core tenured or tenure-track workforce to around forty percent of the entire faculty, while expanding the number of contingent teachers accordingly, thereby increasing, administrative, and decreasing faculty power.

Nowhere is the importance of contingent academic labor more evident than in the Greater Boston Area. With fifty-eight institutions of higher learning within a ten mile radius of the urban center, Boston has the highest concentration of colleges and universities of any city in the world. Each year, graduate programs award thousands of master and doctoral degrees to aspiring professionals. Many of the new degree holders remain in the Boston area, in large measure because of the city's stimulating cultural and intellectual environment. Of those who choose the academic profession, few manage to secure full-time employment, forming instead a labor pool from which most of the city's 10,000 or so part-time faculty members are drawn.

The colleges and universities of the Greater Boston Area are partially subsidized by the cheap credit hours produced by this most exploited layer of the adjunct faculty. The tuition generated by a handful of students - two or three students in courses taught at private institutions, more in public ones - pays the wages for a part-time instructor. The employing institution appropriates the rest of the money brought in by the course as an unpaid premium, as academic surplus value.

The economic function of the contingent faculty extends beyond its role in generating surplus tuition, thereby subsidizing the institutions that employ it. It also plays an important part in the extensive networks that link higher education with private companies and public agencies. The university industry is not only one of Boston's biggest employers. It is connected with the city's other major industries - such as hospitals, financial services, high tech, and state and local government - in a dense web of funding, training programs, research projects, policy institutes, and revolving personnel. The contingent faculty supplies the primary cadres for a crucial node in this web, the continuing education programs that retrain workers.

Moreover, in regular day programs, especially at state institutions, it educates Boston's future teachers, nurses, social workers, computer specialists, accountants, and so on. Finally, in the natural sciences, contingent faculty members conduct research, increasingly funded and utilized by private companies. In this fashion, the contingent faculty acts as a crucial productive force in Boston's larger political economy.

Because of its strategic location in the corporate-state-university complex, a dynamic effort by Boston's adjunct faculty to organize would send ripples throughout the city, affecting students, parents, politicians, public workers, and private corporations. Such a movement would demonstrate how the public's interest in education is damaged by the imperative to maximize profits, with its penchant for leasing educational assets to narrow private interests, while driving "instructional costs" to the floor. It would be poised to make a natural alliance with tens of thousands of students, most of whom are already temporary or part-time workers, and many of whom face the continued prospect, after graduation, of insecure, unbenefitted, and underpaid work. It might even develop imaginative new forms of community and solidarity as antidotes to the culture of careerist self-absorption and competitive isolation normally on offer in our halls of higher learning. To accomplish such tasks, however, the contingent faculty would have to achieve a high level of self-organization. Yet it is notoriously difficult for contingent workers to

organize, and the adjunct faculty is no exception to this general rule.

In most cases, labor solidarity and militancy are nourished by the concrete face-to-face relations that bind workers together on the job. The Wobbly organizing campaigns of the 1910s and 1920s, the workplace occupations of the 1930s, as well as the P-9, Jay, Maine, and Pitstown strikes of more recent years were all conducted primarily by groups of workers who had learned to depend upon one another, on a daily basis, in the factories, the retail shops, and the mines. By contrast, contingent faculty members are atomized. With temporary jobs on a single campus or part-time positions on multiple ones, they have little chance of developing the workplace bonds that sustain concerted action. If collective bonds are to come into being, they must be forged, not in the process of work, but in the course of struggle. In this regard, it is instructive to consider the campaign that gave birth to the Boston Project, the successful battle in 1997-98 of part-time faculty members at UMass Boston for full medical and pension benefits.

As a state institution, UMass Boston shares in the generally high level of union organization that characterizes public colleges and universities in the Northeast. The Faculty-Staff Union, an affiliate of the National Education Association, won recognition in 1976 as the collective bargaining agent of the UMass faculty. Though union organizers argued for the inclusion of all part-time faculty members in the bargaining unit, an administrative threat to tie recognition up in the courts forced them to accept a hurdle to part-timer membership that has had a decisive impact on the character of the union. To be admitted into the union, part-timers must teach a total of five bargaining unit courses in the span of three consecutive semesters. In 1997, 115 people had done so, 109 part-timers taught in the so-called "day university," but without carrying enough courses for bargaining unit membership, while another 116 taught only in the

Continuing Education Division, which is not unionized at all. Had all part-timers been represented by the union, they would have comprised 340 members, roughly forty percent of the entire bargaining unit. But, since only a third of this number enjoyed union membership, part-timers were vastly outnumbered by their full-time colleagues. As a result of this imbalance, the FSU had given priority over the course of its history to defending the interests of the full-time faculty, the vast majority of its membership.

The union did, however, provide a context in which part-time faculty members could organize to assert their interests. During contract negotiations in 1986, part-timers from several departments formed a Part-Time Faculty Committee that functioned as a caucus within the FSU. The Committee mounted a campaign on behalf of a set of demands, above all a substantial wage increase, that succeeded in winning the support of students, staff, and a good number of full-time faculty members. Just as importantly, Committee activists were sophisticated enough to keep strategic pressure on union negotiators, making it difficult for them to abandon part-timers at the negotiating table. Although there was no part-time faculty member on the negotiating team, the Part-Time Faculty Committee sent an observer to each of the negotiating sessions. Moreover, at a crucial moment, the Committee picketed a session, angering union negotiators, but also forcing them onto the picket line. But means of such savvy tactics, the Committee succeeded in winning an increase in base pay for part-time faculty union members from \$2000 to \$3000 per course.

Though the Committee continued to meet for a couple of years following the 1986 victory, external factors soon made it impossible to build on that achievement. A serious crisis in the state budget resulted in a reduction in force that ended by driving one third of the part-time faculty out of UMB. Desperation to hang onto jobs replaced the elan of the '86 campaign.

Yet the Part-Time Faculty Committee had demonstrated that it is possible for atomized adjuncts to build the collective bonds necessary to improve their conditions. This was a seed that would lie dormant for awhile, but that would one day bear fruit.

By 1997, the fiscal crisis had not only ended, but the state had accumulated a one billion dollar budgetary surplus. Though much of the surplus was rebated to taxpayers, and little of what remained was used to satisfy social needs, the state's appropriation to UMass ceased to shrink, and that made it feasible to make new part-timer demands.

In the fall semester, activists mostly from the Philosophy, English, and Math Departments, reconstituted the Part-Time Faculty Committee. Early on, the Committee determined the key element in its strategy. It would work to get the FSU to invert its traditional priorities by making part-time faculty issues the focus of contractual bargaining. It held several large meetings at which perhaps half

the entire unionized part-time faculty chose a negotiating agenda. The agenda was intended to make an appeal to the university community so morally persuasive that the union leadership would be unable to ignore it.

Massachusetts law mandates full medical and retirement benefits for any state employee who works at least half-time. At UMass Boston, most unionized part-timers teach two courses per semester to the full-time faculty's three, yet each was classified by the University as two-fifths of a full-time worker. The point of the classification, of course, was to prevent part-timers from obtaining benefits under the law. In a number of cases, this exclusion had serious consequences. Some part-timers were unable to get medical treatment for chronic health problems while others had to depend on welfare programs for assistance. In justifying part-timer exclusion from the provisions of the law, the University Administration and the FSU Executive Committee were in initial agreement. In their view, part-timers had been hired to perform only one of the three functions of full-time faculty members, that is, to teach, but not to engage in research or service. Yet nearly all part-timers kept current in their fields, while a good

number published articles and books or presented at conferences. All met with students outside of class during regular office hours as well as on an informal basis, and several worked on committees. In a survey conducted by the Part-Time Faculty Committee, the vast majority of respondents indicated that they spent more than twenty hours per week on their UMB jobs.

Still, there was opposition on the FSU Executive Committee to recognizing that part-timers were already working half-time or better. Wouldn't such recognition threaten the traditional claims of full-timers to be engaged in additional and more prestigious sorts of work? In order to circumvent opposition, the Part-Time Faculty Committee appealed directly to the full-time faculty with a petition asserting that part-timers deserved benefits because of the amount of work they performed. The overwhelming number of full-timers asked to sign the petition did so, but without awareness of the FSU's reservations. In the one department where an FSU officer made his objections known, not a single full-timer signed. Nonetheless, the petition had a crucial political effect. Published in the campus newspaper with 170 signatures, it demonstrated the ability of the Part-Time Faculty Committee to mobilize the union's own full-timer base. As a result, the Executive Committee was pressured to endorse the part-timers' negotiating agenda.

It took months to solidify union support through meetings, flyers, posters, buttons, a student petition that garnered 2000 signatures, and a picket by more than 200 part-timers and supporters. The result, however, was extraordinary. Negotiations concluded in June '98 with reclassification of union part-timers teaching two courses per semester as salaried, half-time employees with full medical, dental, and retirement benefits, a floor of \$4,000 per course, a sixteen percent salary increase over the three-year life of the contract, and an additional cumulative \$200 bump every semester. In the wake of this victory, the FSU has worked to bring the part-time faculty to the fully enfranchised center of the union. The Executive Committee has arranged for a course reduction for one of the members of the Part-Time Faculty Committee to facilitate continued organizing, supported an initiative to promote part-timers to full-time term contracts, and endorsed part-timers' plans to unionize UMB's Continuing Education Division. The union has also begun to change its culture more subtly, according part-timer issues an important place at each Executive Committee meeting, in the FSU's membership bulletin, and in its communications with outside groups.

The contract victory at UMass Boston inspired the current attempt to organize adjunct faculty on a city-wide basis. In April 1999, UMB activists hosted the Third Annual Congress of the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL), a national network of contingent faculty activists with centers of strength in New York City, Atlanta, and the San Francisco Bay Area. One of the Congress workshops, a meeting on regional organizing, founded the Boston Project, subsequently chartered as a chapter of COCAL.

Fifty-five of the fifty-eight institutions of higher learning in the Greater Boston Area are private, and so involve obstacles to organizing that the UMass Boston activists never had to face. In all but two of the private institutions, part-time faculty members lack union representation. This is a legacy of the Supreme Court's 1980 decision in *Yeshiva University vs the National Labor Relations Board*. *Yeshiva University* had appealed an earlier decision by the NLRB granting union representation to its full-time faculty.

The University argued that its full-time faculty members were not covered by the National Labor Relations Act because they exercised managerial authority by helping determine curriculum, hiring and evaluating new faculty members, and implementing administrative decisions. In a five-to-four ruling, the Court agreed with the University's position. The result of the Yeshiva Decision was the widespread decertification of faculty unions on private campuses throughout the United States. Yeshiva clearly does not apply to part-time faculty members. By no conceivable stretch of the imagination do they exercise managerial authority. However, by deunionizing the vast majority of private campuses, Yeshiva has taken from part-timers the larger faculty unions in which they might organize caucuses, and so develop the collective bonds necessary to assert their interests.

In large part, the Boston Project is an attempt to get beyond the quandary created by Yeshiva. Through city-wide meetings, pickets and other demonstrations, local organizing committees, and a regular newsletter, Project activists hope to create the sense of community and solidarity that is an indispensable precondition for combating adjunct exploitation. Moreover, instead of relying exclusively on employer-by-employer NLRB certification elections, the Boston Project pursues a community-wide strategy in a bid to shape the broader labor market. In several industries, the labor market is effectively controlled by the union rather than the employer. For example, employment comes to construction workers and longshore workers through a union hiring hall. All employers persuaded or pressured to "go union" abide by the same basic contract. Similarly, "living wage" campaigns (see Jess Walsh's article in this section) set a floor that applies to all workers in a community. The Boston project has adopted a similar, community-wide approach to improving the conditions of adjuncts.

In three city-wide meetings, fifty activists from twenty campuses have drafted a common program for adjuncts that manages to be both radical and commonsensical. At its core are demands for equal pay for equal work, full medical and pension benefits, job security and free speech rights, participation in governance, promotion to full-time positions, and narrowing of salary disparities within the entire higher education faculty. Boston Project activists have made this program the theme of an ambitious public educational campaign. They have discussed it at campus meetings of adjunct faculty members, brought it to students through dramatic pickets at Northeastern University, Emerson College, and Mass Bay Community College, and promoted it by means of radio and newspaper interviews.

In addition to this city-wide educational effort, Project activists have established grass roots organizations at a number of institutions. Depending on local conditions, some function as informal advocacy groups, others as union organizing committees. For example, adjuncts at Suffolk University are working with their Faculty Senate to pressure administrators into granting an increase in part-timers' base pay, while their counterparts at Emerson College are in the early stages of a unionization drive. At UMass Boston, having already won full medical and pension benefits, adjuncts are engaged in a campaign to promote part-timers to full-time jobs. The Project brings wider resources to each of these local battles. Activists develop strategy together at city-wide meetings, walk each others' picket lines, attend each others organizing meetings, report on their struggles in a widely distributed newsletter, and participate in an email listserve.

The Boston Project regards itself as the vehicle of a broad-based social movement rather than a particular organizational agenda. As such, it works with many unions and labor support groups. Its activists are currently participating in unionization drives, collective bargaining efforts, or informal organizing projects with the American Association of University Professors, the Massachusetts Teachers Association (an affiliate of the National Education Association), and the United Auto Workers Union. Of these unions and professional organizations, the Project has especially close relations with the AAUP, which has contributed financial and staff resources to Project activities, and has established a Contingent Faculty Council to represent the interests of adjuncts at private institutions in Boston. Boston Project activists also work closely with a variety of labor support groups including Campaign on Contingent Work, Center for Campus Organizing, Industrial Workers of the World, Interfaith Committee on Worker Justice, Jewish Labor Committee, and Jobs With Justice. Indeed, the Boston Project has acted as a leavening agent within a larger campus labor movement. Concretely, it has stimulated the formation of a University Organizing Project, a solidarity network of unions, organizing committees, and support groups representing students, clerical workers, janitors and maintenance personnel, kitchen staff, technical workers, and librarians, as well as adjunct faculty members, all from campuses throughout the Greater Boston Area.

Only time will tell whether the innovative methods of the Boston Project will succeed in reversing the long-term trend toward the degradation of academic work. But whatever the outcome of that struggle, the Project seems to be poised to have a major impact on the city's higher education industry over the next few years. It may even portend a new radicalization of the campuses, though on a basis much different than that of the nineteen sixties.