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# TOWARD A NEW LABOR MOVEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION:

Contingent Labor and Organizing for Change

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On November 30, 1999 in Seattle, Washington, thousands of union members, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), students, community and religious activists, farmers, Zapatistas, Cuba supporters, gay and lesbian activists and a plethora of others gathered to protest the World Trade Organization summit. In Washington, D.C. a few months later, protests continued. The World Trade Organization protests signaled a shift in awareness of labor issues and a building up of strategic alliances between workers and national and international labor organizations. As Rich Daniels puts it: "Common ground and common cause have been and are being mapped out; everyone is focused right now on the structure of the internationalizing economy and thinking about how to shape alternatives that work for working people and the environment everywhere" (1). Even in rural areas, workers are organizing. In Chelan County, Washington, the self-proclaimed "Apple Capital of the World" where I grew up on an apple and pear orchard, migrant farmworkers, many of them recent immigrants from Mexico, have unionized at local warehouses. Apple and pear growers, patterning their protests after French farmers, recently held tractor rallies to protest corporate grocery stores selling their fruit at well below production costs while reaping huge profits, thus forcing small farmers into bankruptcy and foreclosure. In communities both large and small, many workers are speaking out against the ways in which corporatization and globalization in the name of progress and the "New World Order" have undermined the rights of working people. As a result, what was once thought to be disparate groups are building strategic alliances in many sectors of the international economy.

The revitalization of academic unions and growing regional, state-wide, national, and international coalition building efforts among various groups concerned with contingent labor coupled with localized legislative action can effect change. In this essay, I will report on and analyze campus, municipal, state-wide, and national organizing campaigns to address the working conditions of part-time and non-tenure-track faculty, many of them first-year writing teachers. After that, I will discuss a proposed international week of action, Campus Equity Week, that is forthcoming, and will conclude with a discussion of the rhetorical strategies that literacy workers and others agitating for change can best adopt to achieve coalition building and organizing toward improved working conditions.

#### The International Economy, Contingent Labor, and Literacy Work

In the U.S. and Canada, growing unionization of graduate students and contingent faculty, coupled with campus, municipal, state-wide, and national organizing efforts, are creating the momentum for a revitalized academic labor movement among a range of university workers, including staff, cafeteria, and

physical plant workers. As labor historian Robin Kelley argues, universities employ a "vast army of clerical workers, food-service workers, janitors, and other employees whose job is to maintain the physical plant" (146). Many of these employees are women and people of color, a fact, contends Kelley, that necessitates that unions must resist low-paid wage work *and* resist race and gender-based oppression as part and parcel of class oppression (150). Coalition building among all university workers and the recent local and national campaigns for the Fair Wage Initiative are indicators of an important shift in business as usual at American colleges and universities.

Even professional associations, which are prone to issue statements and to stay out of the fray of labor politics, are beginning to collect wide scale data on the transformation of the academic workforce from full-time jobs to contingent jobs. After the Conference on the Growing Use of Part-time/Adjunct Faculty in November 1997, a number of professional associations, including the Organization of Historians in America (OHA), the Modern Language Association (MLA), and NCTE/CCCC hired the Roper-Starch Research agency to conduct institution-wide surveys on part-time and non-tenure-track faculty's working conditions in the individual disciplines. Prompted by activist graduate students and faculty in the MLA Delegate Assembly, the MLA not only conducted the survey, but it committed the unprecedented act of publishing the salaries and working conditions at particular institutions on its website. Not to be outdone by MLA, CCCC has conducted a study of labor practices in independent writing programs, which the CCCC Committee on Part-time/Adjunct Issues has summarized in a report and recommendations that will soon be released.

Those of us who teach in writing programs or administer them will say that despite widespread acknowledgement of the problem, the part-time and non-tenure-track situation has worsened. On the one hand, our field has burgeoned: graduate programs in Rhetoric and Composition have sprung up, Assistant Professorships are still advertised and filled; established journals, books, and even presses specializing in Rhetoric and Composition titles have grown. On the other hand, first-year composition is still overwhelmingly staffed by part-time and non-tenure-track faculty, many of them women, whose wages and working conditions are exploitive. The national statistics remain dire.

According to a survey by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce (CAW), a group of 25 disciplinary associations, part-time and non-tenure-track faculty comprise a large percentage of those responsible for first-year writing instruction. In the CAW/Modern Language association "Survey," nearly one-third (32%) of those who teach introductory writing courses situated in English departments are part-time faculty. An additional one-tenth (9.5%) are full-time, non-tenure-track faculty, and 22.2% are graduate student teaching assistants ("MLA Survey," Table 2). Thus, in English departments only one-third (36.3%) of all instructional staff who teach writing courses are full-time, tenured or tenure-track faculty. In the CAW/CCCC survey of freestanding writing programs, those that constitute a department with a separate budget and instructional lines from English departments, approximately one-fifth (18.2%) of first-year writing courses are taught by full-time, non-tenure-track faculty; one-third (32.5%) are taught by part-time faculty, and almost half (42.5%) by graduate teaching assistants. Only 6.9% of introductory writing courses are staffed by tenured- and tenure-track faculty (Cox A13-14). Clearly part-time and non-tenuretrack (or "contingent" faculty as I will refer to faculty working off the tenure-track) comprise a significant percentage of those responsible for teaching general education writing requirements. Thus, the professional success narrative of composition is tempered by the continued exploitation of non-tenuretrack faculty.

Moreover, in CCCC, in the late eighties and early nineties, we experienced a critical impasse in organizing around contingent faculty issues when the 1986 "Wyoming Resolution," with its proposed grievance and censure procedures, was not implemented--although it was endorsed by CCCC. Instead, the CCCC "Statement on Principles and Standards for the Improvement of Postsecondary Writing Instruction" with its focus on converting part-time and non-tenure-track positions into tenure-line positions, was issued.

Many in our organization were angered and discouraged that CCCC did not enact the "Wyoming Resolution" (see Gunner, Sledd). As I have argued in *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers*, we learned many important lessons from this impasse, one of which is that we cannot remain in it. Instead, we must build coalitions with organized labor and other professional associations and take action, a point Lester Faigley underscores in his 1996 CCCC Chair's Letter:

From the Wyoming Resolution and the ensuing debate with CCCC, we have learned that we will have to do more than write statements and that we need to form alliances with other organizations if we expect to address issues of working conditions in any substantial way. We also should recognize that 'working conditions' lumps together many broad issues and that we need to learn more about community organizing, the economics of higher education, and the impact of changing technologies on literacy education (1).

Organizing writing faculty as a bloc to address working conditions is no easy matter. Many part-time and non-tenure-track faculty already feel burdened by their teaching loads and some fear that speaking out may cost them their jobs. Many writing program administrators, too, feel overworked and implicated by their perpetuation of the non-tenure-track system, although a number of activist WPAs have emerged as well. I believe, however, that it is unionized and politicized graduate students and part-time and nontenure-track faculty who will lead the way in efforts to address labor issues in the field. The electronic journal Workplace chronicles the efforts of graduate students, contingent faculty, and tenure-track advocates to speak out and take action toward labor justice in higher education. Authors link their labor struggles to struggles undertaken by workers in other sectors of the national and international economy. I am hopeful that the activist/organizing-oriented scholarship modeled in journals like Workplace will take hold in the mainstream scholarship on labor issues in composition, which tend to be caught up in describing and narrating labor problems rather than addressing how to organize and effect action. Indeed, there is currently a strain of scholarship in composition that advocates that we make do with what we have and make some small improvements because there isn't enough funding to better working conditions, overall (see Miller). Such arguments tend to follow the reasoning that the American public won't use more of its tax dollars to go toward higher education and that we must simply adapt to the post-Cold War funding system and do what we can to make localized improvements. Certainly, local improvements can make a difference, but what happens when there are no legal and contractual protections built into those improvements? What happens when the benevolent administrator making the improvements is "let go," retires, leaves for another institution, or is replaced by a less benevolent administrator? What happens when those working above the benevolent administrator erode his or her hard-won reforms or when faculty themselves sabotage them? (see Anson and Jewell 71-73 ). What happens in a time of "budget" crisis or freeze if those localized improvements are not protected through a union contract or through any sort of legal protections? While local reform remains a path toward initiating change, such efforts must be buttressed by organized change movements that involve unionization and revitalization of existing unions or professional associations, coalition-building with other workers, academic and non-academic, and a critical understanding of the changes and challenges facing higher education.

A local reformist agenda, if it is to have credibility, must keep in mind the "big picture" of higher education funding and a vision of a democratic higher education. Within many university budgets, monies allocated toward administrative costs, student services, and distance learning have increased, while money for instructional budgets have not. In addition, many of us have watched with dismay as our state legislatures have built up the prison industrial complex and systematically defunded higher education to do so. We have watched as our police forces and court systems have systematically locked up poor, working class African American and Latino/a men and women instead of creating real economic and educational opportunities (Reiman 98-99). As literacy workers in the system of higher education, we need rhetorics and organizing strategies that will put us in a position to advocate for higher education's continuation and democratization, not its demise.

## Four Models for Organizing: Campus, Municipal, Statewide, and National

In the past five years, campus organizing, municipal organizing (in cities like Boston, New York, and Denver), state-wide organizing (particularly in California and Washington), and national and international organizing efforts around contingent labor issues have grown. In January of 2001, the Coalition on Contingent Academic Labor, an international group supporting equity in pay and working conditions, met at the fourth annual national conference on labor organizing in San Jose, CA. As Chris Storer, Executive Director of the California Association of Part-time Faculty, notes, the COCAL IV conference allowed a national group of activists to give voice to a movement

that has moved far beyond anger to the practical politics of healing the profession and uniting around the common cause of improving the educational opportunities of our students through a reinvigorated faculty professionalism which returns all faculty to the center of institutional governance and educational policy deliberations.

Storer's use of the word "healing" is important. All too often we think of labor issues as a site of struggle, a fight, a battle; however, the language of healing and empowerment is crucial as well, especially as it pertains to working across lines of difference to achieve commonly held goals. Those of us who attended COCAL IV realized we were seeing a watershed moment in contingent academic labor organizing. We saw, for the first time, the seeds of a national and international movement coming to fruition. This movement, however, is part of a larger revitalization of the academic labor movement and coalition building among diverse workers. On some campuses, unions and progressive coalitions of university employees have begun to bridge the gap between white collar workers and blue/pink collar workers. Robin Kelley argues that this bridging is essential if we are going to address the root issue of exploitation in a global economy, an economy where women and people of color often experience the worst of "low wage service work, part-time work, or outright joblessness" (151).

Campus-wide coalitions of University Workers

On many campuses, undergraduate and graduate students and faculty partners are waging campaigns against university patronage of prison labor and sweatshop manufacturers. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, alliances of university workers are growing through campus-wide organizing. For example, on my own campus, Syracuse University where I work as a tenure-track faculty member, a fall 1998 Service Employee's International Union (SEIU) strike over contract issues regarding wages and subcontracting for SEIU members galvanized faculty, staff, and students to create a "Faculty" support group for SEIU University workers. Public meetings were held between SEIU union representatives and faculty, students, and staff. A Faculty Support Group listserv kept supporters up to date on mobilizations and actions. Tenure-track faculty, undergraduate and graduate students, and part-time faculty raised money for a strike fund, organized a support rally, wrote letters and signed a petition urging the chancellor to settle the contract fairly, walked the picket lines with the strikers, and held a teach-in/rally at the local campus chapel. Some of us also invited striking SEIU workers to our classes to speak with students. I invited one of the picket captains, a janitor and part-time returning student, to attend my writing 105 course, a valuable opportunity for first-year students who, in their first-week on campus, were unclear about the purposes behind the strike.

Thanks to the work of this faculty-university worker coalition, the strike was ended soon; moreover, this action raised consciousness on campus. A newly formed Student Coalition on Organized Labor (SCOOL), inspired by a similar student group at Cornell University, continues to actively lobby against sweatshop labor and agitate on behalf of organized labor in the university and the city of Syracuse. Faculty continue to notify one another of labor actions and needed coalitions. Syracuse University, however, is not unique; other campuses have held similar actions, and there is a rich history of such actions that is largely unknown by many academics (see Nelson, Kelley). Campus organizing around local and highly specific

campus issues like union contract struggles and the campus's use of sweatshop and prison labor are highly effective points of galvanization. Yet municipal campaigns, largely conducted in urban areas, are also effective means of change.

## Municipal Coalitions

One of the most successful municipal campaigns, and a model applicable to the national contingent labor agenda, took place in the greater Boston area in 1998 when part-time faculty activists spearheaded an organizing campaign at UMass-Boston. The campaign resulted in numerous gains: "half time status; full medical, dental, and pension benefits; and a floor of \$4,000 per course" (1). After winning these gains, UMass-Boston adjunct activists joined forces with professional associations, along with other union members and leaders, to found the Boston chapter of COCAL with the goal of municipal organizing--an important move in a city where one out of every four people is a college student, a population which makes adjunct faculty almost as common as college students. Co-sponsored by the AAUP, local labor organizations and undergraduate students, the Boston COCAL activists have conducted informational pickets at target colleges with problematic labor practices, held meetings to organize part-time faculty at area colleges (both public and private), and worked to help graduate students as well as contingent faculty organize (1-2). COCAL's "10 point program" connects quality working conditions to quality learning conditions.

- Equal pay for equal work at the appropriate academic rank.
- Full medical, dental, and retirement benefits for those teaching two or more courses per term. Pro-rated benefits for those teaching fewer. Tuition remission for family members.
- Job security. No one terminated without just cause and due process.
- Adequate office space and facilities.
- Full participation in department and college or university governance.
- Opportunities for professional development, including financial support for research and creative work.
- Promotion of part-time faculty to full-time positions.
- Narrowing of salary disparities within the faculty.
- Full protection of free speech rights and all other forms of academic freedom.
- Recognition and respect as vital members of the academic community. (1)

Efforts at municipal organizing are being made in New York City and in Denver. David Rosman and others at the Auraria Higher Education Campus (AHEC), which includes the University of Colorado at Denver, Metropolitan State College of Denver, and the Community College of Denver, are organizing. In New York City, adjunct faculty at the City University of New York organized and sponsored a public hearing before the Higher Education Committee of New York State and the Labor Committee on March 9, 2001. The goal of the hearing was to "awaken public consciousness," "gain public and legislative support for increasing funding of higher education in NY State," "highlight budget items that will improve the status of adjunct faculty," and to create "legislation on unemployment and disability insurance for adjuncts" (CUNY, Adjunct Alert). The American Association of University Professors, along with COCAL, has encouraged these municipal organizing efforts, connecting them to unionization and bringing together city-wide groups of adjuncts to defend and protect basic worker rights. *State-wide Coalitions* 

Another arena for organizing has been through state-wide efforts on the part of unionized faculty. Two coalitions of community college faculty, the California Part-time Faculty Association and the Washington State Part-Time Faculty Association, have led successful state-wide organizing campaigns to improve part-time faculty salaries and health benefits. The California Part-time Faculty Association (CPFA), newly

revived in 1998, promotes "professional equity for all faculty in the California Community College System by ending the exploitation of part-time faculty" (Brasket 1). The CPFA's goal is three-fold: 1) to foster communication and resource sharing among part-time faculty; 2) to educate multiple publics about part-time faculty issues; 3) to work to improve the quality of education through improving part-time faculty working conditions (Brasket 1). The CPFA, banding together with unions, professional associations, local activists (sponsored "Part-time Faculty Equity Week" last April, an event they refer to as Action Coalition 2000 or A2K) and A2K activists engaged in a petition drive campaign around "Equal Pay for Equal Work," urging the state to set aside funds (\$75 million) for improving part-time faculty salaries (Baringer 1). This campaign was successful. California Governor Gray Davis recently earmarked \$62 million for improving part-time faculty salaries, a significant victory (Leatherman A13). Washington State has seen similar gains. Keith Hoeller, a part-time adjunct philosophy professor at Green River Community College and co-founder of the Washington Part-time Faculty Association, which represents the needs and concerns of part-time faculty state-wide, have used the courts, petition drives, lobbying efforts, and organized actions to get the issues of contingent faculty's wages and benefits on the state-wide agenda (Leatherman A12). The CPFA and WPFA are two key examples of broad-based coalitions among staff and graduate and undergraduate students as well as those outside the academy; however, the organizing of adjunct faculty is moving into a national and international arena.

#### National and International Coalitions

In many of the above mentioned coalitions and campaigns, the Coalition on Contingent Academic Labor has been a major force. The Coalition was formed as a result of three academic conferences held in 1997-99 ("Adjuncts Unite!" 1). COCAL is now a national and international network of activists who work to improve the working lives of the growing ranks of part-time and non-tenure-line faculty, graduate teaching assistants, and research assistants. COCAL this past fall convened its fourth annual conference, bringing together adjunct activists, union organizers, full-timers, scholars, and others to address working conditions and to create a national agenda. COCAL recently pledged in 2001 at the annual conference to "hold a national Equity Week in the Fall," organizing teach-ins, petitions, protests, and other actions to call attention to the overuse and exploitation of contingent faculty (Leatherman A12). On October 28-November 3, 2001, Campus Equity Week, an international week of action in Canada, Mexico, and the U.S., will take place. Campus Equity Week will include rallies, teach-ins, information tables, union drives and card-signing campaigns, and a potential effort to collect signatures to petition for local adoption of a common "Campus Charter" or "Professional Working Conditions Bill of Rights." The event is currently being coordinated by a Campus Equity Week Steering Committee who will develop organizing materials (Storer 1).

As Rich Moser, the chief organizer of the Campus Equity Week Steering Committee, states, Campus Equity Week is "a decentralized effort, that means that each campus or region or organization calls their own shots and chooses a level of activity that's appropriate. The committee will provide a slender packet with some core materials but this is really about local initiative as part of a national movement or the old think globally act locally approach" (Moser, email message to the author, March 2, 2001). Campus Equity Week is particularly important for those of us in the fields of English and writing because we have, by far, the greatest reliance on part-time and non-tenure-track faculty. The issue of working conditions, though, goes beyond the bread and butter issue of salaries and contracts; Campus Equity Week is also about the fight to maintain adequate public funding for higher education and about the right to keep higher education affordable and accessible to diverse populations of students.

Recently, the CCCC Committee on Part-time/Adjunct Issues, which I Co-Chair with Karen Thompson from Rutgers University, put forward a resolution asking CCCC to support CEW. The resolution unanimously passed at the yearly business meeting at CCCC, and the Committee held a rally to help the CCCC membership strategize organizing plans for CEW. In conclusion, I will briefly describe the

rhetorics we can best adopt to achieve coalition building and organizing toward improving working conditions: the rhetoric of costs, the rhetoric of common cause, and the rhetoric of coalition building.

### The Rhetoric of Costs, Common Cause, and Coalition Building

First, we need to make arguments for improvements in working conditions that are based on presenting the costs of contingent labor, not the cost-savings. We've heard plenty about the costs-savings that reliance on contingent faculty provides, but what about the costs to students, to higher education, and the local economy? Students, parents, and taxpayers deserve to know what the educational costs are to students when their college instructors do not get compensated for office hours or when their instructors are notified two nights before the term begins that they are being hired "back." These issues must be presented respectfully, without denigrating the work of part-time and non-tenure-track faculty, but, at the same time, we can't pretend that instructional quality isn't affected by working conditions. We have to make the costs visible to our multiple publics through editorials, petitions, legislative hearings, and lobbying efforts.

We also need to develop a more sophisticated rhetoric of common cause. All too often I hear tenure-track colleagues argue that we can't improve working conditions for part-time and non-tenure-track faculty because to do so will solidify a second or third tier of faculty, thus eroding tenure. I believe this is a defeatist logic that has the potential to lock us into permanent inaction. Instead of a two-tier system we now have a four- and five-tier system: tenure-track/tenured, permanent non-tenure-track faculty, part-time permanent faculty, part-time temporary, and so on. Improving working conditions means closing the gap between exploitation and stability. As Linda Ray Pratt, former President of the American Association of University Professors, argues, we must reduce the "cheapness and convenience" of part-time labor by putting "more money into it and more stability behind it, two conditions that negate the attractiveness of part-time over full-time positions" (273).

In a recent article in *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor* entitled "Medieval or Modern Status in the Postindustrial University," Gary Rhoades, a sociologist of the professions, urges that graduate students and other academics who wish to organize should adopt a "post-modern approach to agency and action," thus "[r]eject[ing] the implied forced choice between competing metaphors and mechanisms, between apprentice or employee, between private, individual negotiation and public collective bargaining" (4). To this I would also that we need to resist the binaries between full-time, tenure-track faculty and contingent faculty and the binary between academic workers and other workers.

Finally, we need rhetorics that enable coalition building. In "Making Better Connections: Some Thoughts on Rhetoric and Solidarity as We Struggle for Academic Unionization," Jamie Owen Daniel argues that we need to avoid rhetorical strategies that reinforce the idea that academics as a group are more entitled to fair wages and benefits than other groups of workers. It's certainly true that academic training is specialized, and it's often the case that our apprenticeships are longer than many workers; but is this information useful when we are making arguments to the automobile assembly line worker, or the teacher in a public school, about the role of working conditions in higher education? Will he or she want to hear how specialized and educated we are? No. He or she will want to know what common cause exists between our situation and theirs. If we are going to build coalitions with other workers, we need a rhetoric of common cause, not a rhetoric of entitlement.

Daniel also advises that we avoid one-way analogies, statements that compare adjunct teachers to migrant workers for instance. While it is important to point out exploitation, and the migrant labor analogy is a particularly dramatic, evocative, and frequently used one, it's a one-way analogy. Few migrant workers would say they are like adjunct teachers, especially as "they risk machete wounds or rat bites or heat stroke or the possibility of being reported to the INS and then deported because they've demanded a legal

days' pay or a bathroom on site" (Daniel 3). We need to be careful about analogies that compare us to other workers, using the oppressed status of others to signify our own.

With a rhetoric that opposes binaries and encourages agency and coalition-building, we are in a good position to articulate a broad educational agenda that acknowledges worker rights and the fundamental need for a democratic, accessible, and diverse system of higher education. As the narratives and case studies in *Moving a Mountain* show, the "organizing strategies that will work best [toward achieving that goal] must be adaptive and multiple" (Schell 337). Literacy workers can play a significant role in this movement for change, especially if we use our considerable critical and rhetorical skills as a platform for organizing and agitating for change.

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