



Kavanagh, P. (1999). Organize, activate, educate: A tribute to Karen Thompson. *Workplace*, 4, 7-9.

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## **Organize, Agitate, Educate: A Tribute to Karen Thompson**

Karen Thompson is a pain in the neck.

For those of you who don't know Karen, this may seem like an odd way to begin an essay that is meant to introduce you to an academic activist. For those of you who do know Karen, or have had the opportunity to work with her in the MLA, CCCC, AAUP, or at Rutgers University, you will recognize this as perhaps the highest praise for her work as an educator, an agitator, and an organizer.

Karen is each of these things and what is perhaps most notable is that she has been able to develop a style of activism that has enabled her to unite the principles of education, agitation, and organization into an effective formula for advocacy on the campus of Rutgers University and in the various disciplinary and professional associations where she has been active. As you will read in the interview that follows, in all of her work, Karen has been insistent and persistent in the belief that academic workers must have a voice in the ways that universities are being redefined and restructured. Karen has been committed to protecting and promoting the rights of academic workers at the local and national level for two decades. As she said to me recently, "I'll do the things that most people won't, and I'll keep doing them." This commitment has made Karen not just an effective activist, but an example for all of us involved in the academic labor movement.

As the nature of work in the academy has changed in response to an institutional workplace that is seemingly driven less and less by the pursuit of high quality, affordable education and increasingly by the principles of cost-cutting managerial practices, the calls for academic workers--full-time faculty, part-time faculty, non-tenure track faculty, and graduate student employees--to "organize, organize, organize" have become deafening. For those of us who have become active in the academic labor movement within the last five to ten years, the call to organize as academic workers in response to changes taking place in higher education is now taken for granted. Not only are the issues of fewer full-time tenure-track jobs and the over-reliance and abuse of part-time, non-tenure track, and graduate student employees in wider circulation today, we have many success stories by which to be inspired. Obviously this does not make the work of organizing contingent workers significantly easier, but what it does signify is the increasing acceptance of the notion that the future of higher education depends upon a unified and organized academic workforce.

We owe much of the current acceptance of the issues and success stories that inspired them to longtime committed activists like Karen Thompson. Karen was introduced to activism, and the art of being a pain in the neck, as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It was there that she became active in movements for social and political change--civil rights, antiwar, and feminist most notably. As was the case for so many, these experiences made clear the necessity and power of collective action against injustice and oppression and they have remained an activist touchstone. Years later, as a graduate student at UW-Madison, Karen was a witness to the successful efforts to organize the first graduate student

employee union. When she began teaching as a part-time lecturer in the English department Writing Program at Rutgers University in 1979, the full-time faculty and teaching/graduate assistants had been unionized with the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) for almost a decade. The numbers of part-time faculty at this large state university, however, were growing and the terms and conditions of their employment paled in comparison to the full-time faculty and teaching assistants.

Karen joined the staff of the AAUP chapter at Rutgers in 1985. A year later, with the support of the full-time faculty/graduate student employee union, she began the work of organizing part-time faculty. Today, the issues seem familiar: part-time faculty were experienced, credentialed teachers, yet remained among the lowest paid employees at the university with no benefits, no job security and no voice in the governance of the university. They were, in short, invisible. After two years of hall walking, office visits, and intensive written communication, enough cards had been signed to file for an election with the New Jersey Public Employee Relations Commission. In the summer of 1988, by overwhelming vote of the members, the Part-Time Lecturer Faculty Chapter of the AAUP was formally recognized. For the past ten years, full-time faculty, part-time faculty, and graduate student employees have worked together to protect and promote issues of academic labor and the need for affordable, quality higher education at Rutgers and throughout the state.

As a result of her success at Rutgers, Karen has become a spokesperson for part-time faculty issues at the national level. From 1993-97, Karen was a member of the Executive Committee of the Discussion Group on Part-Time Faculty of the MLA. She is currently, the co-chair of the CCCC Task Force on Improving the Working Conditions of Part-Time/Adjunct Faculty. Since 1990, Karen has been a member of the National AAUP Committee on Part-Time and Non-Tenure Track Faculty, chairing the committee from 1994-1999. Under Karen's leadership, the National AAUP became a leader in promoting part-time faculty issues. The 1993 report on the *Status of Non-Tenure Track Faculty* included the *Guidelines for Good Practice* for part-time and non-tenure track faculty that has become a policy model for colleges and universities across the country. In 1996, Committee G published *Working For Academic Renewal: A Kit for Organizing On the Issues of Part-Time and Non-Tenure Track Faculty*. In addition to a chapter on collective bargaining, the kit includes sections on other campus-based organizing initiatives, statewide activities, and the importance of full/part-time alliances.

Karen will be the first to say that while the successful drive to organize part-time faculty was certainly a significant accomplishment, the work of organizing is never complete. Despite unionization and collective bargaining privileges, part-time faculty at Rutgers and elsewhere are always at risk of being invisible. Like all managers, administrators will go to great lengths to stifle resistance and, as we know, with part-time faculty it is often difficult to find leaders willing to continue taking the risks that are necessary for change. Whether it is stall tactics at the bargaining table or the denial of campus mail privileges for the purposes of communication, part-time faculty are always engaged in a struggle for recognition and respect for the work they do, work without which the university could not function. For this reason, the work of organizing, educating, and agitating is never done.

As Karen says in the interview, "We have to try to enter the arenas where change is occurring." In this area, she has led by example. By promoting academic labor issues on campus, during accreditation visits, before the Board of Governors, before the New Jersey State Legislature, and at statewide higher education meetings and conferences, Karen's work is evidence that effective education, agitation, and organization must take place in different venues--from our disciplinary and professional associations to our campus and state communities.

In all of this work, Karen has maintained that the working conditions of faculty are the learning conditions for our students. The relationship between the quality of work life and the quality of education may seem obvious to us, but it remains one of the central issues around which we must continue to organize, educate,

and agitate. Part-time faculty, non-tenure track faculty, and graduate student employees must continue to fight for recognition and respect in the academic workplace. We should be inspired by recent victories; we should learn from setbacks, and we should continue to do what is necessary to achieve workplace justice and quality higher education. To do so, we will have to continue doing "the things other people won't do." That has been Karen's contribution to the academic labor movement and, more importantly, has become the model for those of us that have had the opportunity to work with and learn from her.

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