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COLLECTIVE CONTINGENCY: AN INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA WOLF

Chris Carter

Carter: Your 1997 video *Degrees of Shame* contains a variety of first-hand accounts of the generally undignified working conditions of adjunct instructors. Though they are themselves dignified teachers with deep commitments to their subjects and students, they lack job security, health benefits, just compensation, and institutional voices. The video moves beyond exploitation narratives, however, to document the incipient struggles of contingent teachers to collectively improve their situation. Could you describe how the concept of collective action functions in the documentary?

Wolf: How it actually functions depends on the viewer. I think that I built it with the intention of the individual viewer recognizing a commonality they share with the part-time professors regardless of their own position. And then while the tape was still in production there was that amazing moment when the Teamsters Union voted to strike on behalf of their part-time workers. Their action was such a relief. It was so unlike everything that we see going on in our society that is geared toward serving the self and ignoring the other. Here we had the Teamsters who have long been considered by some to be the bad kids in the union movement giving us, by their example, the opportunity of responsible, sensible, generous behavior. The full-time Teamsters struck on behalf of and alongside their part-time co-workers. What the full-time Teamsters had to gain was more visionary than practical. By that I mean the full timers weren't, individually or personally, going to realize any significant gain in the short run. What they were seeing/saying was in the long run what is best for all workers is best for all workers. That translates very easily to the university system. Full-time faculty who enjoy tenure share benefits roughly equivalent to the benefits enjoyed by full-time Teamsters. Part-time faculty, like part-time Teamsters, need the help and the collective vision or the vision of collectivity of their full-time counterparts.

Carter: How did your own history as a social activist influence the video's production and design?

Wolf: You seem to be asking about my process. Let's start at the end of your question. Insofar as my work is political, it's political because I am political by which I think I mean I begin with my own subjective responses to the world in much the same way that Dan Rather thinks he begins with journalistic objectivity. This piece began when my partner Michael (a tenured professor) came home and told me that a colleague who had been teaching in his department for 9 years was applying for his own job. I asked how he could be applying for his own job since it had been his job for 9 years. Michael explained that this particular faculty member was an adjunct and his position was being made full-time and tenure track and since it was new full-time position, a national search was being conducted. Six weeks later, not only was someone else hired, but the part-timer was asked back as an adjunct professor to teach some of the same courses he had taught before, courses it turned out his replacement was not qualified to teach. None of this made sense to me.

So it began as a way of learning about something I didn't understand. My process is one of interviewing. I transcribe each interview verbatim including ums, uhs etc. In that process of deep and repetitive listening,

the story that needs to be told reveals itself. It's also important to me that I keep listening to the world while I'm working on the interviews and transcriptions. This time UPS's workers went on strike and those two stories — academics and deliverymen — went together.

My own history of social activism is informed by my work at Cincinnati's Urban Appalachian Council, where as a non-Appalachian I learned the most active thing I could do was listen. Often that listening leads to social activism. I've never actually thought of myself as a social activist — when I was a suburban housewife and worked to desegregate housing in the suburbs or when I co-led a campaign to protect a homeless shelter from an over grasping arts school — I just did what needed to be done. And it was fun and I met wonderful, passionate people. This tape needed to be done.

Carter: Many of the campuses that participated in "Campus Equity Week" have featured "Degrees of Shame" as a means of educating the public about adjunct exploitation in academia. Gracing small information tables and great lecture halls alike, it has helped to catalyze international agitation for academic workplace justice.

How do you respond to your video's growing importance to the equity movement?

Wolf: I'm very pleased that this tape is useful to such a variety of people in so many different circumstances throughout the United States and Canada. Beyond that, it would be my hope that people who are not involved in education could see the importance of the same issue in the lives of workers who aren't involved in education but who are suffering under the same circumstances, where corporations are squeezing their workers to boost profits, where corporate administrators are increasing their own salaries and bonuses while reducing their work force by substituting contingent labor for permanent full-time positions. What I see happening with part-time professors is absolutely paralleled in other arenas. As a nation and a culture we have taken a stand against the worker in favor of the manager or the owner. In our "capitalism-run-amok" culture we allow the worker to be squeezed dry, to increasingly be forced to scramble for basics, and then to be discarded. (It is how we treat other cultures and the natural world as well.) It has been my hope that in seeing this happen to professors (the people who did everything "right" -- "Stay in school, get your degree and you'll get a good job"), others who are experiencing the same phenomena will realize that they are in good company — really good company — and that change is both necessary and possible if folks pull together. It will take new alliances, with professors, laborers, nurses, and fast food workers recognizing the commonality of their situations.

Carter: How might other forums or events use the documentary to raise labor consciousness?

Wolf: When I make a documentary it is usually because I've been asked to make it by an organization that I trust and value or because I must make it. In both of those cases I don't have a picture of how it should be used. I am well aware that is not the way it's done in "the business" but I seem to lack that part of the producer's personality. This show has been used in amazing ways in a wide variety of situations, from an open house where it was played several times as a recruiting tool to get new members for the California Part-time Faculty Association; to organizing sessions where it's announced on campus with fliers, e-mail and personal invitations; it has been played on cable access stations around the country and been aired on public television in Ohio; and during Campus Equity Week a faculty union in Madison, Wisconsin purchased time on a Fox affiliate where it was broadcast and, I believe, followed up with a discussion. In some places faculty members and organizers have shown it to legislators. It has been shown in classrooms. I often thought that it would be interesting to show it as part of a trilogy starting with *Harvest Of Shame*, then *New Harvest, Old Shame* and finally *Degrees Of Shame*. All in all I believe that it has been used in many ways that I could never have imagined because people were using it in their own local situations in manners that fit those situations in ways only they could know.

Carter: In addition to screening "Degrees of Shame," many CEW gatherings have presented the introduction to your upcoming video book on adjunct organizing.

Could you describe your latest endeavor?

Wolf: The sequel to *Degrees of Shame* began as a 30-minute sampler of types of situations and styles of organizing. However, it has become what I am now calling a two-hour video handbook titled *A Simple Matter of Justice: Contingent Faculty Organize*.

The original 30-minute sampler is now the preface which briefly introduces each of the situations I have taped, and in addition, analyzes the growing use of contingent faculty. After that, each situation will be expanded to a Chapter lasting 15 to 30 minutes.

The epilogue or Afterword was taped at the COCAL IV conference in San Jose in January, 2001, which brought together contingent faculty, organizers, lawyers, concerned full-time faculty, sympathetic students, and politicians from across Canada and the United States to share information, tactics, and inspiration.

The entire video handbook focuses on what part-timers and their allies are doing to change the working conditions documented in *Degrees Of Shame*. For the new tape, researcher Andrea Tuttle Kornbluh and I chose to highlight six distinct situations that could serve as models for groups facing similar barriers. Included are part-time faculty in the California Community College system who are organizing statewide to change state laws; Boston part-timers who are organizing on a regional basis because of the vast number of schools there; part-time faculty at Columbia College in Chicago who organized themselves into a union in an institution where the full-time faculty is not unionized; part-time faculty from many locations in Canada who are joining the full-time faculty union, but starting out with separate bargaining units; part-timers in Seattle Washington who are suing the state; and part-timers at Northern Kentucky University who actually have a university president who believes that part-time faculty should be treated with respect, dignity and parity.

Carter: How is it related to your earlier work?

Wolf: *Degrees of Shame* looked at the issue of part-timers and said, "This is just awful." *A Simple Matter of Justice* says, "And this is what we're doing about it." This follow-up tape is a look at the nuts and bolts of where to begin, what to expect, how to organize, who's out there to help, and where we go from there. Those are the kinds of things that it looks at. It's my hope that it will be useful to those groups who know the problems they're facing and are ready to do something about them.

Carter: What insights does it offer contingent instructors and other equity advocates?

Wolf: While I set it up as a book with chapters so that if an organizer wanted to they could merely use the section/chapter that is most closely aligned to their own situation, I recommend looking at the whole "book" because there are amazing insights throughout the other chapters that span the entirety of the issue and speak to any type of organizing situation. So, for example, while your situation might be more like the situation in Chicago, you might want to take a look at Canada because of their concern about regularizing or institutionalizing part-time work.

Carter: The importance of solidarity across job description has been a strong theme in your work on adjunct organizing. When part-time and full-time teachers are resentful and suspicious of each other,

rather than mutually invested in workplace dignity, it undermines organizational unity and momentum.

Based on your observations as a filmmaker and your experiences as an activist, what are the most effective ways to combat the "divide and conquer" strategies of university administrations? How can contingent and full-time professors learn to see their common interests as workers?

Wolf: Oh my, that's a tough one. It is such an often used strategy. And sometimes it's used with great skill. Sometimes it's used clumsily. But I think that no matter how it's used, pointing it out very clearly and always naming it is the first step. The rest of it is the really hard work of just taking care of everyone listening, talking, kvetching, encouraging... all in all, maintaining the group or groups. Making sure the processes are open and that everyone is heard. Being honest with members. Keeping everyone informed by any means necessary. Making sure the people standing by the door feel that they are as important to the work and the movement as the leadership. Also repeating endlessly what members of the group or coalition have in common with each other and what they don't have in common with the administration. Sometimes this is difficult with full-time professors because they are identified as management (Yeshiva decision). Part-timers clearly are not management. So in that case it means going for the values, the common values, of the full timers and part-timers and stressing those. They really are different than administration values. Administrations are concerned first with the bottom line. Faculty are concerned first with the quality of education.

Carter: What other kinds of solidarity formation can help challenge the exploitative practices of our increasingly corporate universities?

Wolf: Ah, this begs another tape.

Barbara Wolf is Director Of the Video Documentaries *Degrees Of Shame* And *A Simple Matter Of Justice*