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## **PUTTING DOWN ROOTS: STABILIZING THE CONTINGENT ACADEMIC LABOR UNION**

1.1. Over the past fifteen years, organizing among graduate employees and adjunct faculty has grown at a fast rate. Union organizing among graduate employees has often been opposed by administrators (and by some full-time faculty members) on the grounds that these teachers and researchers are merely “students in training.” Opposition to adjunct faculty unions is often more honestly acknowledged as an issue of dollars and cents. Part-time, adjunct faculty are paid poorly and often have no benefits; a union would surely change that reality.

1.2. The structural realities of today’s academic workplace are imitative of practices common to corporate America. Large universities in particular openly adopt corporate structures and practices such as downsizing (eliminating programs or whole departments deemed “unprofitable”); outsourcing (eliminating tenure-track faculty lines and full-time administrative or maintenance workers and replacing them with adjunct faculty and subcontractors); and piece work (converting the scholarly triad of teaching, research, and public service into disaggregated pieces, performed by different people who receive differing levels of respect and remuneration from the institution).

1.3. While all aspects of this corporatization are an attack on the integrity of higher education, piece work is perhaps the most obvious one from the perspective of the general public. The Wisconsin Idea<sup>1</sup> isn’t dead, but it’s been cut into pieces, now resembling a stitched-together Frankenstein of intellectual life. Research is the privilege of an ever-smaller number of full-time, tenure-track faculty; much of undergraduate teaching is outsourced to low-paid, part-time academic laborers; and public service becomes an ever-smaller and more tenuous part of the equation. Fewer and fewer academics of any stripe enjoy the privilege of integrating those three aspects of academic life.

1.4. Unless and until this structural reality is successfully challenged by some other means, unions are a natural and necessary reaction to the attack on the traditional concept of higher education as a place apart from the capitalist “produce or die” ethos. The challenge before the academy is twofold: find methods of attacking the indiscriminate corporatization of academic life, which is issuing a grave challenge to academic freedom and scholarly integrity, and find ways to support the growth of unions for all academic laborers, particularly those most exploited by corporatized structures.

1.5. In the past, many national union affiliates assumed that successful organizing drives were simply not possible among adjuncts or graduate employees. The past fifteen years have belied that assumption, with victories from one coast to the other showing that contingent academic labor can be organized. Without a

clear plan for long-term success, however, contingent academic labor unions cannot fulfill their promise as a first line of defense against exploitative practices.

### **The Special Challenges of Contingent Academic Locals**

2.1. Contingent labor organizing in any setting is a challenge; maintaining a healthy organization once the intense energy of the organizing campaign has faded is perhaps an even bigger challenge. Every new union must develop institutional structures that will allow it to function and thrive into the future. For contingent academic labor unions, however, this challenge is amplified by the very nature of contingency: annual turnover in such locals is extraordinarily high, ranging from 25-35% in graduate employee unions, and often higher among adjunct faculty. With the stress of simply trying to maintain a corps of officers and stewards, structural issues are often left to chance, or structures that work in full-time faculty unions, although ill fitting in the contingent context, are adopted from the national affiliate. Yet without a stable structure, contingent academic labor unions are especially vulnerable to a collapse in leadership, the loss of institutional memory, the erosion of an organizing base, and the collapse of democratic practice.

2.2. Can adjuncts and graduate employees form local unions that avoid these traps? Yes, although the road is difficult and requires constant maintenance. In this essay, I will review what I see as the crucial elements of institutional structure for contingent academic labor unions. My thoughts on the matter have developed over the past nine years spent as an officer, activist, and staff person in two graduate employee unions, UE Local 896-COGS (University of Iowa) and the TAA/AFT Local 3220 (University of Wisconsin–Madison).

2.3. During my time in both locals, I have witnessed crises that were at least in part brought about by flawed structures. Graduate employees and adjunct faculty are inevitably overworked and under tremendous stress; weak union structures put those individuals in the position of having to “reinvent the wheel” or, even worse, fix the same broken wheel over and over again. This is a waste of precious time and energy. While locals composed of full-time employees also suffer the consequences of poor structures, they are less likely to collapse under the burden: long-time activists can pass down knowledge and skill to the next generation of activists and the local can develop a culture of practice. In contingent locals, an entire generation of leadership can disappear over the course of two years, leaving good practice to chance and erasing the lessons learned through past experience.

### **Answering the Challenge**

3.1. Finding answers to the challenge of creating viable institutional structures in what are essentially (highly educated) migrant worker unions may make the difference between having or not having adjunct and grad employee unions that are active, vibrant and powerful. Contingent academic unions do have at their disposal, however, an advantage that their fellow migrant workers in packing plants or strawberry fields often do not: they are composed of highly literate members who are attentive to the written word. While documentation cannot fully substitute for the knowledge and experience passed down from long-time activists, it can help bridge the gap and prevent the erosion of good practice.

3.2. The first step, therefore, in creating a strong contingent local structure is the development of clear and transparent governing rules, embodied in the local’s constitution and bylaws. While this might seem like an obvious step, it is one that is often missed. Once the local has been established, the constitution and bylaws are often given only hurried and passing attention during the stressful period when the first contract is being negotiated.

3.3. This is a mistake. While the contract is the primary document that governs the relationship between the university and the union, it is the constitution and bylaws that govern the relationship that the members establish between *themselves*. It must answer crucial questions that will direct the culture and practice of

the union: Who are we? What is our primary purpose? How far will we integrate ourselves into a larger labor movement? How will decisions be made within our union? What will the power structure look like? Which bodies within the union will wield relatively more or less power? How will power pass from one generation to another? How will we manage our income and expenditures? In the event of internal conflict, how will we resolve that conflict?

3.4. If answers to these questions are not laid out in such a way that future generations of leaders can easily follow by simply reading the document, internal instability is almost inevitable. In designing its internal structures, a contingent local must be attentive to the inherent lack of continuity of human leadership and instead vest itself in a *system* of leadership that is balanced and that, as much as possible, ensures a smooth transition from one leader to the next.

3.5. These issues became paramount in the two years after teaching and research assistants at the University of Iowa voted to recognize UE-COGS as their union in the spring of 1996. Many COGS activists had put serious time and effort into designing a constitution, but the first effort suffered from two problems: the inevitable diversion of attention to the difficult task of first contract negotiation, and the temptation to adopt the structures of a union recognition campaign as the shape of a functioning union local. A recognition campaign, particularly in the face of attacks from administration, daily crises, and a merciless timetable, necessarily adopts a fairly rigid, quick-response, military-style mode of operation. A relatively small group of activists, usually with the assistance or direction of outside organizers, make key strategic decisions on a day-by-day (sometimes hour-by-hour) basis. While this model may be necessary during the intense period of a recognition campaign, it is an inappropriate model for those looking to build a stable local that runs on democratic principles.

3.6. The most obvious problem inherent in COGS's original constitution was its vagueness or silence concerning the power relationship between the coordinating committee (the local's executive body) and the bargaining committee: in the event of a disagreement over policy or strategy, which body took precedence? Calling a membership meeting (the highest decision-making body in the union) to review every single decision or step the union would take—a common practice during the heat of the recognition campaign—was simply not realistic as a long-term practice once the local was established. Clear lines of authority and parameters of decision-making power had to be established. The membership responded by establishing a special constitutional revision committee. Calling on the painful experience of the first year and using as a model, in part, a UE local whose factory structure was surprisingly (or perhaps not surprisingly) similar to the University of Iowa context, the committee recommended a series of amendments. The membership voted the new constitution into place in 1998, and it has worked well over numerous officer and activists transitions since that time.

3.7. Making the transition from recognition campaign to functioning local often means, as noted above, moving from dependence on outside organizers and a relatively small group of dedicated activists to a broad-based, member-controlled local. This brings up the second step in developing a strong contingent local: **avoid personification**. Allowing the local to become identified with a particular leader or group of leaders is dangerous in any union. Allowing this tendency in a contingent local can be fatal. If the image and perceived strength of the union becomes vested in, say, an especially talented or dynamic president or a chief steward, the contingent local then becomes particularly vulnerable once that person leaves the campus. When she leaves—as she almost inevitably will do at some point in time—not only does she take with her an inordinate amount of institutional knowledge, but her dominance probably means that a second tier of leadership has not been properly developed to take her place.

3.8. Avoiding dependence on one or a small number of very active officers or stewards can be difficult in a society that generally shuns collective action and collective identity. But it is necessary to fight this tendency. Not only does reliance on a small number of activists leave the local vulnerable when those persons leave, it puts an unfair burden on that small number. Resentment against those whom the hard-

core activists see as not pulling their weight can be destructive, as it encourages the small cadre of leaders to develop feelings of personal ownership of the local. These feelings will often lead to a disruption or destruction of democratic practice in the local, no matter how committed on an intellectual level the leaders may be to such democratic practice.

3.9. Thus, both to encourage democratic practice, to avoid burnout of high-level activists, and to be in constant preparation for leadership turnover, the contingent local must divide up union work into small, manageable tasks. Graduate employees and adjunct faculty are far more likely to become active in their union if presented with many different options for involvement that do not, in essence, involve taking on a second (or third or fourth) part-time job. Tasks must be specific. At both COGS and the TAA, leaders have concretized descriptions of their work and given realistic estimates of the time commitment on flyers used to advertise open positions, making every attempt to convey to all union members that *anyone* can be a union leader.

3.10. Officer and activist positions must also have concrete boundaries and, with the except of a few positions such as president, chief steward, or lead organizer, take no more than eight hours per month. At COGS, the president's position, rather than becoming "everything-and-the-kitchen-sink" job, has specific limitations in both function and power: meeting chair, defender of the constitution, public spokesperson, facilitator of communication and coordination across the union. Nothing more (but, of course, nothing less, each of these tasks being crucial). Each fall and spring, member-to-member phone banking is organized, asking rank-and-file COGS members to give at least two hours per month to a wide variety of union participation options: department steward; new member recruitment visits; attendance at the monthly membership meeting; work on the newsletter or website; posting union flyers and maintaining department bulletin boards; joining the labor solidarity, diversity, or organizing committees.

3.11. This kind of decentralized structure, while encouraging larger numbers of union members to be active, does require some care. Lines of communication and lines of authority must be very clear. Constant communication among officers, stewards, and committee chairs is required, so that various bodies of the union do not end up going in different directions. The TAA, the graduate employee union at the University of Madison, has spent considerable time over the past few years in introspection and structural revisions to ensure that its body of activists has the means by which to coordinate their activities. In the midst of an historic contract crisis (see the [TAA](#) website for more details), this union of over 1,700 members must coordinate the work of seven committees, an executive board of eighteen, over sixty active stewards and, in the spring of 2004, a strike committee, on a campus with close to one hundred departments. Despite the stress of the continuing contract crisis, TAA members, having observed communication breakdowns and occasional intra-organizational conflicts over the past two years, have wisely invested time over the past six months in revising their constitution and bylaws. In addition, activists are working to improve stewards' and all members' understanding of the structures of the union in order to be that much better prepared for the next battle in the ongoing struggle for a fair contract.

3.12. One way to avoid this kind of fragmentation of purpose and direction is to **ground the union in the stewards' council and the general membership meeting**. It is tempting to imitate corporate practice in the structure of our unions, but allowing the center of power to rest in an executive board is counter-productive, as well as undemocratic. Macro-level planning and final decision-making power, if vested in stewards and the general membership meeting, reinforces the truth that a union's true power is at the base. Collective actions are always more persuasive to "the boss" than any kind of legal or legislative power accorded the union by state or statute. To truly tap into the power of collective action, however, rank-and-file union members must feel that *they* run the union, not a small group of insiders. (For this reason, there is no such thing as too many stewards!) If this self-identification with the union is not consistently developed, when the moment comes for a showdown with the administration, it will be difficult to muster the needed show of strength.

3.13. For all these reasons, well-run union meetings are crucial. To encourage widespread participation and to maintain a coherent vision of the union's goals and plans, union meetings must be well planned and well executed. In a union of academicians, however, it is perhaps not surprising that such meetings can quickly expand far beyond the time commitment that most activists are willing to make. Accustomed to intellectual debate over the course of a class or seminar period that may last from 50 minutes to 3 hours, union meetings of *any* academic local can come to resemble a graduate seminar.

3.14. This natural tendency must be disciplined, lest members be driven away from activism by meetings that seem to go on forever and yet accomplish very little. Academics in a union must learn to **differentiate between deliberative and decision-making meetings**. Academic seminars are deliberative, intellectual exercises; union meetings can (and should) involve intellectual deliberation, but in the end, they must lead to decisions, plans, strategies, task assignments, and deadlines.

3.15. The role of meeting chair is key. The chair of a union meeting must take the role of facilitator, rather than participant, asking such questions as: What is the purpose of this meeting, to explore a question or to make a decision? How much time will we allow for exploration of this question before making a decision? What is the scope of our decision-making power? Does this question properly belong before a different body of the union? If we need more information before making a decision, how will we gather it? What is our deadline for a decision? Will we strive for complete consensus, or will we vote? If there is a vote, what is the threshold for passage? Contingent labor locals should take advantage of any training available in effective meeting management, and learn the basics (not the intricacies) of Roberts' Rules of Order.

3.16. Embodied in the questions noted above is another key issue: the ability to **prioritize and set deadlines**. Successful contingent locals will constantly be challenged by the desire to accomplish more while under the handicap of high membership and leadership turnover. The ability to set reasonable goals, set deadlines to accomplish them, and stick to those deadlines is closely tied to maintaining a feeling of success and high morale among the rank and file and leadership alike. The rhythm of the academic year imposes a certain stability, but it also imposes certain limitations on goals and deadlines. Is it realistic to set of goal of doubling our membership if we have a 30% turnover rate? How many days (or weeks) notice do we need to give in order to expect a large turnout at a membership meeting? What is the latest point in the semester that we can realistically expect to have activists working on a plan? If members accept that limitations exist, this knowledge will push activists to set priorities—and set aside worthy goals or plans that are simply not practical. This is often a difficult limitation for enthusiastic and committed union members to accept, but to ignore it is to invite burnout and failed plans.

3.17. The final step in stabilizing and securing a strong and vibrant contingent labor local is perhaps the most difficult: **institutionalizing knowledge** and experience. It is difficult to commit to the apparent diversion of human resources to institutionalization tasks. Often, union members will ask, "Instead of writing this down, shouldn't we be out organizing new members?" Local leaders must come to see institutionalization tasks—specifically, the creation of manuals and the documentation of policy and practice—as an investment in the local's future, not a diversion from today's crisis. While these documents cannot replace human transmission of knowledge, they can certainly supplement, and may in some cases be the only bridge that exists between today's leaders and past leaders' knowledge and experience. Simply and clearly written manuals for each officer position, workshop curricula, and up-to-date databases with key information are a good start. Keeping them up to date with current information is crucial: a manual that hasn't been updated for four or five years is probably not useful.

3.18. TAA activists have recognized the importance of institutional knowledge and responded in part, by creating a Contract Enforcement Committee. This committee responds to day-to-day grievance cases. But more importantly, from the perspective of the long-term health of the union, it focuses on tracking grievances and looking for patterns, documenting past practice, maintaining a computerized database of

incidents (whether resulting in a formal grievance or not), publicizing key contract rights to the full membership, and making ongoing educational workshops available to all officers and stewards.

3.19. In the wake of the Spring 2004 strike, TAA officers again recognized the importance of documenting what had happened so that the knowledge, experience, and processes that led to the strike would not be lost to future members. A few weeks after the close of the Spring 2004 semester, they hired a TAA member with experience as a historical archivist to catalog and organize the massive amounts of photos, documents, meeting minutes, and other material accumulated during the strike and the long deliberations leading up to it.

3.20. By acknowledging this institutional work as crucial and directing resources to it, TAA members have made an important investment in the future—in a real sense, they are repaying the investments made by their counterparts in the past. Or, given the nature of turnover in a contingent labor union, it's perhaps more accurate to say they're "paying it forward": giving something to the next generation out of respect for the gifts given to them by past generations.

### **Contingent Academic Labor: Modeling the Best of Unionism**

4.1. Graduate employee and contingent faculty unions have played a key role in reinvigorating the academic union movement. The structural problems inherent in unions whose members are transient and, due to their often oppressive working conditions, under special stress are indeed formidable. They are not, however, irresolvable. The conditions of transient academic workers merely highlight the importance of grounding a union in broad-based participation and democratic decision making, rather than personality-based, closed systems. Successful contingent academic labor unions can be a model for the best of unionism in all settings. Their special challenge is the need to retain the best of democratic practice while dealing with the constant need to be in "new organizing campaign" mode. Having witnessed two graduate employee locals manage to strike this balance, despite occasional setbacks and losses, it seems clear to me that it *can* be done.

### **Notes**

1 The "Wisconsin Idea," advocated by Charles Van Hise, Robert M. La Follette, and Charles McCarthy in the early years of the twentieth century, referred to the duty of a public university to carry its knowledge and expertise beyond the campus to benefit the general public. For a short history, see [http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel\\_schugurensky/assignment1/1907wisconsin.html](http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel_schugurensky/assignment1/1907wisconsin.html).

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