



Zabel, G. and Brill, H. (1999). Adjunct faculty organizing in Boston. *Workplace*, 3, 71-76.

## **Adjunct Faculty Organizing in Boston**

Gary Zabel and Harry Brill

Boston has the highest concentration of colleges and universities of any city in the world. There are 58 institutions of higher learning within a ten mile radius of the urban center. Along with medical and financial services, the higher education industry is the city's biggest employer. Each week its "human resources" departments send out paychecks to tens of thousands of workers--custodians, clerical staff, cafeteria employees, full-time professors, and a large and growing number of adjunct faculty members.

The burgeoning character of the last-mentioned sector of the higher ed workforce is of course in harmony with larger trends. Adjunct faculty are now 47% of the teaching staff at colleges and universities nationally, and will soon comprise an absolute majority. In general, Boston adjuncts share the working conditions of their colleagues from Atlanta to Bangor, from San Diego to Seattle. They are poorly paid, generally work without medical or pension benefits, and have little or no job security.

Some Boston adjuncts conform to what was the dominant model 25 or 30 years ago: that of the professional person with a full-time job teaching a course or two on weekends or evenings. But if that model is not quite an anomaly, it nonetheless represents a shrinking percentage of the so-called part-time teaching force. In 1999, the majority of Boston adjuncts are career academics who can't get full-time work at any single workplace, though many shoulder more than full-time loads by cobbling together courses at two, three, sometimes four institutions. They are the direct producers of the cheap credit hours that sustain an increasingly bloated and well-paid administrative bureaucracy. Tired and often dispirited, they're also becoming angry, and they're beginning to organize on a variety of fronts.

### **Victory at UMass Boston**

The recent upsurge in Bostonian adjunct activism began a year and a half ago around the time of the Teamster strike to improve the conditions of part-time workers at UPS. The Boston papers and television networks gave especially prominent coverage to the strike since the picket line in the nearby town of Somerville was the most militant in the country. Over the course of several days, police arrested 28 picketers for trying to block truckers from scabbing. Inspired by the audacity and eventual success of the Teamsters' struggle, a handful of UMass Boston adjunct faculty members met in July 1997 to discuss the agenda they wanted their union to carry to contract negotiations set to begin the following spring. The initial meeting occurred under the auspices of the Faculty-Staff Union (FSU), an affiliate of the National Education Association. The core group of adjuncts, however, quickly realized that they would have to organize independently if they were to stand a chance of winning anything substantial.

A substantial number of part-time faculty members were included in the FSU's bargaining unit at the time the union won recognition 22 years ago. However part-timers must teach 5 bargaining unit courses over 3 consecutive semesters, or 8 over 5, in order to be admitted into the union, a status now extended to 115 people. 109 part-timers teach in the so-called "day university" but without carrying enough courses for

bargaining unit membership, while another 116 teach only in the Continuing Education Division which is not unionized at all. Union negotiators claim to have tried to loosen the prerequisites for bargaining unit membership, but their efforts have been half-hearted at best, and little has been accomplished in this respect.

Failure of the union leadership to mount a serious campaign to expand bargaining unit membership is symptomatic of its underlying lack of interest in part-timer concerns. Another symptom is the fact that, while they are allowed 2 representatives on the FSU's 11 person Executive Committee, part-time faculty members are prohibited by the union by-laws from holding the offices of President or Vice President. For these and other reasons, there can be little doubt that the union's principal function has been to serve as an instrument for pursuing the interests of full-time faculty, especially those who are tenured or tenure track.

Still, union leaders have been susceptible to organized pressure from part-timers in the past. During the contract negotiations of 1986, a Part-Time Faculty Committee formed and mounted a campaign on behalf of a set of demands, most importantly involving a substantial wage increase, that succeeded in winning the support of students, staff, and full-time faculty. 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 bargaining table. Although there was no part-time faculty member on the union negotiating team, the Part-Time Faculty Committee sent an observer to each of the negotiating sessions. Moreover, at a crucial moment, the Committee and its supporters picketed a session, angering union negotiators, but also forcing them onto the picket line. By 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.

Although the Committee continued to meet for a couple of years following the 1986 victory, objective factors quickly made it impossible to build on that achievement. Specifically, 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 on to jobs replaced the elan of the '86 campaign.

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. At the same time, Republican Acting Governor Paul Celluci was involved in his first gubernatorial race in a State in which Democrats outnumber Republicans 2 to 1. In an attempt to counteract his disadvantage, Celluci courted labor support, going so far as to appear on the UPS picket line. Fear of active opposition by state workers led him to seek early resolutions of unsettled contracts, creating an opening for part-time faculty to assert an agenda. But activists knew that opening would be useful only if the FSU leadership could be forced to walk through it.

In the Fall semester of 1997, the handful of activists who had met around the time of the Teamster victory reconstituted the Part-Time Faculty Committee. The Committee began by drafting a survey that asked part-time faculty members both within and outside the union to determine what demands they wanted pursued at negotiations, and followed the survey with a general meeting of part-timers conducted over two days to accommodate those with incompatible schedules. More than 40 people attended the two installments of the meeting and overwhelmingly adopted health and pension benefits as their top priority, a result also indicated by the survey.

Drawing from those who attended the meeting as well as other face-to-face contacts, the original core group of 3 people expanded into an active Committee whose frequent meetings were attended at any given time by between ten and fifteen people.

Some of the FSU leaders complained that the Part-Time Faculty Committee constituted a self-selected group, lacking the legitimacy to represent part-timers. That viewpoint reflected a lack of understanding of grassroots, participatory democracy. Since the members of the union's Executive Committee are elected by the organized faculty, they certainly govern by consent. However, the leadership makes little effort to involve the membership, and in fact sometimes resists such involvement, preferring to mediate between administrators and faculty members rather than helping the latter to advocate for themselves.

In contrast, the Part-Time Faculty Committee refused to erect formal or even informal barriers separating members and leaders. All part-time faculty members as well as their full-time faculty supporters were encouraged to attend weekly Committee meetings, propose, discuss, and vote on issues, and implement decisions by serving on a wide range of subcommittees. In response to occasional objections concerning its manner of proceeding, the Committee did not simply defend its position or agree to reevaluate its stance. It invited the discontented to attend Committee meetings, even if only temporarily, to air and advocate for their position on an equal basis.

From the general meeting of part-timers as well as survey results, the Committee had a broad mandate to pursue health and pension benefits. Because of a progressive element in Massachusetts law, there was an obvious way to go about this. Any State employee who works half-time or more is entitled to full health and pension benefits. The UMass administration had arbitrarily defined part-time faculty members who teach 2 courses per term ( $\frac{2}{3}$  of a full-time faculty member's teaching load) as .4 time in order to avoid having to provide them benefits. This definition is especially ludicrous in that many part-timers also serve on committees, advise students, and engage in research or other forms of creative work. The Part-Time Faculty Committee decided to challenge this arbitrary definition and demand half-time status for those teaching 2 courses per term, roughly  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the unionized part-time faculty. Full benefits would follow as a matter of law.

The first obstacle the Committee faced to implementing its strategy was the opposition of the FSU's acting president, who was worried that part-timers' achievement of half-time status would somehow undermine the full-time faculty. In order to circumvent that opposition, a full-time faculty supporter drafted a petition directed to the entire full-time faculty that was highly critical of the administration for understating the work load of part-time faculty members so as to avoid providing benefits. In each department a faculty member was responsible for talking with colleagues about the issues involved and obtaining their signatures. The petition, which was reprinted in the school newspaper, was signed by 175 full-time members of the faculty. Although aimed at the administration, the petition also served to demonstrate to the union leadership that the part-time agenda was widely supported by union members. Though the acting president lobbied against the initiative, he was isolated by the widespread support it elicited.

Shortly after the petition results were made public, the Part-Time Faculty Committee held a joint meeting with the FSU Executive Committee and presented its agenda in a forceful but disciplined fashion. As a result, the members of the Executive Committee voted not only to support the part-timers' agenda, but to make it the priority issue at the negotiating table.

This was a crucial moment in the organizing campaign, but it had to be reenforced by broadening and deepening the support of the whole University community. The point was not only to pressure the administration, but to keep the union's feet to the fire by making it impossible for negotiators to abandon part-timers as the bargaining process wore on. The Committee worked very hard to make sure the campus was inundated with flyers, posters, buttons, and articles and sympathetic editorials in the student newspaper. It also organized two additional general meetings of the part-time faculty which enabled a large number of part-timers to make crucial decisions about the direction of the campaign. By tabling over the course of 3 days, adjunct activists collected 2000 signatures on a petition in support of their demands, mostly from students. And finally, in April of 1998, the campaign reached its peak with a mass picket. On

a beautiful spring day, 200 people gathered in front of the Quinn Administration Building and walked the line in support of health and pension benefits for the part-time faculty. In addition to part-timers, the picket included full-time faculty, staff, students, and most members of the FSU Executive Committee, including the acting president (now vice president) who had opposed the petition to the full-time faculty. It was the largest labor action to occur on campus in 20 years.

Shortly before contract negotiations were concluded in June, the Part-Time Faculty Committee came under pressure from the union negotiating team. The administration had already agreed to award half-time status and full benefits to all adjunct faculty members who taught 2 courses per term. But it wanted to maintain the fiction that 2 courses did not in themselves constitute half-time work, undoubtedly to protect itself from lawsuits over back benefits. So it insisted that part-timers would have to take on formal service work to qualify for half-time status, yet it wanted them to engage in such work without additional remuneration. With the exception of the one adjunct representative on the negotiating team, the union negotiators made it clear that they felt the deal was the best that could be achieved. The Committee, however, decided to resist this pressure. Members discussed the possibility of picketing the next negotiating session. But, since the Committee had already developed considerable credibility and strength, it decided to light the candle with a match rather than a blowtorch. It drafted a letter to the negotiators asserting that the arrangement was unacceptable in the absence of additional compensation. When the letter was delivered by certified mail, the chief negotiator and several others blew their tops, but were nonetheless caught in a bind. In the next bargaining session, the union held fast, and the administration gave in to the part-timers' demands on this issue.

The result was a three-year contract that included the following provisions: 1) Half-time, salaried status and full medical, dental, and pension benefits for all part-timers teaching 2 courses per semester (currently more than 2/3rds of union part-timers). 2) A 21% increase in base pay to \$4000 per course. 3) Additional "appropriate professional responsibilities" compensated by a cumulative \$200 bump in each semester of the new contract. 4) An additional 16% wage increase over the life of the contract.

All in all, a resounding victory.

### **Municipal Organizing**

The UMass victory shows the importance of organizing on a campus-by-campus basis. That is where adjunct faculty power ultimately has to be generated and asserted. But the campus-by-campus approach also has some important limitations. Though groups of adjuncts can always get together and agitate on behalf of their interests on a single campus, it can take years to achieve collective bargaining rights under state and national labor relations law. If a substantial part of the adjunct population on the campus concerned is transient, spending only a semester or two on the job, the original union organizing committee may disintegrate long before it's able to achieve bargaining unit status. But even forming a bargaining unit and winning a good contract on a single campus addresses only one part of the problem faced by underpaid and otherwise exploited adjunct faculty. Most adjuncts teach at more than one institution in order to make ends meet. Many essentially live out of their cars, earning the nickname "freeway flyers." They have been compared to the vagrant, train-hopping laborers of the early twentieth century, as well as the migrant farm workers of more recent times. The only way that mobile workers can defend their interests is by organizing on a scale that encompasses a number of workplaces. In light of the concentration of colleges and universities in the Greater Boston area, this recognition implies adjunct faculty organizing on a municipal scale.

Some of the UMass Boston activists began to talk about the possibility of municipal organizing early on in their campaign, but the demands of the immediate struggle left little time for following up on the idea.

After the victory, however, they contacted the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), having become aware of a similar train of thought in that national organization of faculty members.

More than one adjunct has expressed surprise at the AAUP's interest in the adjunct issue. After all, the group has a rather respectable, even stodgy reputation as a professional association principally devoted to protecting academic standards and collegiality. Still, in 1972 the national organization decided to allow chapters to engage in collective bargaining if they were so inclined, and several became functioning union locals, especially on private campuses. In the spring of 1979, an AAUP chapter conducted a surprisingly militant and successful strike at Boston University. By entering into an alliance with the secretarial and librarians unions, the chapter was able to defeat John Silber, the notoriously abusive BU president. But what Silber lost in the streets he regained in the courts. He was one of the complainants in the 1980 *Yeshiva* Decision in which the US Supreme Court ruled that faculty members at private colleges and universities are not eligible to enjoy the protections of the National Labor Relations Act because they exercise managerial authority. In the aftermath of *Yeshiva*, the BU union was decertified, as were AAUP unions on other campuses. Nineteen years later AAUP membership has dwindled to 45,000. The organization has begun to focus on adjunct faculty organizing as a way of building its membership base. By no conceivable stretch of the imagination do adjuncts wield managerial authority, and so they are not covered by *Yeshiva*.

This emphasis on adjunct organizing is welcome in itself since it has no counterpart in the other two major faculty unions, the NEA and the AFT. But the AAUP has gone even further by hiring an organizer to develop a model of adjunct municipal organization. After his meeting with the UMass activists, the national leadership of the AAUP decided to implement the model as a pilot project in Boston.

The idea is to pull together a city-wide group of adjunct faculty activists that can begin to shape the character of adjunct work in the city as a whole. It would start by defining a basic standard for wages and working conditions in the Greater Boston Area. The group would then target campuses that fail to meet the standard in campaigns involving adjunct activists throughout the region. The campaigns would strike alliances with students, staff, and full-time faculty, appeal to churches, community organizations, and unions for support, engage in postering, leafleting, informational picketing and so on, all by way of pressuring the administrations concerned to meet the basic standard. Eventually it might be possible to create a hiring hall that would supply qualified adjuncts to institutions meeting the standard, withdraw labor from those that do not, establish a portable benefits package, and otherwise enable adjuncts to improve their lot throughout the city and its environs. Though administrators are sure to raise the boogeyman of "outside interference," activists have an easy reply: You can't create and take advantage of a contingent workforce and then try to prevent it from organizing wherever it likes.

In a way, this project harks back to the organizing drives the Industrial Workers of the World (Wobblies) conducted in the first couple of decades of this century among "hoboes," "harvest stiffs," and other contingent and temporary workers of the period. The wobblies crafted a mobile organizing strategy for a footloose workforce, agitating in temporary encampments, riding the rails, concentrating its forces on short notice wherever it made sense to wage a battle. But this is not merely a historical connection. The wobblies are alive and kicking in the US, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere, and they have a general membership branch in Boston that has become active in the adjunct faculty struggle.

The branch organized a meeting in Cambridge a few months ago at which two speakers from the UMass Boston Part-Time Faculty Committee discussed the tactics involved in their victory with a group of 25 people. Two adjunct faculty members from Suffolk University present at the meeting caucused after the discussion with a wobbly who happens to be a Suffolk full-time professor. The three were subsequently joined by a UMass Boston activist who also teaches part time at Suffolk. The four initiated a drive to create an AAUP chapter that would enable Suffolk adjuncts to pressure their administration for

concessions. An initial meeting at the University drew 30 participants and resulted in a superb and sympathetic front page article in the student newspaper.

An IWW-AAUP alliance. Who knows what other marvels Boston adjunct organizing has in store?

### **The Third National Congress of COCAL**

Municipal organizing in Boston is also linked with a larger, national effort. Five Suffolk activists now meet regularly with a similar number from UMass Boston, the AAUP organizer mentioned above, another wobbly activist, and more occasionally with adjunct faculty members and graduate TAs from other area campuses in a planning group for the Third National Congress of the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL).

COCAL, which includes adjunct, temporary, and nontenure track faculty, as well as graduate student teaching assistants and research assistants, was formed at the concluding session of a Second National Congress of these groups held in New York City at the CUNY Graduate Center last April. The Second National Congress was attended by more than 100 contingent faculty activists, and followed by about a year-and-a-half the First National Congress which was held in Washington DC.

The Second Congress was organized for the most part by CUNY Adjuncts Unite, a group of talented activists that has been in a long-running conflict with its AFT union, a local that has systematically marginalized CUNY's adjunct faculty even though it comprises a majority of bargaining unit members. At the conclusion of what most participants found an inspiring event, the Congress organizers asked two members of the UMass Boston Part-Time Faculty Committee who were in attendance to take responsibility for organizing a Third National Congress the following spring in Boston.

The Third Congress promises to be an important event. A Friday evening plenary meeting and social gathering will take place at Suffolk University on Friday, April 16. The all-day Saturday session will occur at UMass Boston beginning with a morning plenary panel bringing together contingent faculty activists from California, Georgia, Michigan, Montreal, New York, and Boston to report on and discuss the struggles occurring in their regions. The panel discussion will be followed by workshops before lunch on municipal and regional campaigns, making alliances with full-time faculty, and how to organize a graduate employee union. After lunch, there will be workshops on legislative strategies, getting undergraduates involved, and corporatization of higher ed. Following the workshops, representatives of the AAUP, NEA, AFT, UAW, Hotel and Restaurant Workers, IWW, and United Electrical Workers (all with a presence on campuses) will participate in a Labor Roundtable on strategies for organizing contingent faculty. A short plenary session will conclude the Congress, though COCAL's steering committee will meet on Sunday to plan the organization's activities for the following year. (More details are on the COCAL website: <http://www.omega.umb.edu/~cocal/>).

It's easy to see from the preceding account that synergy is developing between campus-based organizing, the municipal project, and the attempt to establish a national organization. To some extent, each of the efforts is independent of the others, and yet a number of activists are now working on all three projects in common. Ideas are circulating from one venue to another, new people are becoming active, and successes are inspiring further work. All involved have the feeling that something exciting is happening. Hopefully with good reason. They may be in the process of helping to create a powerful social movement.

*Gary Zabel and Harry Brill, University of Massachusetts, Boston*