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## **CAMPUS EQUITY WEEK:**

### *Contingent Faculty Make News*

Joe Berry

From October 28 to November 3, 2001, thousands of non-tenure-track faculty on over 200 campuses across the US and Canada spoke up for equity. In over 25 US states and 6 Canadian provinces, the “new majority” college teachers made a concerted noise continent-wide for the first time. Supported by all the major faculty unions (National Education Association (NEA), American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and American Association of University Professors (AAUP)) as well as the Coalition of Grad Employees Unions (CGEU) and many professional disciplinary organizations, Campus Equity Week (CEW) brought the issues of unequal pay and benefits, lack of job security, and general disrespect and invisibility to a broad audience on the campuses and beyond. In spite of the 9-11 events, newspapers coast to coast covered actions that included rallies, teach-ins, petition campaigns, street theater, musical shows, a tour for legislators and reporters, testimony before various government bodies, and even gubernatorial declarations in Washington and Oregon. The week demonstrated that there is now a national movement among the literally hundreds of thousands of adjuncts, part-timers, lecturers, and visiting professors who make up the casualized contingent majority in college classrooms today.<sup>1</sup>

CEW is in some ways an example of an older form of organizing, last seen in the United States in the public employees’ movement of the 1960s and 1970s and before that in the industrial union movement of the early and mid 1930s. This is “do it yourself” organizing. This means it was not initiated by established unions as part of an organizing strategy. Instead it was initiated by groups of workers who came together on their own and only afterward sought out a union for affiliation. The roots of this wave of contingent faculty organizing can be traced back to the 1970’s, when large numbers of non-tenure track teachers began to be hired. In California in the 1970s, independent organizing by the California Association of Part-Time Instructors (CAPI) in the community college system sparked a serious debate over whether part-timers should be included in bargaining units with tenured full-timers under the then-new collective bargaining law. Joint units became the pattern and the result, over the years, was a pattern of both unionization and better conditions in California than in most of the rest of the nation. Similar initiatives took place in Washington state, on the East Coast, and in some disciplinary associations like the Modern Languages Association, but there really was no national coordination or even much communication until the 1990s.

From a 1996 beginning, a national movement gradually gained a sense of itself through the four conferences of the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL). The last COCAL, in January 2001 in San Jose, became more than just an experience-exchange and took the major step of attempting to launch a North American week of action. The inspiration to try this came largely from the success of a similar coordinated effort the previous spring in the California community colleges. The momentum of the California idea had consolidated a coalition there of all the bargaining unions and other faculty groups to support what was called A2K (Action 2000), Part-Time Equity Week. Such an action was only possible because there was already a network of union organization and experience, as well as an independent

organization of contingent faculty, the California Part-Time Faculty Association, which worked as a pressure and lobbying group both inside and outside the existing unions and senates of the 107 community colleges, the largest segment of higher ed in California. The original discussions that led to CEW actually took place in yet another forum, the Campus Action Group of the National (now North American) Alliance For Fair Employment, an umbrella alliance of contingent worker groups, where representatives from California discussed their experiences with contingent faculty activists from the rest of the nation.

A2K, along with other statewide actions in Washington state and elsewhere, spurred the Campus Equity Week idea and gave it enough credibility that all of the US and Canada national unions got on board (though they neither conceived nor controlled it). This was bottom up organizing at its best. Whether it can translate into self-organization on a continuing basis is now the most important question.

There are some positive indications that the answer might be yes. CEW sparked enthusiasm in the South where little activity had been reported previously. The alliance with the Canadians, with their greater militancy, clearer political perspective and class consciousness, and commitment to bilingual, inclusive organizing, promises to be a very positive influence. The development of the [CEWACTION.org](http://CEWACTION.org) website and the listserv associated with it demonstrated a new level of sophistication for the movement and showed that a lot can be done with very little money for printing or postage.

Chicago was one of the most hopeful areas for the future. Besides events on local campuses, a metro CEW coalition formed, including both state unions, Illinois Education Association/NEA and Illinois Federation of Teachers/AFT, (despite a history of bitter rivalry) their major higher ed locals, AAUP groups, local organizing committees and unorganized folks. Within the coalition, the University of Illinois Chicago Graduate Employees Organization (GEO/IFT), with their wonderful band GEO Speedwagon played a particularly consistent and active role. Hopefully, this last is a harbinger for the national movement since the graduate employee union movement has frequently kept its distance from adjunct organizing.

On the Thursday before the October 28 official start of CEW, nearly 100 adjuncts and supporters crowded into a meeting room at the College of DuPage (COD), the suburban Chicago institution that may be the largest community college on one campus in the US, employing over 2,000 adjuncts. The occasion was a hearing with local state legislators, all conservative Republicans, who had been pressured by the union organizing campaign into calling a hearing to consider possible changes in the state education labor relations law. Speaker after speaker denounced the present law, which as interpreted by the state courts, allows public community college administrators in Illinois to refuse to recognize and bargain with unions of contingent faculty, even if they demonstrate overwhelming support. Just a few days after CEW, the college administration agreed to respect the results of a union election, albeit for a much-reduced bargaining unit. The election was promptly held, and after a 6 to 1 victory, the first 150 adjuncts now will be represented by the College of DuPage Adjunct Association, IEA/NEA. As one of the (rival) Illinois Federation of Teachers staff reps said at a later coalition meeting, "If the only thing to have come out of CEW in Chicago was the victory at College at DuPage, it all would have been worth it."

But that wasn't all of it. The Chicago CEW coalition sponsored two rallies that generated some press attention. A conveniently-scheduled public hearing of the Illinois Board of Higher Education, which oversees all higher ed in the state, provided another opportunity for public testimony from union reps and individual contingent faculty themselves from a number of institutions. A benefit concert with four bands drew a packed house to the Hideout, a local bar run by sympathetic public school teachers. The bands themselves were so impressed by the struggle that they donated all their proceeds from CD sales that evening. Petitions in both the universities and community colleges garnered hundreds of signatures. A final conference with over 50 in attendance saw Barbara Wolf present her new movie, heard from Cary Nelson (author of *Will Teach for Food*), and then voted to continue the work of CEW by founding a Chicago chapter of COCAL.

This last may turn out to be the most important part of CEW in Chicago if a metro-wide strategy develops to organize the whole contingent academic labor force regardless of their momentary employer, along the lines laid out first by Boston COCAL in 1999. Despite some rocky moments of organizational suspicion and the inevitable injection of some internal organizational politics into the mix, contingent faculty in Chicago seem poised to take some big steps.

Soon after CEW, on November 28 grad employees in GEO took over the University President's office on the Chicago campus in support of a two-day job action by their downstate sisters and brothers at U of IL in Urbana/Champaign, all demanding administration recognition of their union and commencement of bargaining. This represents the highest point so far in the years-long struggle to gain unionization and a contract in the University of Illinois, despite a long series of legal and regulatory setbacks. This is a fight that is clearly not going away and serves as an inspiration for others in the area. The support rally outside during the office occupation drew speakers from IFT, IEA, Illinois and Chicago Federations of Labor, Midwest Regional AFL-CIO, Service Employees Local 73 representing other University of Illinois Chicago workers, adjunct faculty and clerical unions from Roosevelt University, the Chicago Interfaith Committee on Worker Issues, the Jobs with Justice labor-community coalition, assorted faculty, and other local unions. Just having all these folks see each other there for this struggle builds the movement for the future.

Finally, there now seems to be a serious motion toward organization among the largest single group of contingent faculty in the City of Chicago, the Chicago City Colleges lecturers. In the run-up for CEW, a hundred of them signed petitions for better pay and benefits during an administration sponsored adjunct meeting with top administrators looking right at them when they signed. Then they went on to radically change the meeting with a barrage of questions and complaints directed at the Chancellor and Vice Chancellor. Numbering well over one thousand, these folks are some of the most poorly paid college teachers in the area—teaching some of the poorest students. If CEW proves to have sparked organization among these faculty, the entire contingent academic labor context in Chicago will never be the same. One can only hope.

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<sup>i</sup> A different version of this article also will appear in Sunrise, the journal of the Organizing Resource Group of the NEA. Another version was presented at the January, 2002, meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association.