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## COLLECTIVE CONTINGENCY

Nick Tingle

My union, the University of California—American Federation of Teachers, has been renegotiating our contract with the representatives of the administration of the University of California for two years now. A colleague, in the writing program where I work, sits at the actual bargaining table. He told me about what had happened at some recent sessions. It was horrifying. The "other side" started out by asking my side why we had not accepted their offer of a two-percent wage increase (during negotiations everything is suspended including wage increases). My side was utterly stupefied because to the best of their collective recollection no such offer had ever been extended. What was going on? Maybe the UC's new chief negotiator, who just came on board, had been told something that wasn't true? Or maybe it was some sort of strange tactic? And somebody at the same meeting brought up the whole issue of whether or not Lecturers aren't teaching assistants. I had thought the spike had been driven through the heart of that one way back at the original negotiations during the 80s. No. Damn it. We are not teaching assistants.

My colleague said the whole experience had been sort of unreal. I felt de-realized after listening to him. That—feeling de-realized—is not a sensation I at all enjoy, and when my colleague departed, I felt pretty gloomy. I had to remind myself that when ever I heard about the negotiations I felt pretty gloomy, and then I reminded myself that I would not be here to feel pretty gloomy had it not been for the union in the first place. And then I reminded myself that the gloominess wasn't something the union created. My "employer" created it way back in the late 70s and early 80s, when the UC started hiring people under a then little-known job category called "Visiting Lecturer." I was hired as one of those in the fall of 1980.

Lecturers quickly pooled in many spots on my particular campus, especially in the languages and in the English Department that had a sequence of writing courses. At one point, the English Department had about 50 Lecturers, many, if not most, with Ph.Ds. The workload was heavy, eight classes of writing per year, and we were two and three to an office. We didn't have telephones and had trouble getting library cards, but did get medical benefits, and if we were in the system 5 years, we would be "vested" in the retirement plan. The kicker there was that the university made no secret of the fact that none of us would be hired for a fifth year.

Rather we were informed in no uncertain terms that each of us had a one-year self-terminating contract, and that we would only get four of those. When the last and fourth self-terminating contract terminated, we were to consider ourselves as, well--how shall I say--terminated. We would receive no notice of termination and no cause would be given. I used to wonder if my self-terminating contract was like the message at the beginning of "Mission Impossible" and that my contract would self-destruct and turn to ashes as soon as my year was up.

But then something happened. The American Federation of Teachers got wind of the situation. Mostly a K-12 organization, they wanted to get a foothold in higher education. So they took, at their own initiative and expense, "the-four-years-and-you-are-out-rule," to PERB, the California Public Employee Relations Board. It still had people sitting on it appointed by crazy Jerry Brown. And the AFT won; the rule was

declared illegal. And right after that the AFT sought ratification as the sole, legally recognized bargaining unit for all Lecturers in the UC System in negotiations with the University of California.

I am not the bandwagon type, but I jumped on this one. And for the better part of the next three years spent all my "free time" organizing: tromping around campus, trying to locate fellow Lecturers, putting up posters, cabaling with my fellow converts to the cause, holding meeting, after meeting, after meeting, to which mostly nobody came. Then we held a vote. About 30 Lecturers out of 200 or more at my campus bothered to show, but the 30 that did all said, "Union Yes."

And immediately thereafter, Lecturers entered into negotiations with the UC. We were overmatched, though. The UC had a hired staff of negotiators, who never got tired, had comfortable salaries and cheerful homes to go home to. The Lecturers negotiated during on our "own time"—while teaching a heavier load than the tenure-stream faculty—and during the two years of negotiations all the members of our team were warned by a doctor to stop if they did not wish to lose all their hair or teeth or do fatal damage to their health.

The final contract proved weak. We traded away our right to strike clause for an affirmative action clause. But provisions for a form of continuing employment did appear in the contract. After six years on one-year contracts, a Lecturer could be put up by his or her Department for something like a tenure review. If you got through that—and it remains an "if"—you could get a three-year renewable contract, depending upon performance and whether the classes you were hired to teach were still being offered. Pretty flimsy, I suppose, if one judges one's employment situation by the holy grail of tenure, but flimsy or not, it's the reason I am still here, along with a number of other colleagues, some 20 years after I was first hired as a Visiting Lecturer.

My experience suggests that unionizing could be one way to inhibit the ongoing exploitation of contingent labor in the academic market across the nation. This may seem a little less than a ringing endorsement. But I don't want to sugar coat the pill. The United States is NOT pro-union. Reagan and his cohorts used every possible power of the executive branch to undermine unions throughout the nation. The California Supreme Court has held that it would be a violation of some employers' rights to put any restriction on their ability to hire and fire based on the age or length of service of the person fired. In some states and municipalities it is legal to use public funds to fight unions.

I was surprised to read that last dismal fact. And then I was surprised that I was surprised. How could I forget we live in a capitalist society, indeed, THE capitalist society? And the history of unionization shows that whenever the employers have needed it, they have been able to count on the support of the government (as well as the media: themselves corporations), sometimes in the form of the police, the national guard, or the army to repress "labor unrest." I bring up this more general point just to suggest that, if a person wants to act union, he or she has also got to think union. And that means facing up, without one hopes too great an experience of disillusionment, to the nature of the corporate-capitalist beast. From where I sit, at the bottom of the heap, I have had over the years a pretty good--as I call it--anus-eye view of the university and its workings, and what I have seen ain't pretty.

Many folks, I do believe, head into academia with the vague notion that the university may stand for something or represent some type of ideal. The bloom is pretty much off that rose for me. Universities, especially the large ones, are businesses. If they have ideals or values they are no different from those held by IBM or Microsoft. Universities fancy themselves in the knowledge business, and they believe that if they are to succeed they must keep production high and costs very low. The University of California will do whatever it can to hire and reward those people who produce positive cash flow, for example by bringing in grant money and generating patents). And it will give as little as possible to those whose research doesn't "pay," and the staff, contingent labor, and Lecturers brought on primarily to teach. Universities are in no way, even though many draw upon public funds, above "market forces."

I have been around so long that some of my tenured colleagues actually think I am tenured too. Whenever I bring up something related to my employment status or to the union, their faces go all funny and their eyes glaze over. They just don't want to hear it and feel a little embarrassed. The fact is, I understand. I am not saintly enough to believe I would have an easier time remembering if I were in their shoes. The problem isn't people; it's the set-up.

This is part of thinking union. In going union, in working with it and supporting it with my time and my money, I am simply following my rational self-interest relative to my particular employment situation. I am amazed at how many people don't seem to be able to recognize their self-interest. Maybe that's because one keeps looking for a silver lining. But my situation tells me that the university does not value people like myself, teachers; we are considered recyclable. I, as a solitary individual, have no way at my disposal to change the mind of the King of the University living off somewhere in that Kafkaesque castle, even if there were such a person and such a castle.

What I do have—not exactly at my disposal—but at least as my representative, is the union. And the union—all of our money pooled together—has led to union staff persons, lawyers, and lobbyists. The overall purpose of this bureaucratic apparatus is to look after my "rights" as a laborer in the UC system. That said, unions are themselves far from perfect creatures. I have already indicated they are bureaucracies, and that is one strike against them. We, the Lecturers, went through a period, a few years back, of considering "disaffiliation." We were fed up with how much money was going to the AFT national and how little of it was coming back to our statewide organization and our locals. But when we threatened to bolt, the papa union, the big AFT, agreed to renegotiate the terms of our deal with them. We got more of our money back.

Historically, some Marxists have been unenthusiastic about unions, seeing them at best as provisional steps towards revolution. But the revolution hasn't come. Meanwhile, we are stuck with what Marx describes:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyll relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley ties feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superior" and it has left no other nexus between man and man than tanked self-interest, than callous cash payment. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasms, of Philistine sentimentality in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value\*.

I felt de-realized after listening to my colleague because, as Marx suggests, capitalism has altered human relations in a fundamental way. Sure, there is no way to go back to the feudal era, and who would want to? But in place of those threadbare and oppressive relations what we have now is "egotistical calculation" and the pursuit of naked self-interest.

This hurts me because I want to be recognized for my worth as a human being and I want to recognize others in that way too. Working with the union reminds me of the cold truth of the "cash nexus." In my workplace, as it is arranged by the University of California, I have very little "worth," at all, as a human being, only as a commodity.

I don't want to think of myself as a commodity. But my boss doesn't give me much chance to think otherwise. The UC negotiators sitting across the negotiating table from my side are just UC staff. They are commodities too. They are paid, as part of their job descriptions, to sit across from us, and one can be sure that sitting across from us is not a plum assignment. Their job description doesn't include finding out who Lecturers are and recognizing us for our worth as people. They have one goal: to get as much work out of us for as little as possible.

I wouldn't know this truth—about the cash nexus—in the particular way that I know it were it not for the union. I don't like this truth. It makes me cold to think there are no good guy and no bad guys, no conspiracy, and no King in the Castle, just the system and the brutal indifference that it breeds. Going union is a way of facing that truth and resisting it. When we union folk get together for our meetings, when we all pitch in to get out our local newsletter, I feel I am in the presence of peers. For a few hours out of every year, I feel a sort of warmth, collectively generated by our contingent beings. It isn't a fuzzy warmth, that's for sure. More like hoboes on hard times gathered around a fire down by the railroad tracks on a dark, cold night—happy for the fire and happy to share it. So while we may as a union be seeking no more than our naked self-interest, we generate a collective warmth by doing so. In that warmth I see the potential for the generation of human relations based on something other than the cash nexus and the icy waters of egotistical calculation. I may exaggerate the warmth, of course, but I am sure that the "system" will not regenerate what it necessarily destroys.

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