

Contingent Faculty before 2000

The inaugural issue of Radical Teacher in December 1975 was a welcome relief to many of us teaching part time in higher education (the majority of those now called “contingent” or “adjunct” faculty). An article by Paul Lauter, then in the American Studies Department at SUNY, Old Westbury, undercut administrators’ rationale for retrenchment and pointed to the special vulnerability of part-timers¹. A second article, by Susan O’Malley, who taught at Kingsborough Community College, provided the transcript of an interview she conducted with Toby Mortyssev. With her new Ph.D. from the CUNY Graduate Center, Toby was trying to make ends meet by holding three part-time jobs. “You feel like the migrant laborer of academia,” she said. Self-blame was unavoidable: “The way that there are no jobs get translated is, well, you’re just not good enough. It’s the sense that you’re just not up to t and if you were really good, you’d get a job. And that is, of course, not true.”² The third Radical Teacher issue, which appeared in November 1976, included the transcript of an interview Susan conducted with Rusty Eisenberg. After teaching for several years, Rusty had not been able to find a full-time job. “You’ve got to be perfect plus,” she told Susan. “I just wonder if a lot of people who have full professorships and very good positions, whether they would have ever made it to where they are now or to any place with the kinds of pressures all of us area under.”³

Nearly half of the fifth issue in July 1977 was devoted to part-timers. It opened with the report of a survey I conducted two years earlier at Santa Monica College (SMC), a large community college in Los Angeles Country. While enrollment rose approximately 20 percent between 1974 and 1976, the administration had increased the number of part-time instructors by more than 200 percent; the number of full-time faculty members grew by less than 10 percent. The administration rebuffed all

criticisms of the low pay scale for part timers by arguing that most had remunerative outside employment and did not rely on their teaching jobs for the bulk of their income. My survey found that approximately 50 percent of part-time instructors at SMC in 1977 taught in the humanities/social sciences division, 15 percent in the math-sciences division, 5 percent in physical education, 12 percent in the business division, and 17 percent in the vocational division. Not surprisingly, far more instructors in the business and vocational divisions than in other divisions held outside employment and their jobs tended to be more lucrative than those of others. By contrast, instructors in the humanities/social sciences were more likely than others to teach part time at other community colleges, perceive themselves primarily as educators, be willing to accept a full-time teaching position at SMC, and rely on their SMC salary for a significant proportion of their total income. As a result, they were more concerned than others with the low salary, lack of fringe benefits and office space, and inability to participate in departmental affairs.⁴ This article was followed by a collective portrait of the part-time CUNY faculty by Susan Blank and Beth Greenberg, a report of organizing untenured faculty at CUNY by Mary Vaughn, responses to my survey by Ruth S. Meyers, Barry Phillips, and Judith Combes Taylor, and commentary by Paul Lauter, summarizing the various strategies for change available to part timers.

These Radical Teacher issues were especially striking because part-timers were almost completely invisible at the time. The overwhelming majority of higher education faculty held either tenured or tenure-track appointments. The stereotype of a part-timer was a local businessman who stopped off at a college one night a week to share his practical knowledge with students in vocational classes. And, although a few part-time faculty had begun to organize, the prospects for unionization seemed dismal. Part-time teachers were a fragmented work force, with a high turnover rate. Some were fearful of speaking out because they lacked job security; others were reluctant to devote any efforts to improving jobs they perceived as temporary. But the faculty already had begun to undergo metamorphosis. Below I trace the first 25 years of that transformation.

The number of part-time faculty first rose between 1960 and 1970, when college administrators sought a cheap way to cope with the soaring undergraduate enrollment. The number of college students jumped from 3.8 million to 9.2 million in that decade. In 1960, 11 percent of the population between 25 and 29 had attended four or more years of college; in 1975, the proportion was 22 percent.⁵ That extraordinary enrollment increase was the result of the coming of age of the baby boomers, changes in the occupational structure, and the demands of working-class and racially marginalized youth for equal educational opportunity. Community colleges, which experienced the most rapid influx of students, were especially dependent on part-timers.

The proportion of part-timers in both two- and four-year colleges increased even more sharply during the 1970s. Between 1972 and 1977, the number of part-time teachers at four-year institutions jumped 73 percent, from 120,000 to 208,000. During the same period, the number of full-time faculty rose by only 18 percent, from 380,000 to 448,000.⁶ By 1982, part-timers constituted approximately a third of all faculty in higher education.⁷ Because the period of rapidly expanding enrollment had ended, administrators had to find a new way to justify their growing reliance on part-time employees. They did so in two ways. First, part timers did not need higher pay because they had full-time positions elsewhere. Second, they provided “flexibility” during a period of declining or shifting enrollment, a position the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education endorsed.⁸ “The tenured faculty can’t be removed,” one department chair explained. “The budget is fluctuating up and down. Therefore, the part-time faculty are the buffer...They take care of the budget surges and shortages.”⁹

The job crisis in higher education that began in the mid-1970s facilitated the “adjunctification” process by providing a growing supply of graduates with advanced degrees to fill part-time positions. The crisis was especially acute in the humanities and social sciences. Many new Ph.D.s in those fields had had high expectations when they entered graduate school in the 1960s. With undergraduate enrollment rapidly expanding, they had assumed that they would be able to choose among several

attractive offers of jobs with high salaries, abundant research support, and low class size. William G. Bowen, president of Princeton University, later recalled, "At meetings of many professional associations in the fifties and sixties, department chairmen literally stood in line to interview job candidates."¹⁰ The first intimations of dwindling opportunities, especially in humanities and social sciences, were reports that graduates of some of the most prestigious institutions experienced difficulty finding employment. Of the 55 graduates and doctoral candidates from the English Department at the University of California, Berkeley, who applied for teaching jobs in 1973, only 24 found them.¹¹ Such reports became increasingly common.

Some new graduates found full-time-temporary faculty positions. Many more accepted part time ones. In the early 1980s, I conducted a study of 43 academics who either had failed to secure ladder appointments or been fired from tenure-track positions after tenure reviews. Most had gravitated toward part-time employment. Thirteen were teaching part-time when I interviewed them, and seventeen others previously had held part-time appointments. Thus, thirty, or 70 percent, had had some experience as part-time faculty members.¹² Expecting to enjoy the rights and privileges of regular faculty members, they were horrified to receive low pay and neither job security nor fringe benefits. Although department chairs often encouraged the belief that part-time jobs eventually would lead to tenure-track ones, channels for promotion rarely existed. These were dead-end, revolving-door positions, not entry-level ones.

Contingent faculty with new Ph. D.s in the social sciences and humanities received little attention in first two major studies of part-timers. With funding from the Ford Foundation, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) commissioned Howard P. Tuckman to survey the part-time faculty. He and his associates divided part-timers into the following seven categories:

“Semi-Retired- those reporting that their primary reason for becoming part-time is that they are semi-retired (2.8 percent of the sample);

“Students- persons employed in other departments than the one in which they are registered to received a degree (21.2 percent);

“Hopeful Full-Timers- persons who report that their primary reason or becoming part-time is that they could not find a full-time position (16.6 percent);

“Full-Mooners- persons who in addition to their part-time job held a full-time position of f35 hours a week or more for 18 weeks or more (27.6 percent);

“Homeworkers- persons who report that their primary reason for becoming part time is to take care of a relative or child (6.4 percent);

“Part-Mooners- persons holding two or more part-time jobs of less than 35 hours a week for more than one week (13.6 percent);

“Part-Unknowners- persons whose motives for becoming part-time do not fall into any other categories (11.8 percent).¹³

Although Tuckman and his coauthors claimed that these categories were “mutually exclusive,” they overlapped; some were based on motivation, others on work situations. Another problem was that the questionnaires were distributed by the administration. As one observer commented, “It is a little like sending a questionnaire on working conditions to J.P. Stevens and asking that it be distributed to the workers, please.”¹⁴ But the survey was a great asset to administrators who could justify the low pay scale by arguing that part timers who needed more money represented a tiny minority of the contingent labor force.

Tuckman and his associates did not ignore that group entirely. They acknowledged that some part-time teachers were more concerned than others with “how their wages compare to full-timers’”. This is especially true if they are working the same hours as their full-time counterparts but earning less. For this group, serious equity issues arise which have not been subject to serious scrutiny.”¹⁵

The next major works on part timers failed to provide that scrutiny. As M. Elizabeth Wallace wrote in a 1984 book published by the Modern Language Association, “Much of the current writing on part-time faculty takes the tone of a legal sourcebook for administrators, focusing on what a college must do to protect itself against part-timers’ lawsuits.” Wallace cites as an example Part-time Faculty in American Higher Education, published in 1982 by David W. Leslie, Samuel E. Kellams, and G. Manny Gunne.¹⁶ Relying heavily on Tuckman’s figures, the book focused on the personal benefits most part timers derived from their positions. The authors acknowledged that one heard “from time to time...the individual cries of faculty members who depend on their jobs for some measure of security and livelihood in the face of an increasingly, disorderly, and chaotic academic-labor market.” But, the authors stressed, “What we do not hear area the satisfied part-timers who ‘would work for free, but don’t tell the dean!’”¹⁷ One reviewer commented that although the authors provided the best data available, “one still feels somewhat uncomfortable that some important ingredients are either missing or have not received deserving emphasis.” The result, he continued, “is like the understanding one has when an area has only been partly explored, having seen only Fifth Avenue and Central Park (but not the Bronx).”¹⁸

The major educational unions, controlled by regular faculty members, provided little assistance. The National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the AAUP feared that the proliferation of a cheap, transient workforce would erode the gains from collective bargaining. In 1976 an NEA committee described part-time faculty as a “corps of unregulated personnel.”¹⁹ Ten years later the association wrote that “academic freedom, tenure, and educational

quality are being undermined by the excessive use of part-time faculty members.”²⁰ The AFT characterized part-time faculty as a “reserve army of unorganized, noncontract teachers [who] can destroy the rights and prerogatives which faculty have fought for and have gained through collective bargaining.”²¹ Although both the NEA and the AAUP supported the principle of proportional compensation for part timers, the primary goal was to stop the growth of part-time faculty by removing the incentive for hiring them. Improving their employment conditions was a secondary concern.²² The academic disciplinary associations similarly focused primarily on stemming the tide of adjuncts.²³

In 1993, Judith M. Gappa and David W. Leslie published The Invisible Faculty: Improving the Status of Part-Timers in Higher Education, based partly on visits to seventeen colleges and universities and partly on data from both the 1988 National Survey of Postsecondary Faculty and Tuckman’s surveys. As the sub-title indicated, the book paid more attention than earlier works to part-timer’s poor employment conditions. Nevertheless, the authors followed previous researchers in focusing on practitioners and minimizing the participation of unemployed and underemployed academics in the part-time faculty workforce.²⁴ “The level of experience part-time faculty have can be impressive,” Gappa and Leslie wrote. “Retired executives from Fortune 500 companies; judges, directors of federal and state agencies; members of the foreign service; doctors and lawyers, school superintendents, entrepreneurs and small business owners, poets and authors; architects; artists and symphony players; and research scientists in government, business, and industry were among those identified at institutions we visited.” By contrast, “only a minority of our interviewees were aspiring academics who were fully credentialed for and sought full-time tenure-bearing positions.”²⁵

The Invisible Faculty was widely cited, but by the time it appeared, its description of the academic labor force was out of date. In the 1990s, universities increasingly relied on graduate students to teach part time.²⁶ As their numbers rose, they began to define themselves as employees and were included in tabulations of the contingent faculty workforce. Practitioners, once considered the majority

of part-time faculty, gradually faded from view. Graduate students also added to the ranks of unionized faculty members. The number of organized graduate students rose from 14,060 in 1990 to 19,900 in 1994 and then to 38,750 in 2001.²⁷ Although contingent faculty unionization previously had been concentrated in community colleges, it increasingly shifted to research universities, including elite ones. Administrators argued that teaching assignments enabled graduate students to gain both new insights into their fields of study and experience that would serve them well in their careers. Students protested, however, that the pay was too low to cover their living expenses, especially in cities with high housing costs, and that they spent most of their time teaching the same large introductory courses year after year and marking enormous piles of blue books. As the job crisis deepened, students also increasingly understood that they probably had no future in academia. Cary Nelson, a professor of English in the University of Illinois, wrote in 1997 that in that situation, “apprenticeship” easily morphed into “exploitation.”²⁸ The same year, Marc Bosquet, then president of the Graduate Student Caucus of the Modern Language Association, delivered an even more trenchant critique in a talk titled the “Excremental Theory of Graduate Education” at the association’s convention.²⁹ As he explained in a 2002 article,

Most graduate school admit students to fill specific labor needs... The academic labor system creates holders of the Ph.D., but it doesn’t have much use for them... The system produces degree holders largely in the sense that a car’s engine produces heat—a tiny fraction of which is recycled into the car’s interior by the cabin heater, but the vast majority of which figures as waste energy that the system urgently requires to be radiated away.³⁰

Graduate employee organizing campaigns were some of the first contingent faculty drives to gain support from a blue-collar union, not only from an educational association. By 2001, 42 percent of graduate student membership was with the United Auto Workers as opposed to 22 percent with the AFT. A 2003 front-page headline in the Chronicle of Higher Education read “United Academic Workers”;

the words “United Auto Workers” had been scratched out.³¹ Graduate employee unions also took the lead in linking the explosion of the contingent labor force with the corporatization of universities. According to a view that became increasingly prominent, the casualization of the higher education faculty resulted not only from the rapid expansion of undergraduate enrollment and the academic job crisis but also from the adoption by universities of the practices associated with for-profit entities.³²

Graduate student employees were not the only contingent faculty to organize in the 1990s. Thirty-five contingent faculty bargaining units, with a total of nearly 18,000 members, existed by 1996; 200 units contained both contingent and tenure-track faculty.³³ The first meeting of COCAL (Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor) the following year spurred the formation of additional units.³⁴ Since the turn of the twenty-first century, contingent faculty, including many Radical Teacher readers and writers, have continued to organize and fight for better working conditions. The unionization of graduate student employees continues to be the most remarkable. Between 2012 and 2014, the number of unionized graduate student workers increased from 64,400 to 150,100, a 133 percent increase. By contrast, the number of unionized faculty members rose by just 7 percent from 374,000 to 402,000.³⁵

The high proportion of contingent faculty has especially serious consequences as higher education comes under attack from the Trump administration. Professors without security of employment cannot be expected to join the resistance. The division between contingent and tenure-track professors weakens the ability of all faculty members to fight back. During the 2024 campaign, Trump argued that “Marxists, maniacs, and lunatics” dominated colleges and universities.³⁶ Despite a Yale Law School degree that helped catapult JD Vance to the highest reaches of government, he referred to universities as “the enemy.”³⁷ Soon after the inauguration, Trump issued an executive order banning all DEI programs. Another January executive order promised to deport foreign students who participated in protests against the war in Gaza. And in February the administration proposed to slash the funding for indirect costs universities received from National Institutes of Health research grants. As

the administration continues its assault on higher education, establishing a secure and unified faculty becomes more urgent than ever.

¹ Paul Lauter, "Retrenchment—What the Managers Are Doing," Radical Teacher, 1, no. 1 (December 1975).

² Susan O'Malley and Toby Mortyssev, "Non Working or Speak Bitterness," Radical Teacher, 1, no. 1 (December 1975).

³ Susan O'Malley and Rusty Eisenberg, "Non-Working or Speak Bitterness," Radical Teacher, no. 3 (November 1976).

⁴ Emily Abel, "The Professional Proletariat: Teachers in California Colleges," Radical Teacher, July 1977.

⁵ National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1979), 16.

⁶ Digest of Education Statistics, 104.

⁷ David W. Leslie, Samuel E. Kellams, and G. Manny Gunne, Part-time Faculty in American Higher Education (Westport, CT.: Praeger, 1982), 19.

⁸ Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, The More Effective Use of Resources: An Imperative for Higher Education (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 11.

⁹ Judith Gappa and David W. Leslie, The Invisible Faculty: Improving the Status of Part-Timers in Higher Education (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 133.

¹⁰ William G. Bowen, Graduate Education in the Arts and Sciences: Prospects for the Future (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 10.

¹¹ Richard B. Freeman, The Over-Educated American (New York: Academic Press, 1976), 28.

¹² Emily K. Abel, Terminal Degrees: The Job Crisis in Higher Education (Praeger, 1984), 113.

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- ¹³ Howard P. Tuckman, Jaime Caldwell, and William Vogler, "Part-Timers and the Academic Labor Market of the Eighties," American Sociologist, 13, no. 4 (November 1978): 189
- ¹⁴ Judith Bronfman, Letter to the Editor, Academe, February 1979.
- ¹⁵ Howard P. Tuckman and William D. Vogler, "The 'Part' in Part-time Wages," AAUP Bulletin, 64, no. 2 (May 1978): 77.
- ¹⁶ M. Elizabeth Wallace, "Who Are These Part-Time Faculty Anyway?" in Part-Time Academic Employment in the Humanities, ed. M. Elizabeth Wallace (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1982), 21-22.
- ¹⁷ Leslie, Kellams, and Gunne, Part-time Faculty, 7.
- ¹⁸ Robert T. Blackburn, "Review of Part-time Faculty in Higher Education," American Journal of Education, 92, no. 2 (February 1984): 233.
- ¹⁹ "Report of the NEA Committee on Substitute, Part-Time and Paraprofessional Personnel" (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1976), 106
- ²⁰ "The National Education Association's Report and Recommendations on Part-time, Temporary, and Nontenure Track Faculty Appointments," Exposure, 26, no. 4 (1988): 28.
- ²¹ Quoted in Jack Magarrell, "Increasing Use of Part-Timers Condemned by Teachers' Union," Chronicle of Higher Education, September 16, 1977.
- ²² "National Education Association's Report," 31. See Sue Doe and Mike Palmquist, "An Evolving Discourse: The Shifting Uses of Position Statements on the Contingent Faculty," ADFL Bulletin, 42, no. 3 (2013): 23-34.
- ²³ Doe and Palmquist, "Evolving Discourse."
- ²⁴ Gappa and Leslie, Invisible Faculty.
- ²⁵ David W. Leslie and Judith M. Gappa, "The Part-time Faculty Advantage," Metropolitan Universities: An International Forum, 6, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 93.
- ²⁶ Daniel J. Julius and Patricia J. Gumpert, "Graduate Student Unionization: Catalysts and Consequences," Review of Higher Education, 26, no. 2 (Winter2003): 187-216.
- ²⁷ Robert A. Rhoads and Gary Rhoades, Graduate Employee Unionization as Symbol of and Challenge to the Corporatization of U. S. Research Universities," Journal of Higher Education, 76, no. 3 (May-June 2005): 248.

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- ²⁸ Cary Nelson, Manifesto of a Tenured Radical (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 172
- ²⁹ Thomas H. Benton, "A Look at 'How the University Works,'" Chronicle of Higher Education, April 4, 2008.
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- ³² Rhoads and Rhoads, "Graduate Employee Unionization."
- ³³ Timothy Reese Cain, "A Long History of Activism and Organizing," in Professors in the Gig Economy, ed. Kim Tolley (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 61.
- ³⁴ Joe Berry and Helena Worthen, Power Despite Precarity: Strategies for the Contingent Faculty Movement in Higher Education (London: Pluto, 2021), 138.
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- ³⁶ Stephanie Saul and Alan Blinder, "As Trump Targets Universities, Schools Plan a Counteroffensive," New York Times, January 29, 2025.
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