

Adjuncts Arise¹

Ali Shehzad Zaidi

Earning as little as \$1,000 per course, adjuncts now teach about half of the university courses in the U.S. Because so few have health and retirement benefits, job security, intellectual freedom, or involvement in the decision-making process of their institutions, adjuncts are organizing to improve their lives. Part-timers recently won representation at New Jersey City University and Columbia College in Illinois. Combined with nascent graduate student employee unions at public research universities, and with student-labor coalitions at colleges such as Bard and Oberlin, organized adjuncts hope to reverse the slide in academic working conditions.

In April 1998, a new and as yet unnamed advocacy group for non-tenured and adjunct faculty emerged from a labor conference at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). CUNY is surely an appropriate venue to jump-start an academic labor movement. CUNY's full-time faculty declined from 11,300 in 1974 to 5,300 in 1998; the university system's 7,200 adjuncts now comprise 60 percent of the faculty but make up only 10 percent of the faculty union, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC).

Tenured in 1985, English professor Barbara Bowen, who represents the PSC chapter at Queens College, belongs to the last generation of CUNY professors to enjoy the full privileges of their profession. In her conference speech, Bowen called for a rethinking of the prevailing model of business trade unionism which tends to focus on pacting with management rather than on broad mobilization. The practice of securing across-the-board percentage increases, Bowen noted, only widens the gap between faculty salary tiers.

Another speaker, Stanley Aronowitz, suggested that adjuncts take their cue from the recent UPS strike in which the demand was not so much for money as for full-time jobs. "When you have been working as a part-timer for more than seven years," quipped Brodie Dollinger, who represents the National Association of Graduate and Professional Students, "then you are no longer part-time."

University administrators claim that tight budgets necessitate increased flexibility—in other words, the hiring of more adjuncts. However, flush state budgets and soaring endowments belie their claims. "I will believe them about the budget," said Dollinger, "when they hire the first part-time dean."

The key to successful organizing drives is the building of coalitions with labor, student, and progressive groups. Vicky Smallman, who represents the MLA Graduate Student Caucus, described coalition-building efforts in Ontario, where rotating strikes shut down nine cities for a day. "Take the fight out of the classrooms and into the boardrooms," she urged conference participants, echoing the slogan of a successful 55-day faculty strike at York University in Toronto.

Cary Nelson, English professor at the University of Illinois, identified part-time labor as central to such issues as tenure, affirmative action, and distance learning. He warned of a future in which tenure will be limited to those who accept their supervisory and punitive responsibilities as managers of personnel.

¹ This article was originally published in October 1998 by *ZMagazine* at: <http://www.zcommunications.org/zmag/viewArticle/13531>.

Nelson urged conference participants to fight for an adjunct minimum wage through their professional associations, while cautioning those who might still harbor illusions about winning concessions through moral persuasion. "Administrators will grant nothing on their own initiative," he said. "Asking them to look into the depths of their souls is to plumb the shallows." Nelson believes that persistent pressure alone will improve the working conditions of adjuncts. "You will win what you take."