

Campus Equity Week's Offspring Takes a Few Steps: Contingent Faculty Organizing in Metro Chicago

by **Joe Berry** (*Working USA*, Spring 2003)

By 2000, efforts to organize and mobilize contingent faculty (adjuncts, part timers, grad employees, and full-time temporaries) had reached a level that it seemed inevitable that a national network linking these efforts would happen. There were state-level organizing efforts in California, Washington , and elsewhere, metro organizing in Boston, and growing grad organizing nearly everywhere. There were changes in the leadership of two of the largest faculty local unions (the California Faculty Association in the huge California State University system and the Professional Staff Congress in the City University of New York) that promised more attention and activism on contingent faculty issues. The national network was gestated at the national Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL) meetings in Boston in 1999 and in San Jose in 2001; it was paralleled by the establishment of a foundation-funded coalition of contingent worker unions and other groups called NAFFE, the National (now North American) Alliance for Fair Employment, whose Campus Action Group included many COCAL organizers as well as veterans of the successful statewide activities (Part-time Equity Week) in the California Community Colleges. This fertilization produced a plan to hold a week of strategic actions on campuses across the US and Canada in October 2001, to be called Campus Equity Week.

This article focuses on the results of Campus Equity Week (CEW) as they impacted the higher education organizing efforts in Chicago since last October.

Metro Chicago, sometimes called Chicagoland by its denizens, may well be the workplace for upwards of 20,000 contingent academics, counting only those in traditional academic institutions. No one really knows the number and therein lies a major part of the story. Since historically, the only truly accurate counts of contingent academics have been done by unions or in the context of organizing drives, and since the vast majority are unorganized in the Chicago area, it is almost axiomatic that the numbers are unclear and almost all estimates are low. With over 100 institutions of higher education, and many ancillary workplaces, contingent academics probably make up one of the ten largest discrete workforces in Metro Chicago. The fact that many of them are part-time and multiply employed does not diminish the significance of this fact and may increase it since their very instability and movement gives them a broader knowledge of the sector in which they work than is common for workers generally. Second, their dispersed individual employment puts them in contact with a much wider variety of people -- namely students and colleagues, not to mention bosses -- than is normal in the workforce generally. In short, the contingent academic workforce has been both a sleeping and invisible elephant in the living room.

Campus Equity Week, while not the first cause by any means, was in fact the marker to demonstrate to all who cared to look that the elephant was waking up and thereby making itself visible as well.

The contingent academic workforce in Chicago is both more mixed and more evenly divided as to institutions than is the case on either the East or West Coast. There are large segments of public employment (community college, state university and research university), private non-profit university and colleges (religious and secular, university, small liberal arts, and specialty), and also one of the largest for-profit sectors in the nation, led by DeVry Institute. As the new home of many immigrants, and the financial and business center of the Midwest, Chicago is also the site of a great deal of non-credit adult education, especially ESL which is delivered in an uncountable (and uncounted) number of contexts and employment relationships. It goes without saying that these sub-workforces overlap, flow together, pool separately and morph in infinite variation. However, these overlaps have not resulted in anything resembling market-driven standardization of wages, benefits, conditions or legal employment relationship. Wages, for instance, range from under \$1,300 to over \$5,000 for a three-unit semester course.

This workforce is overwhelmingly unorganized, with the exception of a minority of contingent academics in the various state universities, partial units in a few community colleges, one for-profit trade school, and, recently, two of the private non-profit institutions. This is despite the fact that nearly all of the tenure-track faculty in the public institutions have been successfully unionized for years, some of them even before the collective bargaining law of 1984. Part of the reason for the lack of contingent unionization is a very restrictive public education labor relations law that has been further narrowed by negative court decisions. The other part, however, is the persistent lack of interest, and occasional hostility, shown by full-time tenure-track faculty union leadership.

Ever since the 1980s, the idea of organizing contingent academics Chicago metro-wide has bubbled on the back burner (Suhrbur, 1998, and) but only with the late 1990s organizing of Columbia College, followed by Roosevelt University, and then College of DuPage and Campus Equity Week, did this discussion break into the open, at least for most activists. In Chicago, the Campus Equity Week Coalition in 2001 put together a series of activities including public hearings, petitioning and tabling on campuses, demonstrations, teach-ins and forums, concerts and parties, media events and outreach; all culminating in a conference. The Chicago CEW Conference, besides speakers and workshops (and Barbara Wolf presenting her new film on contingent organizing, “A Simple Matter of Justice”) concluded with the decision to continue the work of Campus Equity Week through the vehicle of the creation of Chicago Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL), based partially on the Boston COCAL Metro Strategy model.

Campus Equity Week in Chicago demonstrated three important facts. One: that it is very, very difficult to get contingent academics physically together in one place at one time, but that it is relatively easy to gain their active support in other ways. Two: that active support can constitute sufficient pressure to force the historically warring faculty unions in the Chicago area, and Illinois generally, to sit down at the same table. Three: it demonstrated that as a practical matter, not merely theoretically, any victory was everybody's victory.

Since Campus Equity Week in October, both the level of activity among contingent academics and the attention that it has drawn have increased well beyond the expectations of any of the organizers. The first official meeting of the open steering committee of COCAL attracted not only virtually 100% of all those who said they would come, but also representatives -- for the first time -- of all three layers (state, national and local) of the AFL-CIO. Their attention was no doubt heightened by the fact of the recent organizing victory at College of DuPage where a minority contingent faculty bargaining unit was established subsequent to a years' long grassroots campaign that linked up with the Illinois Education Association in its final months. As perhaps the largest community college on one campus in the United States, College of DuPage necessarily plays a flagship role.

Another important development in the weeks following CEW was the increased activity and militancy of the Illinois Federation of Teachers-affiliated Graduate Employees Organization struggle for union recognition at the University of Illinois. At the Urbana campus a work stoppage shut down many buildings and at the Chicago campus GEO staged a solidarity sit-in at the president's office.

Perhaps most important, one of the largest groups of contingent faculty actually mobilized in some way by CEW were part-timers in the City Colleges of Chicago, who constitute the largest single workforce in the sector and, naturally, also the largest unorganized one. When, at a meeting during the run-up to Campus Equity Week, over 100 of these folk signed petitions for better wages and working conditions literally under the noses of the Chancellor and his assistant, it was clear to all in the room that people were ready to move. Outrage had finally overcome fear.

In the wake of Campus Equity Week and the forming of COCAL, events in the City Colleges of Chicago have outraced both expectations and structure. Activists brought together by CEW have begun an independent organizing effort, now named City Colleges Contingent Labor Organizing Committee (CCCLOC) and are now building a network of the upwards of 2,000 unorganized teachers throughout the seven colleges. This increased attention and activity, as has always been the case in the labor movement, has brought with it new questions, controversies, rivalries and difficulties. The problem is no longer starting some motion and gaining some attention: the problem is now how to steer and develop the activity and project a strategy and a vision for the

future. This new plate of problems is desperately to be hoped for in all areas of the country where the movement has not yet emerged. Nevertheless, the new plate is immediately full, of problems as well as opportunities.

Old organizational rivalries have reemerged as the reality of organizing has increased. Additionally, differing conceptions of unionism and organizing are now in play. On the one hand, there is traditional, dues-unit, top-down, staff driven, business unionism, with its focus upon building stable, even if small, bargaining units as quickly and cheaply as possible. On the other hand is a vision of grass roots, do-it-yourself, participatory organizing which focuses upon volunteer organizers building a movement encompassing all unorganized faculty, not just those most likely to successfully gain legal bargaining rights in the short run. The coming months and years will, of course, tell the tale, but it seems a safe bet that Chicago-area higher education is being permanently altered in the process.

References:

Suhrbur, Tom. "Adjunct Faculty Association of Chicago, IEA/NEA." unpublished paper (1998).