

(Tirelli 2007). Meanwhile, a similarly positive ruling from a California arbitrator in 1985 defined the contractual language of “careful consideration” for reappointment to the benefit of adjunct faculty. This second ruling came *after* the establishment of the broad “wall-to-wall” union model that prevails today at CSU, and it remains intact.

4. *The First Contract*. When the first union contract was settled for California State faculty, three of the five Lecturer lines had the same pay scale as their tenure and tenure-track counterparts. In large part, this was the result of the state education code, which—even without a union contract—was supposed to place all faculty on the same salary schedule (Hoffman and Hess 2014). In New York, meanwhile, neither the first PSC-negotiated contract in 1973 nor the contract for adjunct faculty that preceded it had these provisions. Following decades of “adjunctification,” such a demand is more difficult to win today.
5. *Subjective Factors*. The history of adjunct disenfranchisement in the PSC is extreme. Until new leadership won office in 2000, the union took the truly exceptional stance of declining to collect adjunct “agency fees.” In effect, this created a so-called right-to-work environment for part-time faculty. These conditions led to a failed union decertification attempt in 1986 as well as an intensely anti-union culture among some activist adjuncts that persists to this day. In the CFA, by contrast, adjunct activists had greater success in transforming feelings of disrespect into motivation to organize.

It is likely that all five hypotheses have some power in explaining the divergent outcomes for contingent faculty in the CSU and CUNY systems. Moreover, because history is made by the decisions of individuals and organizations in interaction, at some level all of the factors are—as the fifth hypothesis is named—“subjective.”

Today, in bargaining units both old and new, adjunct faculty are making history—albeit not under circumstances of their choosing. The first step is always organizing: finding leaders and transforming disrespect, oppression, and exploitation into collective motivation to organize. The program in each workplace and union will vary; however, especially for those in the public sector, engaging in and—as happened in New York in 2018—changing state-level politics are vital to raising pay for adjunct faculty. Some unions in New York are considering an effort to legalize public-sector strikes, as has long been the case in California. Regardless of the legal terrain, organized adjunct faculty should assess and build their capacity to withhold their labor, which is evermore essential to universities both public and private. ■

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SCRAPING BY AT CUNY: THE FRUITS OF DISINVESTMENT

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The City University of New York (CUNY) was founded on a democratic principle—“whether the highest education can be given to the masses ... and whether an institution of learning, of the *highest* grade, can be successfully controlled by the *popular will*” (Board of Education 1849). During its 170-year history, CUNY’s commitment to this principle has waxed and waned. During the 1960s and 70s, students, buttressed by the new social movements of the era, pushed the institution to a democratic high tide marked by free tuition and open admissions—in other words, a commitment to universal public higher education. The long economic crisis that began in the 1970s (Brenner 2006) prompted an ongoing retreat from this goal, making the country’s largest urban public university a frustrating laboratory for the effects of disinvestment on the students who need our help the most. A key component of this retreat has been an attack on the wages and working conditions of the faculty, achieved by fostering a class of teachers whom the school demeaningly calls “adjuncts” despite the fact that they teach the majority of courses at the university.

In recent years, the crisis has worsened. Between 2008 and 2015, per-student state funding fell 17% at CUNY’s four-year colleges (CUNY Rising 2016), reflecting a trend that shook public colleges across the United States (Mitchell, Leachman, and Masterson 2016). Administrators compensated by increasing the number of students, increasing the tuition they pay, deferring maintenance on crumbling campuses, and replacing full-time faculty with adjuncts, who are low-paid and can be jettisoned as demands shift. An adjunct starting at one of CUNY’s 25 campuses earns just over \$3,200 per course, slightly more if one possesses a terminal degree. This works out to under \$26,000 a year before taxes for an eight-course annual load in the most expensive city in North America, although few adjuncts can secure this much work. I once made more money moving furniture for nine days than I did for an entire semester of teaching at CUNY.

The university’s goals in establishing a tiered workforce are the same as employers everywhere—to cut costs and to safeguard those cuts by undermining workers’ solidarity. Adjunct work is a form of contracting, a maneuver designed to sever conventional bonds of responsibility between employer and employee. This disavowal of responsibility is expressed not only in low wages and vulnerability to layoff, but in the thousand subtle and not-so-subtle ways adjuncts are reminded they do not fully belong at the institution.

In their roles as department chairs and committee members, tenure-track professors risk becoming conscripted as front-line managers of the growing adjunct crisis. To the extent that they acquiesce, they become complicit not only in the erosion of their own salaries and working conditions, but of their power to check the university’s slide into the narrow logic of profit-seeking. At the City University, doing more with less means bulging class sizes, decrepit facilities, overworked faculty, and inadequate advising (Chen 2016). It also means increased tuition, which privatizes the school, making it an instrument that hardens class and racial divisions instead of ameliorating them. The ability of the faculty to intervene in the interests of students

diminishes when the bulk of the faculty are poor, alienated, vulnerable, and scared.

These forces can likely be checked only by a democratic revolution within the institution. The City University is not “controlled by the popular will” in any meaningful sense of the phrase. Ultimate decision making lies in the hands of a political establishment for whom investment in public higher education is not a priority. Many of us feel we have reached the limits of moral persuasion. Our union, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), has established a \$7,000 per course minimum salary for adjuncts—nearly double the current rate—as a central demand in ongoing contract negotiations. Other public sector unions in New York, however, including the one representing faculty at the State University of New York, have accepted raises that total around two percent per year. It is unlikely that CUNY management, saddled with limited budgets by the state, will wish to radically alter this pattern by doubling the salaries of its 12,000 adjuncts.

For this reason, like increasing numbers of educators across the United States, we will likely be forced to turn to direct action if we are to compel a living wage for adjuncts, check the erosion of faculty governance in one of the country’s greatest universities, and stand up for the needs of students for whom the City University is a key vehicle for achieving their dreams. There are serious obstacles. Our union, afflicted by gaps in sympathy and understanding between tenure-track and contingent faculty, is in some ways a victim of the administration’s divide-and-rule strategy. In addition, New York’s Taylor Law forbids public employee strikes and provides incentives for union leaders to eschew militancy in favor of moral appeals. And we need to mount an intensive campaign to enlist students, our most powerful allies, in a quest to remake the university into a vehicle for the satisfaction of our shared goals—a task that involves making tuition, class sizes, facilities maintenance, and adequate advising part of our bargaining agenda. The growing wave of teacher direct action across the United States, including the recent strike by educators in Los Angeles, offers models we should heed.

As a rank-and-file activist, I can report that sentiment for direct action is growing among faculty at CUNY, as evidenced by a near-unanimous strike authorization vote in 2016 and sympathy for a “\$7K or Strike” campaign emanating from more militant corners of the union. The future of CUNY as a genuinely public institution depends on our willingness to organize and to stand fast in service of a democratic vision. ■

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AN INSIDE/OUTSIDE FORMATION: COCAL

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The idea of an “inside/outside strategy” in social movement and labor organizing is not new, and it can take various forms, depending on the circumstances (Moser 2015). For example, the role played by the old ethnic labor councils, such as the Italian–American Labor Council formed in 1941, was to bring together groups that did not readily find a voice within the union structures that existed at the time. These formations were able to operate outside of these structures and speak to an unmet need of a particular community, thereby providing greater flexibility in terms of ideas and action, and sometimes positively influencing the more permanent labor organizations from which they emerged. Participants and leaders of the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL) have aspired to play such a role within higher education (Berry 2005; Berry and Worthen 2014).¹

COCAL is a loosely-knit group of part-time, temporary, graduate, adjunct, and non-tenure-track faculty and their supporters. It was conceived at the December 1996 “National Congress” organized by graduate students from George Washington University as well as activists from the Modern Language Association’s Graduate Student Caucus, which was having its annual conference in Washington, DC at the same time. This was followed by the New York National Congress in April 1998, and that is where COCAL was born. With help from various student government organizations—most notably the Doctoral Student Council of the City University of New York Graduate Center—and the energy of graduate students from around New York City, we emerged as a determined association of scholar-activists facing an uncertain future. Twelve conferences later, COCAL continues to develop the communication networks that help to build solidarity around issues facing faculty, students, administrators, and, we soon discovered, our entire global academic community. In the summer of 2020, COCAL XIV is scheduled to take place in Querétaro, Mexico.² In addition to the contingent academic labor participants from Mexico, Canada, and the United States, efforts are being made to invite academic labor activists from South America, Central America, and the Caribbean.

In part, COCAL was a result of the lack of attention given by the major labor unions to the growing use of part-time faculty. The growth of higher education in the post-war United States, combined with funding instabilities during the 1970s fiscal crisis era and beyond, left the university system in crisis. Many labor unions responded to pressure from management by allowing an increasingly large, flexible, and multi-tiered work force to develop, ostensibly as a temporary measure to protect their full-time core group. However, the use of part-time and other classifications of non-tenure-track faculty became a permanent feature of the landscape. The strategic difficulty in organizing a fragmented work force composed of “temporary” part-time workers who are somewhat isolated from one another necessitated a different approach. From the earliest discussions at COCAL there emerged an understanding that a better means of communication and networking among contingent faculty might help to shift the discussion as well as the focus of labor unions. The growth in the use of the World Wide Web at that