

A Chicago Example of the Metro Organizing Strategy for Contingent Faculty

Discussion paper for COCAL VI

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Abstract

Organizing of contingent faculty is in the stage of movement-building. It requires in-depth research and analysis of the workforce, activity both inside and outside existing organizations, and possibly, the creation of independent, intermediate organizations. A proposal for a metro strategy for the Chicago area contingent faculty workforce explores these requirements as an example.

Introduction

Since the 1970's, the majority of the faculty in higher (and adult) education has been casualized. Casualization is a major aspect of the corporatization of higher education. It has made faculty labor both cheaper and more flexible. Most of us now work without tenure or other job security, without living wages, without benefits, without shared-governance rights, and without the other traditional perquisites of college teaching. These losses have also meant the loss of any meaningful right of academic freedom, since it is both a logical and a practical impossibility for easily replaceable contingent workers to maintain individual free speech rights on the job.

These losses are both individual and collective. A majority contingent faculty is less able to collectively resist corporate-style administrative initiatives or to successfully initiate any changes of their own. This trend threatens not just faculty wellbeing, but also the social value and purpose

of critical higher education. In response, we have begun to build an organizing movement of the new majority faculty. This paper lists and highlights the major considerations that face our organizing. It is part of an attempt to support the national, and now international, democratic discussion about strategic alternatives facing the movement. We need both the discussion and clearer strategic alternatives to consider and then test as a movement. For many reasons the existing national unions, led by noncontingents, have neither generated this discussion across organizational lines nor have they projected a clear national strategy for the effective organization of the majority of contingent faculty. Now we must do it ourselves and, collectively, we can.

Seven Principles That Shape a Strategy

1. A strategy must be focused primarily but not exclusively on *movement-building, not organizational growth*. At a later stage organizational growth may become primary, but at the stage we are in now, movement-building must be primary.
2. A strategy must take into account the importance of both the lack of job security and the lesser economic power of contingent faculty relative to full-time tenure track (FTTT) and the resulting *fear and fatalism* as a factor in contingent faculty consciousness and behavior.
3. A strategy must recognize that the “new majority” faculty are now *part of the working class*. Like our largely working class students, we want economic and job security equity for ourselves, in addition to our desire to defend and improve the education that our students receive.
4. A strategy must understand that contingent faculty are part of a casualized workforce and must be *organized as a whole workforce*. As a whole workforce, we can play a key role in opening the door to essential coalitions on and off campus.

5. The *organizational forms* that the movement should create must be allowed to be varied, fluid and not necessarily reflective of only the present trade union structures.
6. A strategy must be *democratic in form, content and activity*, as participatory as possible, and with a leadership that reflects the workforce in all aspects.
7. A strategy must be “inside-outside.” That is, it must respond to the need for an independent organization of contingent faculty, at the same time as it responds to the need for solidarity with our tenure track colleagues.

Applying these Principles to a Strategy for Metro Chicago

In Chicago, the effective workforce flows over the entire metro area. We work for substantial numbers of public, private non-profit and for profit institutions, as well as in other contexts. Most contingent faculty are not yet in unions. Those 20% organized are mainly in contingent-only bargaining units and are split between affiliates of three unions, two of which are engaged in active organizing, sometimes competitively. Most of the existing units only include a minority of the contingent faculty at an institution. However, since 1998, new units have been organized at 8 institutions, sparked by the 1997 UPS Teamsters strike, by Campus Equity Week 2001 activities, and by reforms in the state education labor law which made organizing easier.

The application of an appropriate inside-outside strategy will look different in different contexts. In most, it will call for the creation of some sort of intermediate organization in addition to work within existing bodies. This intermediate organization may be a coalition of existing groups, a network of organizers, a membership organization, a caucus or committee within a larger group, or various combinations thereof. Given the geography, history and past organizing experience in

Chicago, the appropriate metropolitan strategy could mean the creation of a Metropolitan Strategy Organization (MSO). An MSO could be based upon the present Chicago COCAL, which itself was formed to continue the CEW 2001 coalition activities. What follows is a summary of a more detailed plan of how a metro strategy could be implemented with the goal of organizing the rest of the over 16,000 contingent faculty and mobilizing more of those already organized.

Researching the Workforce

The research function needs to begin early and continue throughout. It should build upon existing research. It would be used for direct organizing and service and for external publicity. It could be done by a combination of professional researchers and member activists in a participant action research context. The areas of research should include:

1. Numbers: demographic data, and pay and working conditions of existing contingent faculty, by institution as well as generally;
2. Power structure research on the employing institutions;
3. Lists of activists and potential activists and well as overall lists of contingent faculty;
4. Collection of published pieces on contingent faculty, especially by people in the area;
5. History of organizing efforts in the area;
6. Political and legal status, including who is covered by what labor and employment laws.

The general rule here is that research should be seen as not just technical, but as organizing itself. If research or data collection gets in the way of organizing and solidarity building, then it is counterproductive.

A “Contingent Faculty Workers’ Center”: Actual and Virtual

One of the aspects of recent organizing research and practice that has been most encouraging and successful in the United States has been the rise of the Workers’ Center concept. Workers’ Centers form a focal point for organization of workers not merely vis-a-vis their employer of the moment but also as a way to come together and collectively speak to a much wider range of their needs. Workers’ Centers are forming based on commonalities of industry, geography, ethnicity and language, religion or immigration status. A Workers’ Center for contingent faculty would likely form around industry (higher education) and geography. Given the way the contingent faculty workforce in the metro Chicago area is dispersed, a Workers’ Center in or near the central city Loop area, where public transportation services converge and where many colleges and universities are clustered, would make sense.

The physical center

A Contingent Faculty Center would be a combination service, social, organizing and educational center. It would also be the office of the Metropolitan Strategy Organization (MSO). Its physical site would enable the following services and activities. I will look first at professional and personal services related directly to employment, then at assistance to organizing, then at direct demands, advocacy and coalition-building, and finally at the added opportunities that a virtual center, based in the physical site, would provide.

Professional services related to employment

1. Job bank: A listing for employers of people available for work, along with their credentials and fields, listing of people available for substituting, and a member

directory. As strength is gained, and leverage is accumulated, this function could evolve into an actual hiring hall with referral agreements with employers under various kinds of contractual arrangements.

2. Ratings and reports on the conditions in various schools and departments.
3. Professional development classes, assistance in preparing portfolios and CV's/resumes, assistance in attending conferences in one's field.
4. Office services for member, such as package reception, copying, internet access, fax, etc.

Personal services related to employment

1. Benefits. Clearly the most pressing personal service is to collect a sufficiently large group to gain health and retirement benefits and then other traditional supplements to salary that are enjoyed by regular employees. In the short term, up to date listings and referrals to free, inexpensive or sliding scale health services would be an assist to a great many of our members, but in the long run, the effort to directly provide health insurance, either through a Taft-Hartley trust with multiple employers signing on or through other sorts of provisions, is a major service goal. Additionally, by bringing people together around this issue and their own personal needs, this can well be a spark to help in the organizing of political pressure for universal health care.

2. Help with filing for unemployment and in assisting members on unemployment appeals.

3. Help with filing and providing legal referrals for worker compensation problems.

5. Help with enforcement of other employment law rights, such as OSHA, civil rights laws, ADA, FMLA and other state-level laws.

There are, without a doubt, other personal services such as discounts, buying clubs, group legal and child care services, credit union, and the whole assortment of member services that many unions offer their members that could be provided through the MSO, either through affiliation with a national union or by direct negotiation by the MSO. Locally these could include discounts on computers and software, office supplies and equipment, books and subscriptions, access to fee-based on line data bases and research tools, and other items contingent faculty typically have to purchase. Treated in the right context, these can be movement-building services.

Assistance for organizing

Another function of the MSO's physical center would be assistance for organizing. Previous research demonstrates that among the main obstacles to self-organization among contingent faculty are fear, fatalism, and ignorance, which of course are deeply related to each other. Drawing from this, the assistance for organizing that the MSO can try to provide should give people the confidence to overcome fatalism, the courage to act in spite of their fear, and solid information and previous examples to dispel their ignorance. In a word, what the MSO should do is give people a sense that they are part of a movement that is growing, developing, and welcoming.

Obviously, one thing is a safe, comfortable, accessible and confidential place for people to meet and begin the process of getting to know each other and forming viable campus committees. It is also a place where people could bring the specific problems that emerge, collective and individual, that need to be acted upon if possible, as the local committee begins to act like a union, even long before bargaining rights can be achieved. Similar activities, already underway, could be fostered in various professional organizations.

Other aspects of concrete assistance to organizing would be collective access to the services and resources: labor education, legal resources, other information in the resource center gathered about contingent faculty, samples of materials used in other schools, information on the state of contingent faculty elsewhere. Activists would also be on site to staff picket lines, pass out leaflets, and do other initial public activities that might be difficult for an organizing committee to do by itself in the early stages of the campaign. The capacity to bring people could also be used in support of direct action tactics if they are utilized on a campus.

These various forms of assistance would increase leadership skills and self-confidence among activists and allow them to be better leaders in whatever union or other organization emerges or affiliates. It would also make them more likely to help others organize later.

Publicity is of course part of organizing. The MSO would be a steady beacon light in the community that says, "Contingent faculty information HERE. " This information would include our take on higher education and all the issues surrounding it, generating a constant stream of publicity about contingent faculty, positive attention to the organizing movement, and a critical

pro-”new majority” faculty view toward what is going on in higher education. The regional publicity would lead to a change in public climate, already begun, that would make it possible to not just publicize struggles at particular campuses or the “plight” of contingent faculty in general, but support the making of direct demands.

Direct demands, advocacy and solidarity

Sooner rather than later, we would hope that the organization would become mature enough to make direct demands upon area employers. In the case of the City Colleges of Chicago, these demands would focus on the political system, headed by the Mayor. It could also make regional demands, like SEIU’s Justice for Janitors, on groups of employers, such as, for example, the multiple private sector colleges in the Loop in Chicago.

The success of these demands, of course, would depend heavily on how well we have built solidarity. Our organizing movement has an ongoing critical need for alliances, coalitions and external solidarity generally. These include ties with other unions and groups of faculty, staff, and students on our own campus and on related campuses in the same sector or system. We also need to develop and sustain ties with all aspects of the local labor movement, including labor councils, activist coalitions like Jobs with Justice, Interfaith pro-labor coalitions, and others. We also need to promote alliances with other contingent workers, through groups like North American Alliance for Fair Employment (NAFFE) and locally as well. We could usefully be a link between our largely working class students and many of the vocations they will enter, especially though vocational classes. This makes possible yet other possible alliances and contacts. All of these possibilities have been proved to be useful, but they must be pursued consistently and with the idea of giving solidarity and assistance when needed, not just asking for

it when we need it. Most local unions and campus committees simply do not have the activist resources to keep up the mutual relationships necessary, especially those not on their own campus. The MSO, in its coalition aspects, could do this on behalf of all contingent faculty. This would strengthen our movement by getting us needed assistance and broadening the perspective of our members and it would strengthen the entire labor and progressive movement by what we could bring to it.

A virtual center based at the physical center

Recent organizing in Chicago has shown that web pages, Email, a cyber version of a printed newsletter, and listserves can fill communications gaps that otherwise might be very difficult to overcome. The fact that nearly all contingent faculty today possess Email accounts, many of them personal accounts as well as accounts through their employer(s), gives us the opportunity to conduct virtual participatory democracy organizationally as well as informationally at a level that simply was not logistically possible before, though it cannot substitute for direct contact. It could be also used to mobilize support for actions, via the listserve, to take polls, to have discussions, to provide class resources for people like guest speakers or emergency substitutes in class. This virtual center could also be a vehicle for many direct services that were discussed in the previous section.

How could an MSO for Chicago be sponsored? Some alternatives

There are a number of possible alternatives for how an effective MSO and its contingent faculty center could be sponsored, preferably for a minimum of two years. How this was done would impact questions of staffing, budget, organizational structure, dues, affiliations, and many other matters. Preferable would be a joint sponsorship by all the relevant unions, with buy-in by their

local, state and national bodies. This could well include the local and state Federations of Labor as well, with possible expansion to include other campus workers. Groups of related contingent professional workers, such as the National Writers Union, which already have substantial overlap with contingent faculty, could also share the center. The sponsoring consortium could appoint trustees for the project, but allow sufficient autonomy for operational leadership to emerge from the base. This would provide a structure for joint agreements as more bargaining units were formed. Not an easy recipe, but possible considering the potential gains for all organizations involved.

Other alternatives might be sponsorship by a single union or for the existing Chicago COCAL to get foundation and other private funding. This latter, especially through NAFFE affiliation, might well be productively combined with the first alternative. These potential frameworks have some precedents in the worker center movement nationally, in membership associations sponsored by unions, and in regional joint organizing projects by unions. If successful, such a project could be a model for other metropolitan areas.

Conclusion

Organizing among contingent faculty is shaping up quickly in the movement-building stage but needs concrete strategies that are tied to effective research and specific workforces and their geographies. The strategy I have proposed here, using Chicago as an example, is both ambitious and specific. In particular, the proposal for an inside-outside strategy, involving the creation of an intermediate body, the MSO, is a departure from most current strategies. My intention is to

stimulate discussion, to simultaneously push the strategy for Chicago forward and spark proposals for equally ambitious, specific strategy proposals for other regions. I look forward to the next steps in this process.

Note: A more extensive version of this paper has been published by the North American Alliance for Fair Employment as their *Strategy Working Paper #3* and is available on their web site www.fairjobs.org. Both papers, in turn, are drawn from Joe Berry, 2002, *Contingent Faculty in Higher Education: An Organizing Strategy and Chicago Area Proposal*, which is available at www.chicagococal.org/resources.htm