

## A Call for A National Union of Non-Tenure Track Faculty Teaching in America

by Robert Samuels For Workshop II

**Abstract:** The fundamental goal of this paper is to discuss several strategies for transforming the employment practices of higher education in the United States. Many of these strategies grow out of my experience as a union president at UCLA and as a bargaining team member for the state-wide University of California, American Federation of Teacher's Union (UC-AFT) representing over 3,000 non-tenure-track faculty (NTTF). Over the past six years, I have studied over 200 hundred union contracts representing faculty in America, and I have also analyzed the employment status and working conditions of teachers working outside of the tenure system. I have used my knowledge of collective bargaining and employment practices to help write and successfully negotiate a new contract for the University of California, and I would like to use my experience in California to help articulate the possibilities and problems regarding the growing utilization of non-tenure track faculty in the United States. In particular, I will make a call for the need for a national union that would organize all faculty, including graduate students, who are working outside of the tenure system.

The fundamental goal of this paper is to discuss several strategies for transforming the employment practices of higher education in the United States. Many of these strategies grow out of my experience as a union president at UCLA and as a bargaining team member for the state-wide University of California, American Federation of Teacher's Union (UC-AFT) representing over 3,000 non-tenure-track faculty (NTTF). Over the past six years, I have studied over 200 hundred union contracts representing faculty in America, and I have also analyzed the employment status and working conditions of teachers working outside of the tenure system. I have used my knowledge of collective bargaining and employment practices to help write and successfully negotiate a new contract for the University of California, and I would like to use my experience in California to help articulate the possibilities and problems regarding the growing utilization of non-tenure track faculty in the United States. In particular, I

will make a call for the need for a national union that would organize all faculty, including graduate students, who are working outside of the tenure system. My call for a national movement is based on the fact that we have a national academic labor pool that thrives on producing a surplus of qualified faculty members who are forced to take low paying and insecure positions to stay in the academy. In order to counter this late capitalist corporatization of higher education, I posit that we should direct our critical, theoretical, and practical energies toward improving the status of all academic workers.

Here is my plan of action to make higher education more just, equitable, and effective:

- 1) Form a national union of non-tenure track faculty by integrating existing graduate student, non-tenure, and part-time faculty unions into a single activist organization.
- 2) Hold a national strike and/or day of action to prove the existence and importance of faculty working off of the tenure track.
- 3) Establish national guidelines regulating the pay, course load, benefits, security, working conditions, and protections for NTTF.
- 4) Lobby national and state governmental legislatures to pass standards regulating our profession.
- 5) Educate parents and citizens about our issues and the economics of higher education.
- 6) Establish guidelines and legislation regarding the over-use and over-production of graduate students as cheap teachers.
- 7) Pressure individual schools and departments to change their hiring practices.

- 8) Utilize organizations like the MLA, CCC, AAUP, AFT, and NEA to shame institutions into following our guidelines and standards.
- 9) Make the cost of using part-time faculty and full-time NTTF so expensive that schools will be pressured to transform these positions into tenure-track jobs.
- 10) Sue institutions that advertise false student-to-faculty ratios and other misleading statistics.
- 11) Pressure ranking systems and accreditation bureaus to stress the quality of undergraduate education and teaching in their analysis of higher education.
- 12) Develop effective models for reviewing and rewarding teaching.
- 13) Legislate class size limits in universities and colleges.
- 14) Expose inflated administrative salaries.
- 15) Induce faculty to take back the control from administrators over colleges and universities by including NTTF in faculty senates.

Several of my suggestions may seem too idealistic or unattainable; however, I believe that we are already on the road to accomplishing many of these goals, but what we now need to do is to co-ordinate our efforts.

The first step in forming a national organization is to bring together the leadership of the academic unions already existing in the United States. While some of these unions are competing with each other for new members and bargaining units, we can put pressure on our own unions to work together for the common good. In fact, by organizing a national strike and/or day of action, we can use our collective will to make our presence known and to organize for the future. After all, non-tenure track faculty and graduate students represent the overwhelming majority of people now teaching in higher

education. What we should do is to start to bring our very diverse group together as a political and educational force. We then need to discuss model contracts and legislation that already helps many people working off of the tenure-track system

My experience at the University of California has shown me that any organizing of academic workers will meet major resistances, but a small percentage of active members can create a snowball effect. One thing we have to show our colleagues and the general public is that other professions have organized and have forced institutions and governments to establish regulations concerning working conditions and reward systems. If medical doctors and lawyers can be protected by national standards, why can't academic professionals be protected equally?

Some may argue that the working situations of part-time and full-time faculty members out of the tenure system are so diverse that it would be impossible to legislate any type of universal standards; however, I would reply that the new contract for non-tenure track faculty negotiated by the UC-AFT in 2003 covers a highly diverse set of workers in several different campuses. In fact, most of our contract uses a pro-rata system that does not distinguish between full-time and part-time workers; instead we base employment levels on time served and the percentage of full-time equivalency. Moreover, our contract establishes a series of protections and levels of promotion for non-tenure track faculty. Yet, before I use our contract as the new standard, I have to warn that there are still some key flaws in our agreement. These problems stem from the fact that our faculty are still funded out of temporary budgets and not out of permanent lines like tenure-track positions. What we need to do on a national basis is to legislate national standards and guidelines to protect these positions.

One reason why we should be able to lobby local and national political leaders is that many of us are part of large national unions and/or professional organizations that need to be responsive to their members. By forming a national teacher's organization, we can pressure our own unions to spend money and resources on lobbying and public relations efforts. Furthermore, there are so many of us now teaching out of the tenure system that we can use our diverse experiences and expertise to educate the general public about our issues and the changing nature of higher education in America. For the sad truth is that many parents, students, and citizens spend enormous amounts of money on higher education, through tuition and tax dollars, and yet they often have no idea about the ways colleges and universities are downsizing and downgrading their educational missions. A national strike and the formation of a national union would help to publicize the quality of education and employment issues that are so important to all Americans.

By educating parents about increasing class sizes, decreasing job security, and the exploitation of graduate student teachers, we can help to protect the state and national funding for higher education. However, this public information campaign must be coupled with an effort to educate our own institutions about the multiple effects of relying on such a high number of non-tenure track faculty. In many ways, it is in the best interest of tenured faculty to have more faculty members who can participate in the shared governance of their institutions. In fact, what has recently happened in the last thirty years is that the increase in faculty off of the tenure track has been coupled with an increase in costly administrators who now perform many of the same functions traditional faculty once controlled. By having more tenured faculty--and by allowing non-tenured

faculty to participate in faculty senates--we can start working against administrative bloat and we can take back control of our own institutions.

Another way that our own departments and programs can begin to make higher education more just is to change their current hiring practices. Too many departments will only hire newly minted Ph.D.s for tenurable positions because they see experienced non-tenure track faculty members as damaged goods. This situation is ironic since these same departments help to create this situation by relying on so many graduate students and part-time faculty to teach their courses. Our national organizations and unions have to fight to limit the use of graduate students and part-time faculty by establishing standards and censoring institutions that fail to live up to these standards. Moreover, to help regulate the over-production of surplus labor, we have to motivate departments to reduce their level of graduate student teachers. In fact, the heavy reliance in research universities on graduate student teachers works to devalue the very degrees these institutions help to produce and certify. For example, what value does a Ph.D. in English have if the same department that granted the Ph.D. hires graduate students with no degrees or expertise to teach their own departmental courses. Universities simply have a local monopoly of labor that needs to be regulated and controlled.

One way to help reduce the over-production and devaluation of graduate degrees is to negotiate contracts that limit the number of classes graduate students are allowed to teach. In fact, this type of limitation has already been written into many contracts. However, many graduate student organizations have not realized that one of the major reasons why graduates cannot get good academic jobs when they graduate is that there are so many graduate students teaching at large research universities. These

organizations have to be pushed to limit the number and types of courses graduate students teach.

We also have to work to regulate the use of visiting professors at colleges and universities. In many institutions, these visiting professors are often visiting from nowhere, and in many other cases, tenure-track positions have been replaced by temporary faculty posing as post-docs and visiting faculty. By letting the public know about these unfair labor practices, we can begin to fight for more equitable working conditions.

While many people may reject my proposals because they will cost too much money, we have to realize that many universities have endowments over a billion dollars, and many other institutions have shifted their money into administration, which has grown at a much higher rate than the cost of instruction. Furthermore, many institutions spend a great deal of public money on research, but do not funnel the profits from that research back into their educational missions. One reason why the public does not know about these changes in the economics of higher education is that colleges and universities constantly circulate false and misleading statistics regarding class size, percentage of tenure-track faculty teaching undergraduates, the use of graduate student teachers, and the employment of part-time faculty. Thus, the public has also been blinded by constant debates over affirmative action, culture wars, and political correctness, and these cultural conflicts have been used to hide the real economic transformations allowing for the emergence of a growing cadre of wealthy administrators and researchers who do not contribute to undergraduate instruction. To help reverse this trend, we need to let donors

and taxpayers know where their money is really going. We also need to sue universities and colleges for false advertising.

An organization like COCAL is positioned to help coordinate the efforts to realize many of my proposals. By working with unions and other professional organizations, we can organize our efforts and work for real change on a national and local level. We can also help to educate our students and their parents about the changing structures of higher education. One of the keys to this project is to tie the quality of instruction to the quality of faculty employment.