

COCAL VII: The report from Vancouver

-- Sandra Baringer

A forty-hour train ride seemed like an appropriate way to arrive at the seventh conference of the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor in Vancouver B.C. the second week of August. My uneven on-track, off-track, lurching arrival ten hours behind schedule engendered a sort of third-world fatalistic vision of the future: the American public sector's abandonment of meaningful support for public ground transportation seemed to parallel the third-world-esque "contingentization" of American academic labor. As Mexican speaker Arturo Ramos Perez commented at the conference on what he was hearing about working conditions among United States faculty (loosely paraphrased), "welcome to my world."

AFT's Larry Gold announced on the first day of the event that only thirty percent of this country's higher education instruction is now performed by tenured or tenure-track faculty. And while David Horowitz and his right-wing comrades continue their attack on academic freedom among the tenured (check out his list of "The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America" on wikipedia), the 70% of higher education instructors without tenure continue to wonder how many bits of academic piece-work they'll be collecting for the next semester, and whether allowing their students to ask controversial questions will get them fired (see Douglas Giles' story about that on the next page).

Cary Nelson, new president of the American Association of University Professors, noted that the World Bank and the IMF are pushing a contingent labor force internationally by demanding levels of contingency in employment arrangements in return for loans. He urged that contingent faculty "take over any union they can" by joining their locals as voting members and running for local union offices. He reiterated AAUP's official position that all instructors, full or part-time, be entitled to job security protections after 7 years (preferably after 3 terms), with dismissal to occur only after hearing before a



committee off faculty peers and a finding of "academic reason" for non-reappointment. Nelson called for monitoring of "all forms of academic employment" to "make bad jobs more and more expensive to maintain."

The second day of the conference opened with Joe Berry, author of *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower*, noting that despite increased awareness of the contingent labor problem in academia, achievements in addressing the problem have reached a plateau. One reason he cited for this was administrative counterattacks, as in the hiring of union avoidance consultants to fight organizing drives, retaliatory firings of union activists in Chicago, the NLRB's recent decisions refusing to recognize graduate student bargaining units, and attacks on academic freedom. But Berry also asserted that a national strategy has not emerged from any of the national organizations.

Larry Gold had announced the previous day that AFT was launching a 15-20 state legislation drive focused on improving fulltime/part-time staffing ratios, pay equity, job security, and budget enhancements to support those goals. But details on specific large-scale strategies remained unclear by the end of the conference. On Sunday morning, Keith Hoeller cited a bill introduced in the Washington state legislature each of the past three years to implement job security protections for part-time community college faculty – a bill which Hoeller said never gets out of committee because neither the AFT nor NEA Washington state affiliates will support the bill. Cary Nelson then called on NEA and AFT to support such bills.

For good reason, the closing hours of the conference focused on assaults on academic freedom. Gold reported that he had infiltrated a David Horowitz event and asked Horowitz about the 70% of higher education instructors who were off the tenure track; Horowitz replied, "yeah, I know about them – they're the worst." Contingent faculty are, incontrovertibly, at risk on the academic freedom issue.

Yet many of these teachers and scholars at risk seemed willing to speak out more than they were given the opportunity to, at this particular conference. Too little time was available for those lined up at the open microphones; the problem being described by the scheduled speakers was, for the most part, already understood by the attendees, and too many scheduled speakers exceeded their time allotment. Moreover, no clear national, trans-union strategy emerged from this conference. One can only hope that those prominent national organization leaders in attendance are now back in their offices phoning each other. If not, COCAL remains a grassroots phenomenon whose fate remains unknown.

Otavio Paz wrote in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* that "We withdraw into ourselves, we deepen and aggravate our awareness of everything that separates or isolates or differentiates us. And we increase our solitude by refusing to seek out our compatriots, perhaps because we fear we will see ourselves in them, perhaps because of a painful, defensive unwillingness to share our intimate feelings." He was speaking of his Mexican countrymen, or rather a certain subset of them, but as contingent faculty, we should take this analysis to heart. Too many of us withdraw into ourselves, increasing our isolation and decreasing our ability to advocate for ourselves and for higher education. Our students deserve better than the train wreck for which public higher education seems headed, and if we don't stop it, it's unclear who will.



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