

Confronting Precarious Academic Work

A Report by Lykke de la Cour, Bob Hanke and Derek Hrynshyn

On February 11 and 12, 2016, this OCUFA conference examined the reality and impact of precarious academic work. Precarious academic work affects contract faculty, students, and tenured faculty in myriad ways. The last panel concentrated on finding a way forward. After summing up the highlights, we make six recommendations as the Local proceeds into elections and pre-bargaining. Members can pledge their commitment to decent academic jobs by signing this [pledge](#).

The first keynote presented the results of new public opinion survey of 1000 English-speaking Ontarians. Here we highlight some of the findings of relevance to contract faculty. Although overall awareness of precarious academic jobs is low, two thirds prefer full time faculty, three out of five think that a long term relationship with faculty is best, and there is near full support for universities as “model employers.” For example, 88% said they supported converting contract faculty to “full-time” positions. Two findings have strategic implications that Unit 2 needs remember going into pre-bargaining: Only 2% mentioned education, schools or tuition as the “most important issue in Ontario” but 70% are in favour of more public funding to hire more full-time professors. Details of this survey can be found [here](#).

The second panel examined what we know about the impact of precarious academic labour on contract faculty and our university communities. The research shows impacts on individuals (economic security, career paths, professional identity, and emotional, mental & physical health) and the community (multi-tier faculty system, disjointed relations). The academic entry-level job has been replaced by a casualized, feminized, marginal, invisible workforce. Three years after graduating, Ph.Ds on the treadmill of working and applying to work become despondent about tenure-track employment. Precariousness has a ‘not knowing’ effect upon teaching, income, and retirement. For longer-term contract faculty, there is a fear of becoming ‘stale’ compared to recent Ph.Ds. Precariously employed faculty who aspire to academic careers are concerned about job instability, lessened chances for advancement, unpaid work, and the poor working environment. For decades, administrations refused to collect and release data on contract faculty. However, since the extension of FIPA requests to universities in 2006, more data has become available to researchers such as Jamie Brownlee – author of *Academic Inc: How Corporatization is Transforming Canadian Universities*. His work confirms that precarious employment has skyrocketed. At York, for example, between 2000 and 2015, there has been there has been a 58% increase in senior executives and middle managers, a 20% increase in tenure-track faculty, and a 182% increase in contract faculty" ([A Fifteen-Year Snapshot of York University](#)).

The second keynote address was given by Guy Standing, Professor of Development Studies, University of London (UK) and author of *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011) and *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens* (2014). Stressing employment insecurity as one

of the defining features of neoliberal capitalism, Standing pointed out the obvious: precarious workers are precisely what capital wants; but, to date, neither unions nor political parties have placed precarious employment at the center of the political agenda, nor adequately analyzed this shift in work. For Standing, the problem lies not with the “flexibility” but the “insecurity” associated with precarious employment and its attendant effects: income uncertainty, no occupational identity, a lack of control over working conditions, a lot of extra, unpaid work, and status frustration. Cautioning against the tendency to fetishize “full time” jobs, Standing instead called for a reconceptualization and reorganization of work and workplaces, based on the principle of universal basic incomes and the integration of precarious workers into institutional governance structures. It is only with the inclusion of the precariat in governance, Standing argued, that the effects of neoliberalism can be meaningfully confronted. In the context of post-secondary education, this translates into calling for the restoration of education’s social value against the corporate “industry” it has become, and the manifold ways post-secondary education has been commodified and degraded over the past three decades. But this challenge can only happen, Standing maintains, with a full and meaningful inclusion of precarious faculty within the governance structures of the university.

Themes of governance and building solidarity among faculty, students and the broader community dominated the two subsequent panels on Thursday. Jim Gerlach, Chair of the CAUT Contract Academic Staff Committee and a long-term sessional at Wilfred Laurier University, summed up the panel on governance best: if we are really going to effectively address quality of post-secondary education and contract faculty issues, contractualized faculty have to have a say in university governance. Presentations in this panel emphasized the central contradiction inherent in universities today where an emphasis is placed on teaching and research “excellence,” but where a majority of the faculty - contract faculty - are not given the proper working conditions to achieve such “excellence.” High levels of last-minute hires, exclusion from departmental and faculty decision-making, the lack of office space, barriers to accessing research grants and leaves, etc., effectively lay bare claims that universities are in reality pursuing teaching and research excellence. Panelists pointed out how new “teaching supports” promote an image of the university fostering teaching excellence, yet leave in place oppressive working conditions for contract faculty. Contract faculty contributions may be acknowledged by teaching awards but they are otherwise devalued compared to permanent faculty.

The panelists pointed out a number of other contradictions. First, there is nothing provisional about contract academic work, despite vocabularies such as “part-timers,” “contingent,” “adjunct.” Such language serves to obscure the fact that contract faculty are an intrinsic part of universities and have been so for quite a while. At the University of Toronto, over 40% of contract faculty have worked for 4 years or more, and 30% for more than 8 years. This parallels CUPE 3903’s findings, where 54% of Unit 2 has taught for 5 or more years at York and 30% for 10 years or more. 30% of Unit 2 teaches at a level equivalent to and up to more than double a YUFA teaching load. Second, the notion that contract faculty erode the “quality” of university

faculty also contradicts reality. Many contract faculty maintain active research and publishing agendas. Contract faculty also engage in paid and unpaid service work within the university, hold positions such as program coordinators, participate in graduate committees, etc. In other words, there is no evidence that contract faculty are “second-class” citizens in terms of the work they perform. Indeed, contract faculty are doing much the same work as tenured faculty, but with significantly divergent experiences and at much lower wages. Finally, probably the biggest of the contradictions: the tuition generated by contract faculty constitutes the main revenue stream for universities today, especially in Ontario. Hence, the panel on building solidarity among faculty, students and the broader community emphasized the need to expose these contradictions, suggesting that they provide fertile opportunities for engagement within and outside of the university.

The last two sessions included a keynote presentation by Karen Foster, who argued that a return to the post-war consensus with universities fully staffed by tenure-track faculty was very unlikely, since the deskilling of the jobs has been effective for university administrators and resisting that has not been successful. She suggested that a reallocation of existing resources would be preferable. On the basis of quantitative research conducted at Nova Scotia universities on sessional faculty, she also made the case for decoupling of labour and income through a guaranteed basic income.

The final session was a plenary panel with four presenters. First, David Robinson of CAUT who argued that the bargaining process is the most powerful strategy available, although he recognized that it is difficult to make gains. He suggested that the European model of legislation limiting the continuing use of contract labour would also be an advantage. Fran Cachon, a sessional instructor at the University of Windsor, described the difficulties produced by the lower status of sessional within universities, even in programs with a social justice orientation. Alistair Woods, of the CFS, argued that demands for better labour relations for sessional faculty and the reallocation of funding into investment in basic education rather than commercializable research is actually consistent with mainstream arguments for increased economic growth. Finally, Pam Frache introduced the strategies and approaches of the national “15 and Fairness” campaign, of which she is lead organizer, and urged people to take part in the April 15th Day of Action that was planned as part of that campaign, as it is very much consistent with the principles of confronting precarity and austerity in the contemporary economic situation.

Recommendations

This conference sounds the alarm again that we ignore precarious academic labour at our own peril. There needs to be much more collective attention paid within CUPE 3903, YUFA and other unions to the issue of casualized academic labour in a multitier faculty employment system. An anti-precarity perspective begins by acknowledging that faculty inequity is reinforced by the employer's overreliance on short-term, per-course contracts to hire cheap academic labour to teach more undergraduate students.

To that end we recommend:

(1) Formation of a Unit 2 Committee tasked with doing research on contract faculty at York

We need to apply research-based and living knowledge of precarity to build upon our 2014-15 communication strategy "A Better York is Possible." This campaign was based on the recognition that York's hiring practices and policies are not aligned with its core values of equity and justice. We need to 'speak the truth' to the administration about faculty inequity, growing income inequality, and woefully inadequate pensions over our academic lifetimes. Precarity also undermines quality education; this is a fundamental issue that students, their parents, alumni and the wider public will engage with. In nonbargaining years, the Local needs to allocate more time, space and resources to educate our members about the baleful effects of precariousness on individuals *and* the institution. In prebargaining and bargaining time, a communication campaign to internal and external audiences must also make contract faculty visible, as well as expose where all the money goes at York and how the university has failed to live up to public perceptions of a being a 'model employer.' This requires the ongoing allocation of adequate resources to produce academic labour events and media. As the OCUFA survey results also suggests, issues of fairness will resonate with our members, students, and the public.

(2) Affiliation with the Canadian Association of University Teachers

CUPE 3903 should seriously consider affiliating itself with CAUT. Dues are \$3.70 per month, or \$44.43 annually, and payable monthly based on a monthly membership count. CUPE Locals 3902, 3909, and 3912 are already voting members of Council and have access to all CAUT services. CAUT defends academic freedom and one of their ongoing campaigns is [Fairness for Contract Academic Staff](#). Academic precarity threatens academic freedom and this is a core value of the public university and a public interest.

(3) Affiliation with OCUFA and participation in their contract faculty committee

OCUFA represents both permanent and contract faculty across the province and is in a position to build support in Ontario for campaigns directed at the provincial government which is responsible for funding post-secondary education. This conference is an indication that OCUFA

takes the issue of increasing reliance on precariously employed faculty seriously and CUPE 3903 could be an important contributor to coming campaigns.

(4) Unit 2 representation at the upcoming COCAL Conference

The next Coalition of Academic Labour conference of contingent educators and organizers will be at the University of Alberta in Edmonton on August 5-7, 2016. For more information, visit COCAL's [website](#). CUPE 3903 should send at least four delegates from Unit 2, including one Unit 2 member of the Communications Committee.

(5) Formation of a Unit 2 Bargaining Support Committee

Unit 2 needs to begin preparing for bargaining now. We recommend the formation of a Unit 2 committee that can begin the work of amassing research and data for the 2017 negotiations, including redesigning the Unit 2 bargaining survey and preparing a plan for its activation well before bargaining commences. This committee should also be tasked, in coordination with the Unit 2 VP and Unit 2 Chief Steward, to begin member outreach, through departmental/faculty consultations, to both solicit and disseminate information on job security proposals.

(6) Formation of a CUPE 3903 Ad-Hoc Governance Committee

A central theme emphasized at the OCUFA conference was the imperative of building contract faculty representation at all levels of university governance -- program, departmental, faculty, and senate. The purpose of this committee would be to explore ways to build this form of engagement, including identifying the barriers (social, cultural, structural and ideological) that currently impede greater membership involvement in university governance.