



The 'Golden Age' is Over: Time to Fight for the Future

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I am very glad to have been asked to contribute to this blog. The world of contingency, especially in the history and labor studies disciplines, has been my own personal world since 1980, with a very few breaks. I have been privileged to participate, almost continuously, in the labor movement and the part of the faculty labor movement that represented contingent faculty for better, or worse in some cases. In spite of being a historian by training and interested in labor history and teacher union history, I never really put my position as a contingent faculty into the "historical river of labor history" until I was asked in 1999 by a much younger colleague to contribute a general history chapter to a proposed book on graduate student and contingent organizing. Their book became *Cogs in the Classroom Factory* (Julie Schmid and Deborah Herman, eds., Greenwood/Praeger Press, 2003) and I was sparked to think about where I sat, at that time in a leftover office at Harold Washington Community College in downtown Chicago.

As I ruminated over my position as a part-time temporary community college teacher, it struck me that my situation was the norm since the invention of mass capitalist wage labor

just a couple of hundred years ago. Most workers have been very precarious in their positions for most of the history of capitalism. Perhaps that was one of capitalism's most important distinctions from feudalism — insecurity, captured so nicely by Anatole France when he said, "How noble the law, in its majestic equality, that both the rich and poor are equally prohibited from peeing in the streets, sleeping under bridges, and stealing bread!" Since that time, I have repeatedly thought about how academia's now-majority contingent faculty is really the norm for most wage workers over most of history, and certainly for most in the world today. Being as I write this in Viet Nam, with its large informal labor sector, massive Foreign Direct Investment in super exploitative labor conditions, and virtually no enforcement of labor laws for part-time workers, the issue is underlined for me.

Then, why does it seem so unusual and unfair to most of us if it is really the historical norm? One answer, not surprisingly, is history. The history of the academic profession is one where an elite and small niche vocation, up until the early 20th century, became a large one, especially after World War II. At the same time, professors succeeded in gaining substantial job security through legal recognition of the right to tenure and academic freedom. Simultaneously, many mass production workers also gained some stability of employment through union organizing, as well as living wages that allowed purchases, like houses for many. The government policies (labor laws, GI Bill, housing loans, teacher tenure laws, etc.) that made these changes possible likewise only reached a limited percentage of workers. Professorships remained a largely white, male, middle and upper class, preserve, and the New Deal labor and welfare laws that protected organized workers (NLRA, Social Security Act, FLSA, etc.) excluded the jobs held by most women and people of color (government work, domestic work, agricultural work). But for the protected, this was a "Golden Age" of sorts, until the 1970's brought a new political economic strategy into power, now called neo-liberalism. It was this shift that so irritates us today. Those of us educated in the 50's and 60's expected to move into the positions our teachers, and fathers, had occupied, with the same conditions and pay. It was not to be. And not only were aspiring academics frustrated, but an entire generation, on average, never reached the careers of our parents.

The neo-liberal turn toward treating everything as a business, impacted academia in a number of ways. The cutting edge was the casualization of the faculty, which had a number of causes, or inducements if looked at from the point of view of top administrators and most trustees. One was certainly the financial crisis of the 70's, which put public budgets under strain as the government tried to pursue a "guns and butter" policy, on borrowed money, and eventually invented the new phenomenon of stagflation, previously thought impossible in capitalist economies (at least by mainstream economists). This had a fallout with the private colleges too, as profits were squeezed, discretionary donations fell, and endowments

stagnated. Saving money on contingent faculty was a good bet.

Second, the nature of the still-growing demand for higher education had changed. It was now much more part-time and older students: vets, “re-entry” women, workers laid off or fearing it, and many more working class enrollees, including many people of color for whom the struggles of the 1960’s had opened up both opportunities and aspirations for higher education. This new student body was harder to plan for since they were older, usually working, and had adult responsibilities. It was a lot harder to plan how many sections of English 1A a school needed to offer. One answer was a “just in time” faculty that could be hired and fired in a flash, as needed. If bosses’ “flexibility” became our “insecurity” that was just the price to be paid (temporarily, we were assured) for continuing democratic open access to higher ed.

Third, the student struggles of the 60’s had also given rise to a union movement on campus that had come to agitate professors, grad students, and other campus workers, as well as students. Creating a two-tiered faculty, with one group enjoying the traditional perquisites of faculty and the other doing much of the work (adjuncts and grad students) was a time-tested, divide and rule strategy for any employer facing a restive and union-seeking labor force. The biggest victory of this strategy was the U.S. Supreme Court *Yeshiva* decision (declaring tenure-track private sector faculty managers and, thereby, outside the protection of the labor laws). But this division also impacted public faculties as debates raged, especially in the fast-growing community colleges, over whether the proper union or bargaining unit should include only full-time tenure track faculty or also take in the new “interlopers,” as we were viewed by many. The heritage of this management tactic still bedevils us today, as does the debate over whether grad employees are really employees or student “apprentices” just learning faculty skills. And it was not just the roadblocks to unionization that two-tiering the faculty created. It also disempowered academic senates and shared governance generally, as now the majority of faculty did not have the job security (or the time) to speak their minds on college issues. The faculty as a collective body was weakened, opening the door to all the other neo-liberal pro-corporate “reforms” we have seen in higher ed since then.

Fourth, as the success of the social movements of the 1960’s brought more people other than white males to college, and thence some to grad school, the potential pool of faculty was irrevocably changed as well. Besides the obvious positives in this hard-fought change (still not fully realized, though), came an enlarged political opportunity for administrators and trustees to degrade the previous generation’s definitions of proper faculty pay and working conditions. After all, if this was no longer a white, male, cultured, upper-middle class (at least in status) job that demanded a family supporting wage, then they could hire

people of color, and especially women, cheaper and under less secure conditions. This is not the first time a profession has been degraded, as it was “colored and feminized.” We have all seen office and clerical occupations go through the same transition over the course of the 20th century. The heritage of racism and sexism in the U.S. could be relied upon to help justify these trends and blunt any attempt to treat the new entrants equally to their white male predecessors.

So now we have the spectacle of homeless adjuncts, Ph.D.s on food stamps and unemployment insurance, if they can get it, and the average college teacher not having time (or an office) to counsel and mentor the next generation of students, who have it much worse economically than we did. But, we also have the spectacle of the low-paid workers movement (Fight for \$15 and a union, et. al.) which is being joined in dozens of cities by contingent faculty who, despite too many years of formal education, not only recognize their students in this movement but, increasingly, themselves as well. There is a reason why one of the few places the labor movement looks a little like a “movement” and is actually growing is on college campuses. For that you can mostly thank the contingents, grad students, and other campus workers. It has even built a fire under some of our full-time tenure track colleagues who are coming to see “concerted activity for mutual aid and protection” as the best response to the gradual degradation of their own positions.

Living in Viet Nam now I cannot resist the temptation to quote two of the most illustrious Chinese in history: Confucious said, as a curse it is sometimes recalled, “May you live in interesting times.” My favorite Yin to that Yang is Mao’s famous line, “There is great confusion under the sun. The future is bright.” May we all, as historians, act to make it a little more interesting and brighter both for our contingent colleagues and their students, as well as the profession as a whole.

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