

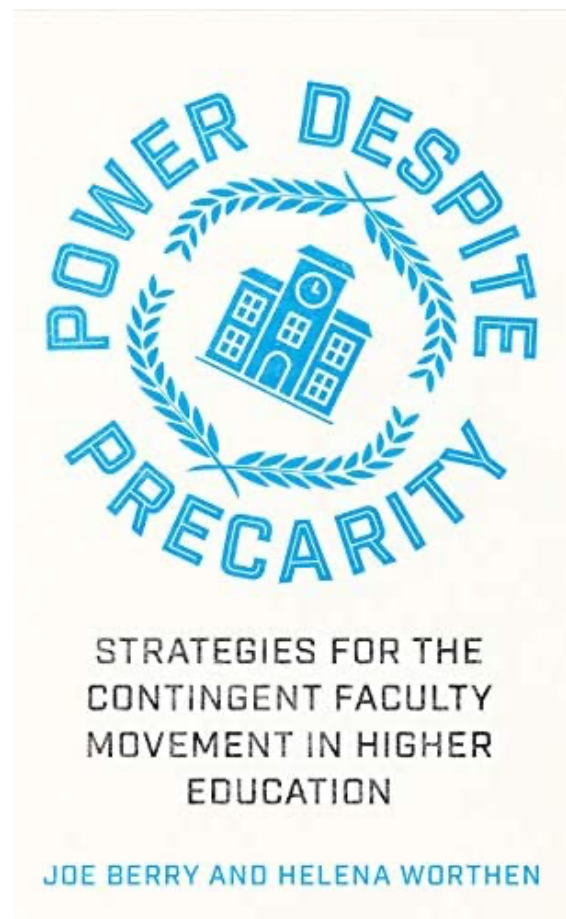
RADICAL TEACHER

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Review

Power Despite Precarity: Strategies for the Contingent Faculty Movement in Higher Education

by Michael Batson



JOE BERRY AND HELENA WORTHEN. POWER DESPITE PRECARIETY: STRATEGIES FOR THE CONTINGENT FACULTY MOVEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION. LONDON: PLUTO

Joe Berry and Helena Worthen. Power Despite Precarity: Strategies for the Contingent Faculty Movement in Higher Education. London: Pluto Press, 2021.

Higher education is at an inflection point: The continuous creep of neoliberalist dogma into academia over the past four decades has completely transformed universities and colleges, the most troubling element being the transition of the academic labor force from a predominantly full-time tenure and tenure-track faculty to majorities of contingent, or adjunct, faculty on campuses throughout the United States. While the particular arrangements and conditions of contingent faculty labor vary from college to college, common features are a lack of job security; low pay; usually part-time employment; subpar benefits, if any are offered at all; a lack of institutional support such as office space, computers, and professional development; and exclusion from, or underrepresentation on, the governing bodies and committees of the institutions in which they teach. Additionally, all too often those conditions are accompanied by alienation, a sense of powerlessness, and interactions with colleagues that hint at a second-class status within their college's hierarchy.

In *Power Despite Precarity: Strategies for the Contingent Faculty Movement in Higher Education*, authors Joe Berry and Helena Worthen offer both practical strategies and inspiration for fixing the contingency problem while arguing that doing so is essential to repairing our broken higher education system. This moment, they assert, requires a national contingent faculty movement that is "conscious of its place in the broader struggle within the political economy of higher education" (160). Berry and Worthen utilize the insights and knowledge they gained from decades of experience as both contingent faculty and as organizers to provide valuable analysis and anecdotes, and while they focus primarily on their own and their colleagues' experiences at their home institution, California State University (CSU), there is much to be gleaned from *Power Despite Precarity* for those across the nation who desire to understand and improve the circumstances of contingency or, preferably, to abolish it altogether.

Like many other institutions, higher education has been gradually succumbing to the predominance of neoliberal thought. Neoliberalism's assault on the Keynesian consensus that allowed for at least a limited role for the government to redistribute wealth, to provide mechanisms for social mobility, and to curtail the excesses of the free market, as well as its success in reducing the scale and scope of state functions, loosening constraints on the market, flattening the progressive tax system, and promoting privatization would inevitably have consequences for higher education. As Berry and Worthen write: "Higher Education, which had until now been somewhat protected from market forces, was going to learn what it meant to be 'run like a business'" (77). The consequences have been

...demands for program-based budgeting and therefore program-based discipline and performance metrics within universities and colleges. Students became "customers" or even "products" to be tailor made for corporate employment as demanded by employers, rather than young citizens to be educated. Tuition in the whole sector was pushed up, which represented cost-shifting to students and parents as part of higher education's marketization and this conversion from a social good, to be supported by taxation, to a private good, to be purchased as a commodity, by individual families. (78-79)

The expansion of contingent labor has played a dual role here: it has both facilitated the transition by weakening the resistance that a unified faculty with job security and academic freedom would likely put up, and it has provided a solution to the tighter budgets and fluctuating enrollments that managers and administrators face.

That managerial solution has become endemic and deeply entrenched. At the City University of New York (CUNY), where I teach, management has been deeply opposed to any contract demands that infringe on their control of the adjunct workforce. In each round of bargaining, management has sought to maintain and even increase flexibility across different professional titles. Despite this, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) has been able to win significant gains for contingent faculty over several rounds of negotiations. Since 2000, with the election of the New Caucus slate, contingent faculty have won paid office hours, health benefits for about 2000 members, the allocation of about 225 full-time lecture lines with a Certificate of Continuous Employment after five years of service for long-serving adjuncts (one of which I was appointed to after seventeen years as an adjunct), three-year contracts guaranteeing at least two courses per semester for eligible adjuncts, professional development grants, and in the last round of bargaining in 2017, a per-course minimum salary increase from about \$3200 to \$5500. As significant as these extremely hard-won breakthroughs are, they do not achieve either parity in pay or benefits with full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty, and they still leave thousands remaining on a semester-by-semester employment basis.

In *Power Despite Precarity*, Berry and Worthen describe the many ways this two-tier system creates a structural inequality that imposes both dire material conditions and emotional distress on tens of thousands of higher education instructors while also undermining the core mission of colleges to produce and transmit knowledge through open discourse, faculty governance, and democratic mechanisms. The existence of large numbers of faculty and staff on campuses perpetually at risk of losing their livelihoods and largely excluded from governing bodies and campus committees is very much at odds with that mission. As Berry and Worthen point out:

Higher education is certainly an institution with definite norms -- for example, the norms of what good curriculum, good teaching, and other good practice looks like. The AAUP Statement on Tenure and Academic Freedom is an example of one of those norms. The

mission statements produced by every institution of higher ed, even the sleaziest, also boast of 'quality,' which is another norm. In the daily effort to practice 'quality' under degraded working conditions, every contingent has lived under the pressure that shows the sky through the cracks in the contradiction between what is supposed to happen and what does in fact happen. (157-158)

Despite the dismal present situation, Berry and Worthen tend towards optimism about the future. Their decades of activism within the College Faculty Association (CFU), the union that has represented the faculty at CSU since winning a contentious election in 1982, suggest the possibilities for what can be accomplished when contingent faculty and their allies get organized and develop sound strategies for collective actions. Their first-hand accounts and interviews with fellow organizers about that history -- a history that resulted in significant gains in wages and benefits, and a level of security through seniority for CSU's contingent faculty -- are likely the most useful chapters of *Power Despite Precarity* for current academic union activists.

This from-the-trenches approach takes readers into the minutiae of organizing from member mobilization to movement building. We can see how the tap on the shoulder, the knock on the office door, the ringing of the phone, the small ask, the invitation to a meeting is the beginning of moving people from isolation to association to action, or in the authors' formulation, from "fear-and-fatalism" to "hope-and-courage" (165). This is the first step in the process of turning individual discontent and self-blame into group-consciousness, a shared vision, and collective action.

Throughout *Power Despite Precarity* are examples of how organizing both raises consciousness and develops the skills necessary to transform the workplace. About midway through the book, for example, the authors tell a story about a long-serving contingent faculty member and organizer at Long Beach State University who, prompted by an incident with her daughter, decided to fight for and won emeritus status for contingent faculty there. While attending an event, her daughter pointed out the omission of her name in the catalogue, thus highlighting her official invisibility on the campus she served for some twenty years. In a book that pulls no punches in describing the "degraded working conditions" (158) of contingents in higher education, the issue might at first seem trivial, yet the anecdote illustrates two important points: one is that in addition to the poor material circumstances that tens of thousands of contingents labor under are the all-too-normal exclusion, alienation, and slights that come with contingency; the other is that the act of organizing is itself transformative and points the way to full inclusion, dignity, and decent working conditions.

The authors argue that the rising collective power of organized contingent faculty must be exerted first within the local union, a space of contested terrain. Employing Antonio Gramsci's theory of the role ideology plays in achieving cultural hegemony as a framework (Chapter 9), the authors prescribe the use of the Inside/Outside strategy to shift the culture of the union away from "the tenured gaze" (184-

185), away from thinking and acting in ways shaped by the legacy privileges of a seemingly bygone era in higher education. The Inside/Outside strategy, whereby "a sub-group organizes itself as an independent base of power within a more powerful group in order to create a safe space where they can have a significant impact on the more powerful group" (135), can shift the entire frame of discussion and action within an organization. This, in turn, will amplify the voice and concerns of contingent faculty in the various spaces where decisions about their conditions are made, such as bargaining tables, college and university boardrooms, legislative halls, and affiliate conventions. As the authors point out, there are precedents demonstrating the efficacy of the Inside/Outside strategy. One of the handful of historical examples they mention is the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Although short-lived, the MFDP was able to change the discourse within the Democratic Party, which in turn led to the end of segregated seating for delegates at Democratic Party conventions after 1964 and enough political pressure to win passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

This Inside/Outside strategy does beg some questions: since contingent faculty are not a monolith, claims of speaking for the majority or representing the rank-and-file is problematic in conditions where, on the one hand, contingent faculty's membership in the union is low and their engagement not widespread, and, on the other, democratically elected representative bodies exist. This does not suggest that unequal power dynamics are not at play within those elected bodies, merely that it complicates the discourse and decision-making. Likewise, while shifting the conversations within an organization towards the needs of contingent faculty is incredibly important and absolutely necessary, building solidarity requires taking into account many different interests and issues, particularly come contract negotiation time. To use CUNY as an example again, the PSC represents several different titles within its roughly 30,000-person bargaining unit. Full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty, teaching and non-teaching adjuncts, library faculty, higher education officers, continuing education instructors, and college laboratory technicians each have their own concerns, and each expects the union to address those concerns.

As important and consequential as this local work is, Berry and Worthen stress that "the transitions we need to bring about are not going to be won by individual local unions at the bargaining table" (160). The problems higher education faces -- attacks on tenure, sometimes wholesale by state legislation, more often informally institution by institution; shrinking state support for public universities; the acceleration of online education due to the COVID 19 pandemic; demographic changes pointing to fewer college-age individuals in the near future; and an increasing emphasis on vocational training at the expense of the general education model -- are national in scope and necessitate a national and unified movement to respond. One particularly effective platform for bringing local activists together to compare local conditions, to learn from the numerous actions taking place across the country and beyond, and to begin to think of strategies for nationalizing the struggle is the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor

(COCAL). COCAL is a coalition of activists from higher education founded in 1997 that most notably holds biennial conferences rotating between Mexico, the U.S., and Canada. These conferences provide a setting for activists to share notes and knowledge and to begin to think of the work they do more broadly than at just their own college or university. Learning what has been won in a particular place and how that victory was achieved expand the possibilities for all. Sharing and aggregating data reveals the true nature of the problem, one that goes beyond particular college administrations and city and state legislators. I found the COCAL conferences I attended in Mexico City and in New York City to be both enlightening and empowering. The one in New York City in 2014 had a direct impact in growing the activist base within the PSC at CUNY and in shaping the demands of the 2017 round of contract bargaining.

Power Despite Precarity is a timely piece of work that persuasively makes the case that fixing the contingency problem is extremely important in-and-of itself, but it is also absolutely essential if we hope to heal what ails academia as a whole.

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