

Chapter 13. “Ten . . . Toil Where One Reposes”: Stories of an Adjunct Faculty Organizer

Anne Balay
SEIU LOCAL 1

One of my bargaining units, a Jesuit university in a small Midwestern city, decided to welcome new members at a Halloween-themed event. Thirty new adjuncts had been added to the school’s roster this second pandemic fall semester, and 23 of these had joined the union. As a lifetime adjunct and now an organizer, I appreciated the campiness of their plan.

Adjuncts are low-wage workers who pretend to be professors. Since we have no job security and no academic freedom, we get to keep pretending this only if we do it well—if our act convinces our full-time colleagues, our administrators, and our students. If we allow gaps to show—let slip that we are not allowed to use the copy machine or reveal that we’re holding office hours in the coffee shop, not because we’re too cool for the office, but because we don’t have one—the department may not be able to “find” classes for us in future.

By camping up the masquerade that our professional life requires, adjuncts demonstrate that full-timers are faking it as much as we are—that “professor” is a narrative we tell ourselves. Walking into a classroom is what makes it feel real. So, when a handful of adjuncts sit at a table in front of the library and self-consciously, deliberately, exaggeratedly occupy their professional role, tenure-track faculty members and administrators might feel uncomfortable. Is a professor something you do, or is it someone you are?

You can’t identify adjuncts by looking at them, by visiting their classes, or by asking students who they are. We imitate the originals so well that we become indistinguishable from them. This serves management well because we can’t find each other; adjuncts feel isolated and stigmatized. Teaching provides few opportunities to create the community that might counteract that.

Still, adjuncts *are* different from the tenure-track faculty members with whom they share education, job description, and culture: we get maybe one-tenth of their pay and live in permanent, destabilizing uncertainty. Though I work for a union that tries to deliver “more pay and more say” to these and other workers, we can offer little material relief. Even a reasonable raise does little to close the gap with full-timers, and job security is never even bargained for. What we do offer is community and a chance to share stories with other workers.

A Voice from the Field

“Angela” has a Ph.D., has published in her field’s prestigious journals, and is beloved by her students. She had a tenure-track job in another state, but both her parents got sick. Her dad (a retired union carpenter) was caring for her mom, who was sliding precipitously into Alzheimer’s, and this was a huge drain on his health. Then, her husband got a job offer here, so they decided to leave her full-time professor gig and move back home. It was too late to relieve her dad from his care burden, but at least she was here when he died. And still here, adjuncting, when her husband and his full-time income left. Without health insurance or job stability, she is now putting two kids through college. Though she gets five or six classes per semester across two schools, I think she will probably lose the house.

Her dad’s union experience encourages “Angela” to believe that our union can make this better. She remembers walking the picket line with strikers and her family getting support from the union to survive those lean months. More, she remembers the parties and picnics and the sense that co-workers are family: they argue, but they stick together. But carpenters work side by side on the job and form social bonds. “Angela” says they went to each other’s BBQs and held their wedding receptions at the union hall. That comradery is just not automatic with adjuncts, who rarely have offices or other places to congregate on campus and are usually rushing off to teach another class at another campus.

All academics are isolated. I worked as a car mechanic before teaching, and that job (like carpentry) forces workers together in a small place, solving problems, sharing tools, eating, and shooting the shit together. After eight years, I knew everything about the men I worked with. In contrast, faculty members do their jobs in isolation, interacting more with students than with other faculty members. What brings them together is committee work, departmental meetings, and the shared stress of promotion and tenure preparations. None of that social grease is available to adjuncts.

This isolation is not accidental. Low-wage workers are ships passing in the night so that we won’t meet, compare notes, and organize. Turnover is high, and morale is low. The pandemic has further increased this isolation—milling around in hallways or chatting at the printer are even less likely than before.

For “Angela,” once her dad died and her husband left, she was panicky and overwhelmed. As the pandemic unfolded, she was teaching in-person because those were the only classes her college offered her. An email went out to the faculty saying that during these difficult times, students, staff, and faculty were encouraged to reach out to the counseling center for support. As “Angela” informed her students of this policy, it occurred to her that she might benefit from it herself. However, when she called, she was informed that these free services were available only to full-time employees and students.

My challenge as an organizer is to shift from this personal story of injustice and abuse to a collective movement for change. Anyone who takes the time to

listen to adjuncts will hear similar stories of trauma. Part-time faculty members were pushed to the razor's edge of tolerance even before the pandemic took everything up a notch. Most gig workers in the US and globally are under similar pressures. Stories of individual hardship animate organized resistance and thus change. But to activate these stories, we need to theorize links between them and a shared, social movement.

Sharing Stories

The steward and I were setting up an information table at a university during the early stages of contract bargaining preparations. We had cookies, coffee, and copies of the old contract, and we had contacted the list of new adjunct hires who we hoped would stop by for a chat. One goal was to identify potential leaders for the contract campaign. Another was to get adjuncts talking to each other since stories are the best way to combat isolation and apathy.

And that all worked. People who said they could stay for only ten minutes wound up staying longer while they exchanged stories and laughed and worried with other adjuncts. This university has been doing some restructuring and has rolled out new requirements and policies. Among these is one that states students will no longer need to take one year of language instruction. As is common, adjuncts dominate the world language department, and they assume that enrollments will now drop precipitously and that within a few years, most will have lost their jobs. They're not wrong, and it sucks. One adjunct who has taught at the university for many years relies on three classes plus a lab each semester, which makes him eligible (post ACA) to buy the employer's health insurance. He and his husband depend on these benefits. As we stand there listening, we are witness. And we are helpless.

Later, a different adjunct in the same department remarks, "I'm lucky—they've asked me to teach Spanish for medical students. It's like first- and second-year Spanish compressed into one year with medical terminology added. And they're really pushing it with their pre-med students, so I should still get classes."

This prompts another adjunct, new this semester, to add that he has three sections of introductory sociology, all over-enrolled, chiefly with premed freshman who signed up because the MCAT has added a sociology section. He, in turn, feels lucky because a national corporate giant is motivating students to enroll in his classes.

When each describes their circumstance as "lucky," I cringe. Each is offered an unusually challenging pedagogical ask, and since the alternative is no work at all, they tell themselves that they are favored by fate. Because we are together, sharing stories collectively, I can ask them to step back and think critically about the story they are telling themselves. When several people take subservience to an oppressive regime and reinterpret it as individual good fortune, it's easier to notice than when we stay isolated and tell these stories only to ourselves. That is the task and

the possibility of labor organizing: to tell individual stories collectively so that the workers notice trends and systems and begin to seek change.

It helps to realize that this pressure to “think positive” shapes low-wage gig work generally, just as it shapes U.S. neoliberal culture. I recently asked a friend who drives a semi-truck to explain the backlog of container ships in the ports, a situation which had suddenly gotten media attention in the fall of 2021. She told me the situation wasn’t new but that COVID-19 has worsened it in ways I hadn’t imagined, ways that are not making their way to the mainstream media. What struck me in her explanation, though, was her claim that “me, personally, I’m fortunate,” because she is able to use indoor bathrooms with hot water for hand washing near the ports during her 14-hour workdays. Sounds familiar, no?

Finding themselves lucky is a strategy workers use to distance themselves from their crappy working conditions by giving them some control. It’s a source of self-esteem within a context with few others, but it thwarts organizing by personalizing conditions that are structural. However, even to make that distinction (to entrench a binary opposition between structural and personal effects) reifies and hardens what I hope instead to change. People’s stories—how we understand and narrate our experiences—can fuel change when they find collective, shared, and public expression. Management knows this, which is why it makes it hard for adjuncts and other low-wage gig workers to meet.

Ride-sharing drivers, for example, are always in their own cars. Though they are everywhere, there isn’t a central location where they gather to get work—or to discuss it amongst themselves—until they use the app that divides them against themselves.¹ Often it’s easier to identify other workers’ oppression than our own, especially given the working-class injunction against whining and the general culture’s insistence on staying positive. But adjuncts can’t see other adjuncts at work because we look like any other professors.

Unlike various other status markers, class is not necessarily visible—its marks can be hidden, at least temporarily. In the U.S. context, this potential invisibility contributes to the erasure of class as meaningful. It’s because class stratification can be invisible that it perpetuates and reproduces itself inescapably.

Conclusion

Organizing adjunct faculty into labor unions resists this invisibility process. Once adjuncts have been to a union meeting, they can identify each other in the halls and parking lots. And seeing other adjuncts makes visible the covert class structure of academia since it lets us see the tenure-track faculty also. Any divide between the full-time and part-time faculty relies on their invisibility. As with any binary, once the sorting process is noticed, its arbitrary rules

1. One such story is well told in Callum Cant’s *Riding for Deliveroo: Resistance in the New Economy*.

are exposed and, though it reconstitutes and justifies itself continuously, the gig is up.

When adjuncts stage their own orientation events as costume parties, sending up their own ability to walk the walk and talk the talk, they're using camp to critique higher education's hierarchical structures. Parody is a mobile strategy that can resist hegemony's inexorable march. People in higher education aren't entrenching an oppressive labor hierarchy in which "ten . . . toil where one reposes" (Oppenheim)—it's more like a game of pretend that everyone participates in. By laughing at ourselves, at full-timers, and at the silly distinctions between us, we can imagine new ways to act and teach and think and engage.

What does it mean to be a professor? To teach? People complain about teaching in a mask during the COVID-19 pandemic and about not seeing the majority of students' faces in the classroom, whether behind a mask or on a Zoom call with their cameras muted. But maybe this opens up a change in higher education hierarchies by emphasizing the imaginary nature of classroom authority, of leadership, and of learning.

Works Cited

- Cant, Callum. *Riding for Deliveroo: Resistance in the New Economy*. Polity Press, 2020.
- Oppenheim, James. "Bread and Roses." *The American Magazine*, Dec. 1911. *Jewish Women's Archive*, 2022, <https://jwa.org/media/bread-and-roses-poem>.