Fighting Labor Contingency: Getting Teacher Unions to Work with the Larger Labor Community

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Good Adjuncts,

As I more or less said in an [earlier post](https://adjunctcrisis.com/2016/06/24/its-about-all-of-us-tell-your-students-what-you-are/), if the fight to address the issue of adjunctification is ever going to get anywhere, we have to realize and act upon the fact that adjunctification has been going on in earnest in all aspects of the economy under the terms like “labor contingency,” and the “independent contracting” of the “gig economy”.  In that post, I pointed out how this was the discussion you needed to have with your students.

But that’s just the beginning of it.

Teachers’ unions and traditional labor unions need to get on the same page in addressing the issue, and really, adjuncts are the true link between the two.

For those of you needing a little background into the history of labor and teachers’ unions in this country, the history of such unions takes two strains.

One strain was that, as with the rise of the labor movement in general, it was younger women, who suffering from poor salaries, working conditions, and a general lack of respect, formed teachers’ unions which tended to act more or less like traditional labor unions, by going out on strike, forcing negotiations, etc.  Such teachers’ unions in turn identified themselves with the larger labor struggle, and were part of a larger labor movement to improve the lot of all workers.  Much of this contributed to a period of increasing economic equality between the years 1930-1970, and has come to be known as “[The Great Compression](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2118322?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents).”

Another strain was that teachers’ groups, in some cases led by management, formed educational associations which over time morphed into teachers’ unions.  While these groups would in turn fight for their members’ salaries and benefits, they generally took a more conciliatory tone with management, and more or less distanced themselves from traditional labor.  This became more prominent from the Mid-70’s onward (note the interesting parallel to the start of adjunctification in earnest).  From the 1970’s onward, America on the whole has experienced an increasing economic inequity which author and journalist Timothy Noah has referred to as “[The Great Divergence](http://img.slate.com/media/3/100914_NoahT_GreatDivergence.pdf).”

I write this not to put blame for income inequity at the feet of these teachers’ unions so much as to say that these unions’ lack of working in consort with the larger labor community has not only lessened their own power, but the power of unions and workers in general to resist the forces which favor the consolidation of wealth into fewer hands at the expense of a larger social contract with the general public.

As I said before, I am active within two different local teachers’ unions.  One is very rooted in social activism.  Part of this is driven by the fact that they are an older, more-urban and multi-school district. Their membership is larger, has more resources, and has a significant number of members with a social activist mindset.  This union has greater links to the social activist tradition of the first strain.

This union is very active in the local AFL-CIO labor Council.  It strongly supports the labor actions of the AFL-CIO affiliates, and in turn is able to garner general labor support for not only education-friendly candidates, but for a wide variety of labor and social progressive issues.  In this respect, they are seen not only as a labor union, but as a community force.  On the adjunct level, they have, despite some issues, one of the best adjunct priority re-hire policies in the state, and provide adjuncts working over a 50% load full-insurance benefits or the adjunct and his/her dependents, including discounted vision, dental, and chiropractic care.  They also have provided paid office hours for over 10 years.

The other is a single-school district which is some 50 years younger, with many of its faculty being more middle to upper middle class in spite of its being in a more exclusively Latino community.  It is more affiliated with the second strain of teacher unionism, yet is coming more to the realization of this strain’s shortcomings.

The second local has, until recently, not been involved in the larger local labor movement, and, in my opinion, it has, until recently, left them open to the electing of governing board members who have been pushed by local construction and trade groups in concert with a local political machine in which people work their way up the ladder via the governing board.  Some years back, several of the board members, along with some administrators, were indicted and convicted on corruption charges.  At one point, all instructors took a 5% pay cut, there were massive layoffs of adjunct staff, limited movement was made in terms of jobs security, and adjunct support facilities deteriorated. Recent years have seen a significant turnaround, with a slight increase in wages, paid professional development, and the start of a small, paid office hours program, but there is still a long way to go.

Despite the sharp contrasts I draw between these two unions, both face similar challenges, particularly with regard to dealing with adjuncts and with labor contingency in general.  The first is that both teachers’ union are affiliated with larger national unions largely driven by their majority K-12 membership which generally does not have a full understanding of Higher Ed, from its work conditions to its labor force.  As a result, the concerns of Higher Ed are often given lesser priority and attention.   The second is that for the longest time, the main focus of both teachers’ unions is on the preserving of working conditions for the full-time unit members, with no specific or central strategy for addressing the increased use of adjunct labor, pay inequity.  They clearly don’t like adjunctification or pay inequity, but are stymied about what to do, primarily in the face of an anti-increased revenues movement which has gripped America since the late 1970’s.

This mindset however is weakening, due in part to a growing income inequity in the face of a growing economy.  Perhaps the strongest break in this mindset can be seen with the passage of Prop 30 in California in 2012.

Now is the time for adjuncts to step forward, and we need to do this by aligning ourselves with the interests of the larger labor community.  It’s always been there for adjuncts to pursue.  For my own part, I have tried to forge links, through my locals, with the AFL-CIO Labor Council, and involved myself with the labor campaigns like the SEIU’s and UDW’s respective struggles for janitors and home healthcare workers.  I have been actively involved with the “Fight for 15” campaign pointing out, that for all the Higher Ed training adjuncts have, many adjuncts work for similarly low pay with no benefits and tenuous job security. By the way, if you ever go to one of the rallies, you will see people who are far more marginalized than our adjuncts out in force on the street in seas of purple, red, or green shirts chanting boisterously for justice.

It’d be nice to see adjuncts so motivated.

And guess what?  At least at the community college level, many of these workers, or their children, are our students.

Talk to your fellow adjunct and full-time union members about being part of the larger labor community.  Get them to see the larger picture.  If you can’t get your union leadership on board, then go a local labor and social-justice based organization and tell them you want to help.  No, this doesn’t mean giving your life to them, but hey, just holding a sign of support at a rally, or writing a letter to the editor, or inviting a worker to your class to speak of his/her experiences is a start.

Better yet, make organized labor or social justice groups a part of your Camus Equity Week. Invite them to take part.

And adjuncts, on every campus is that janitor, clerical, or classified staff who works alongside you, right down to the older cafeteria worker who has two kids at home and a life you don’t know about.  Ask them about their work conditions and challenges, and generally show you care.

You might find that they will care about you too.

Then, when you speak and agitate for better work conditions for all workers, along with an end to adjunctification, they’ll support you too.

As the old union saying goes “an injury to one is an injury to all.”

Stop the injury, start the healing.  We can be ONE.

Geoff Johnson

A “Good” Adjunct