

# RADICAL TEACHER

FOCUS

UNEMPLOYMENT /  
UNDEREMPLOYMENT :

★ PART TIME { IN CUNY  
IN CALIFORNIA

★ THE NEXT TWENTY YEARS

★ POLITICS + POETRY

5

# PART-TIME TEACHING AT CUNY

The following article was written by members of the Committee of Untenured Faculty, a lower-rank faculty organization at the City University of New York. Part I is a collection of quotations taken from

personal anecdotes of various adjunct lecturers at CUNY. Part II is one member's account of the attempt by the Committee to organize lower-rank faculty at CUNY between June, 1976 and April, 1977.

Part I: Living at the bottom  
by Susan Blank and Beth Greenberg

---

## *Adjuncts must understand that adjuncting, not full-time work, is the job they have.*

---

"When people ask me what I do, I say I teach English at CUNY. And then I quickly add, 'but I'm only an adjunct.' Sometimes they say, 'What's that?', and I answer, 'Oh, sort of a part-time graduate assistant.' But that doesn't really explain it. It's much more complicated."

We are adjuncts at the City University of New York. Although we have the same academic qualifications as many full-time teachers, we are part-time (and technically limited by the rules of the university to part-time work), paid by the hour, and hired or fired semester by semester. No matter how long we remain in the system as adjuncts, we have no possibility of tenure. Usually our pay-scale is roughly one half the salary for two thirds the work of a full-timer of the lowest rank, and this discrepancy is widened by the fact that we have no benefits or Social Security.

To us, teaching as CUNY adjuncts means being caught in a series of contradictions, each one prickly and confining and ultimately exploitative. What follows are a few of those contradictions:

*There are union rules to protect me against exploitation; they keep me underemployed by making it illegal for me to get enough work.*

"I make \$6,000 per year teaching two courses each semester. Proportionately, if I taught four courses, I could make \$12,000, which I could afford to live on. But according to the union contract, I am limited to teaching nine hours per semester (or two courses, whichever is less). If I teach more, I am no longer part-time and am officially being underpaid and deprived of benefits as a full-time teacher."

In contrast to the adjunct, the full-time CUNY teacher is allowed to teach one extra course to make more money:

"Last week I began teaching one of my new courses. I was very pleased to meet an old colleague from another campus. At the same time, I couldn't help feeling a measure of resentment. This course is one of the two that I'm allowed to teach. Teaching the same courses with the very same qualifications as I have, he, as a full-timer, is making perhaps \$17,000 a year to my \$6,000. I can only conclude that his course should be offered to an adjunct as a third course

rather than provide extra income to someone already making a full-time salary."

*Teaching is a "profession," but in many ways I'm like a migrant worker.*

"When I've built up a good relationship with a class, and students ask me if they can take a course with me next semester, I say I don't even know if I'll be teaching at this institution next semester."

"I'm always tempted to accept more courses than I can handle in the fall, for fear of not finding work in the spring. One year I was offered classes at five schools, another year at four. I always accepted work at just two different schools until recently when I tried working at three. Never again."

"Fall semester I worked at two schools. In November, one of those schools told me I was among the lucky ones who would be rehired in the spring. I would teach two three-hour classes. During intersession, I planned the classes, chose texts, and got thoroughly excited about meeting my new students. Four days before the new term began, the other school offered me two four-hour classes. Although the two extra hours would have meant more money, I decided to stick with the first school, where I had really enjoyed the creative atmosphere and the interaction between adjuncts and full-timers. The day before classes began, I received a phone call saying that due to low registration my six hours had been cancelled. The caller's warmth and words of sympathy helped little. I quickly called the second school, but, of course, the two classes they'd offered me were already covered."

"Largely because many departments have so many adjuncts hired at the last minute, books are often chosen for us. I walk into a school one or two days before classes begin and am handed several books I'm unfamiliar with. The fact that I could function more effectively with my own preferred texts makes no difference. Each school has its particular philosophy of teaching also. What I've done with success at one school might be entirely inappropriate at another. As soon as I know where I'm going to teach, I begin to psyche out the department. Although I'm rarely told that I'm expected to teach in a certain way, it usually

comes out in the observation report if I don't. And that makes it difficult to be rehired."

"Although most of us are very dedicated, the fact is that we are not usually able to perform all those duties associated with college teaching. For example, if a student can't meet me right before or after class, it may be impossible to schedule conferences, because when the student is free, I may be traveling to, or teaching at, another school. I feel fortunate when I meet a student on the way to the train and have a little while to talk. So many student problems spill forth during these accidental meetings, problems that are often remedied as a result of our talk."

"Because of the difficulty locating me, I give my students my home telephone number. I'm not thrilled with the idea, but many students have found it useful, and so far no one has abused the privilege. Some of my colleagues have been less lucky and have had to discontinue the practice, leaving their students at times stranded."

"When I was a full-time instructor, before I got axed in the budget cuts, I would consider it my job to see as many students for as many hours as possible. Now that I'm an adjunct, I still hold conferences, but basically, if the students can't make it during the days I'm out there, we just don't meet. I'm part-time, not full-time. Of course, they are exactly the same kind of students with exactly the same needs for remediation as the students I taught as a full-time instructor. Students lose out with part-time teachers."

---

*"but I'm only an adjunct"*

---

*Teaching should mean working with other people, but I feel alone.*

"It is rare that I find time to talk to a colleague. One of us is always rushing to another school at the other end of the city, or in Westchester or New Jersey. Or there's something to straighten out with a secretary, or to type and duplicate. Of course, with people working part-time, schedules often don't coincide at all."

"Whenever a friendship manages to grow, it is almost certain to be uprooted the next term. The chances of being in the same school again and having overlapping schedules are remote."

"Last semester I was delighted to have an office, rare for an adjunct. When I saw a notice on the wall addressed to "Dear Fellow Wage Slaves," I felt less isolated than usual, more supported. I do enjoy the conversations about shared inequities with the other adjuncts in the office, but after a while, I have noticed that the contact itself isn't enough. Talking helps, but I want change."

*If I do a responsible teacher's work, I'm working for free.*

At an English Department meeting at a CUNY community college, the staff is rather small, informal and young. Most significantly, well over half its members are adjuncts. The full-time members are

some with doctorates, some still in graduate school, all of them committed teachers. The adjuncts can be described in exactly the same terms. As far as one can tell, the only difference between the two groups is who happened to be in the right position at the right time to get a full-time job.

---

*"I'm always tempted to accept more courses than I can handle"*

---

The department chairperson is sensitive to the situation. "We depend on our adjuncts," she says frequently. Unlike many other CUNY departments, this one encourages adjunct participation on committees, in curriculum decision making. Nevertheless, in its second semester this department did not rehire twenty of the adjuncts who worked there in the first. This was in no way the fault of the chairperson. The system dictates that she retain only enough adjuncts to "fill the sections." Still, this faculty meeting is over half-filled with teachers uncertain if they will be working here six months hence. And the chairperson isn't sure either.

Now an adjunct raises a question. "I keep hearing about this grant and that committee. Couldn't the department inform adjuncts about these activities?" Several people nod and feelings of exclusion quietly fill the room. The reply is swift and diplomatic. Certainly, notices of Departmental activities will be distributed to adjuncts. The tension in the room releases.

The next day, however, several adjuncts tell each other: "I'm not going to any more of the damn meetings. Why should I care what the full-timers are doing?" "People just go because they figure it looks good for getting rehired."

On the one hand, we are professional teachers and feel slighted when excluded from professional duties. On the other, we are hourly workers and feel exploited when we are asked to perform these duties for no pay. Similarly, the chairperson is caught—accused of snobbishness when ignoring adjuncts and of exploitation when involving them. Technically she must disregard extra-class activities when rehiring, but if she does, she ignores substantial effort. Of course, when adjuncts sense that extra duties will be considered, they feel constrained to volunteer. Clearly good will and personal solutions will not eliminate these traps.

*I see myself as a potential assistant professor, but in fact my apprenticeship may last forever.*

There are very few—in CUNY, virtually no—full-time jobs to be had. That's the situation. But no one is ever going to demand change until adjuncts really understand that adjuncting, not full-time work, is the job they have.

Almost all adjuncts see themselves as on the way to someplace else. And there are elements of the system which encourage this view. Possession of, or progress towards, a doctorate is a consideration when an adjunct is hired. Some schools even conduct a kind of

mini-oral during job interviews.

These standards, however, are the style and not the substance of the adjunct's reality. Rather than apprentice scholars, adjuncts are often the drudges who do more than their share of the menial work of teaching.

Very infrequently (and less so in CUNY now that the budget cuts have hit), a full-time position does become available. What adjuncts are beginning to understand is that such a full-time instructorship has increasingly become a job for a double adjunct." Instructors teach four to five courses—mainly introductory. In English departments these are usually all composition courses, an impossible paper load. A much sought-after instructorship at Hunter College this year demanded a course load of five

composition courses (read, comment, and grade 125 papers a week).

The positions of these instructors are almost as tenuous as those of the adjuncts. Many were retrenched in last August's budget cuts, only to be replaced by adjuncts; frequently instructors replaced themselves as adjuncts.

Most adjuncts and even instructors know that they are the menial workers of the university system. But our vision is clouded by a double image. The person who fills out an hourly time sheet and who may be laid off tomorrow if registration dips, may also, with a few lucky breaks, be an apprentice scholar on the verge of security, tenure, and advanced courses. Until we get a clear, single image of the reality of our position, we will be immobilized by contradictions.



Students and teachers demonstrate against cutbacks at New York City Board of Higher Education, 12/75.

Part II: Organizing from the bottom up  
by Mary Vaughn

Almost every time I complain to someone outside the City University about my life as an adjunct lecturer, I'm asked, "Why don't you organize? Why not bring in a union?" The answer, of course, is that we already have a union of sorts—the Professional Staff Congress (PSC)—but we are really not organized at all. At one senior college recently, an informal count at election time showed that only about 300 of the 500 full-time faculty were union members, and only 135 of those voted in the election. Only 4 of over 100 part-time faculty were members.<sup>1</sup> This lack of organization has tempted more than one group to try to bring some unity to the faculty, and last year, I, too, got involved in forming a group to organize CUNY teachers.

It was, interestingly, at a union-sponsored demonstration—called after Chancellor Kibbee had locked all the students and faculty out of the university to dramatize the need for an immediate solution to the CUNY budget crisis—that I met the people who would form the basis of our group. The demonstration was well attended, but there was a conspicuous absence of part-time faculty, because most of us felt alienated from, and even hostile to, anything connected to the PSC. Wasn't it the PSC which had stood by and allowed the number of part-time faculty to grow until nearly 50% of the faculty consisted of people exploited as cheap labor?<sup>2</sup>

---

*the position of instructors is almost as  
tenuous as those of the adjuncts*

---

And wasn't it the PSC which had then bargained out of the contract anything that might have afforded us some dignity? Of course, it was the union leadership which was at fault in the matter, and it was not they, but a newly-formed committee of union activists, who had planned the demonstration. Still, it was not much easier to identify with those activists, because they were mainly full-time faculty, and full-timers all too often acted surprised when we told them about our work situation, and then offered us a kind of pity that was quite humiliating. As adjuncts, we felt rather out of place.

But it was not simply part-time faculty who felt left out of the demonstration. As we were to find out, many other lower-rank faculty also feel that the union does not represent them, and that their working conditions and chances for advancement are not necessarily any better than an adjunct's. While adjuncts must take on unreal workloads in the fall, knowing they may be unemployed in the spring, instructors and uncertificated lecturers are forced to do the same all year, knowing they will eventually be terminated and have to seek work elsewhere, or in the case of some, be rehired as adjuncts. Like adjuncts, they are hired to teach courses that higher rank faculty do not want—introductory courses, and

remedial courses created for students entering under the Open Admissions policy. It is undoubtedly a reflection of the attitude of the administration and the union toward Open Admissions students, that they are taught by underpaid and overworked teachers in programs where there is a forced turnover of staff semester by semester and year by year. Perhaps the only reason that full-time teachers are hired at all is because they are needed to do the work that cannot be required of hourly workers: registration, placement, curriculum development, without which remedial programs would be in total chaos.

The PSC demonstration, like others held around that time, appeared to have little impact, probably in part because everyone realized the union did not have the full support of the faculty, and that most of the faculty did not have the support of the union. But it was clear to us that more of the teachers would have to get involved in the fight against the cuts before we could force the union to take a real stand on the issues, and that the union would never take a stand on our particular issues unless we got organized ourselves.

Thus, four of us, two instructors and two adjuncts, left with the idea of forming a group of lower-rank faculty, both full and part-time. We would organize starting from the bottom, and work our way up as high in the ranks as we could, knowing at some point we would reach a level where faculty could not identify with our problems and would not be interested in joining. We also felt that if we were to mobilize any of our co-workers, it would have to be done independently of the union, because few of us belonged, and most of us had very bad feelings about it. Since we felt our biggest audience would consist of those with little job security, we decided to call our group the "Committee of Untenured Faculty."

---

*most of us felt alienated from, even hos-  
tile to, the PSC*

---

After a lengthy phone campaign, we reached a point where about twenty people, a few instructors and a large number of adjuncts, were involved in C.U.F. meetings and activities. Our initial enthusiasm was great, in spite of the fact that we lacked experience: less than half the members had belonged to any political groups at all, and those of us who had, felt totally baffled by the problems posed by the City University, with its 18 individual campuses, and the disorder and the demoralization brought about by the budget crisis.

I felt particularly awkward about my abilities as an organizer. Although I had worked with a number of groups at the University of Michigan during the late sixties and early seventies, I had rarely taken a leadership role, and had always seemed to be somewhere else when strategy was planned. Now I found myself in a group in which I had more

experience than most. But I didn't know exactly how to bring that experience to bear on any of the workings of the organization. Also, I was afraid of taking a leadership role in the beginning because I was intimidated by the fact that many of the teachers involved had completed or nearly completed, doctorates, while I had dropped out of graduate school with a master's degree and was now teaching English as a second language, a "non-academic" subject. I felt I might encounter the same elitism I had noticed in many university professors, who gave me the feeling that being allowed to teach at a university without a doctorate was a privilege that demanded some sacrifice: basically the sacrifice of full-time work, decent wages, and job security.

But the real difficulty of working in the group was that the problems we faced were entirely new to me. I had organized tenants, and even university teaching fellows. I had also had the exhilarating experience of being one of the leaders in unionizing the hotel and restaurant where I worked for a year as a waitress after dropping out of graduate school. Yet none of that could give me any insights about what direction we should take at CUNY. Here it wasn't as simple question of persuading people to show they had the guts to sign cards and make it clear where their loyalties lay. That kind of organizing had been done already. Now it was a question of doing something about the union that had been instituted and the way it had evolved. This was a much more complex matter.

---

*the problems we faced were entirely new to me*

---

But in spite of the complexities, it seemed to all of us that the work had to begin somewhere, and that we could no longer wait for someone more experienced to lead us. We decided to begin with small projects, involving a limited amount of strategy. We sent letters of protest, distributed useful information for lower-rank faculty, spoke at a Board of Regents hearing, and generally tried to publicize our plight. Most of this took place during the summer, when all of us were either unemployed or underemployed, and we were all aware that even small projects such as these would be impossible if we were unable to find more members before the semester began.

I wish I could begin at this point to explain in detail how we went about recruiting members, how we integrated them into our organization, and how we all worked together to raise the level of political consciousness of lower-rank faculty, for those were our aims. I wish I could say that we set the groundwork for a powerful organization in which unity, not competition for a few full-time jobs, was the major concern. Unfortunately, I cannot, because, as we were to find out, in spite of the gravity of the crisis, in spite of the fact that CUNY was fast becoming a wasteland where education would be for a few, and in which none of us would play any real role, it seemed nearly impossible to convince anyone that now was the time to join together in the struggle.

For one thing, it was hard to convince people to join a group which was unable even to come up with a list of short-term goals. Things were happening so rapidly, and so insidiously, that we couldn't grasp what we were really up against. Should we fight for the reinstatement of Open Admissions and free tuition, or was it more important to concentrate on faculty issues? Which issues were still alive? We hoped that as we drew more people in, we would get a better sense of the situation all over CUNY, and then be able to develop realistic projects. But the people we drew in came expecting to find answers, and were discouraged just to find more questions.

---

*we needed people willing to face the complexities and be patient for the answers*

---

What we needed were people willing to face the complexities and be patient for those answers. But how to find them? Departments kept few records of part-time faculty addresses. When we contacted full-timers, they often knew of people they thought might be interested, but they never had addresses or phone numbers, especially not of adjuncts, and often couldn't even give us last names.

Another problem we encountered was that many of those contacted simply felt they had no skills to contribute to an organization like C.U.F. I heard comments like: "I just can't join, because I don't know how to talk to strangers on the phone," and "It's all a really good idea, but I'm not a political sort." Some composition teachers were reluctant to help write leaflets because it was a "special sort of style" they weren't sure they could handle. Sometimes it was possible at the same meeting to hear certain members demand that we plan a serious job action, and others express fear of stuffing their department mailboxes—"what if someone sees me and tells me to stop?"

Actually, we had been prepared from the beginning for the possibility that we would have difficulty finding members, but we had also imagined that the impending disaster in the city would bring out great crowds of people clamoring for action, and that we could form coalitions with other groups that arose from the budget crisis. Those groups disappeared one by one—the PSC Mobilization Committee itself was one of the first to go—and the issues seemed to disappear with them.

Also disappearing were most of our potential members. Phone campaigns and leafletting turned up fewer and fewer people who were still working in the university system. A recent CUNY fact sheet may explain the problem: it appears that of 16,620 part-time staff in June, 1975, 13,387 had been terminated by the next accounting in September, 1976.<sup>3</sup> The statistics include all part-time staff, not just teachers, and are possibly in error, since it seems that no one bothers to keep accurate statistics on part-time help. Nevertheless, this must be some indication of what has happened to many of those we had hoped to organize. In our own group of approxi-

mately twenty active members, eight no longer have any connection with CUNY. Many were fired and some, like myself, simply quit. I left to take a nine-to-five job in publishing, because I found that I was so exhausted by a fifteen hour a week schedule divided between CUNY and New York University that I could not only do little effective organizing, I wasn't even able to fulfill my responsibilities to my students.

In view of the massive firings of adjuncts, the only logical thing to do would have been to make sure we involved instructors and lecturers in the group since their situation was somewhat more stable. But the great gap between full-time and part-time was never bridged. Because we consisted mainly of adjuncts we concentrated on adjunct problems, and many members simply found it very difficult to imagine that there was really any similarity between the problems of adjuncts and other lower-rank faculty. Many instructors and lecturers felt the same way. They seemed to identify more strongly with those above them than with those below. We simply hadn't made the case for unity among all lower-rank faculty.

But it must also be said that with the massive firings and threats of more, people were beginning to look out for themselves. If the crisis had no other effect on them, it at least uprooted them from their complacency. People who had had their graduate education extended by political involvement in the Vietnam era suddenly decided to work on dissertations full steam and to devote any other free time to the search for that one job. Others were preparing for entirely new fields or searching for jobs in industry. Although I never heard voiced aloud, as I had seven years before by teaching fellows at Michigan, the idea that "professionals get ahead through achievement, not organization," I think it is still strong somewhere in our minds. Even if the prospects for finding jobs in academia are slim, it still must seem more worthwhile to give everything to the search for a job than to commit oneself to collective efforts in this time of political lethargy.

---

*the great gap between full-time and part-time was never bridged*

---

Finally, at a meeting in April, we decided that C.U.F. had outlived its effectiveness, and that to prolong its life would only discourage our members from undertaking similar projects in the future. At the last meeting we tried to evaluate what we had accomplished, if anything, and to explain to ourselves why it had been so terribly difficult even to build a small activist organization. The consensus was that we had simply picked the worst possible time for such an undertaking and that even in the best of times, working to organize such an unstable population as adjuncts and instructors would be an extremely difficult task.

I personally have come to the conclusion, along with many others who were in C.U.F., that the only rational way to go about organizing at this time is to take a strong position on the union: that it is definitely an elitist organization whose main concern is high

salaries for the higher ranks, but that the only way to wrest the power from the union leadership is to persuade lower-rank faculty to join the union and build a power base from within. Union membership may appear expensive to adjuncts (at \$60 per year),

---

*why had it been so terribly difficult to build even a small activist organization?*

---

some of whom go without health insurance, but in most workplaces this is considered a normal cost of collective bargaining. To add a somewhat optimistic note, two of our members, one adjunct and one instructor, ran for union representative against the union slate in the election mentioned above. Although they lost the election, one managed to get 57, and the other 51 of the 139 votes cast.

#### Notes

1 This is according to a count made by two candidates, who were given lists of current union members which they then compared to the faculty directory. The number of adjuncts mentioned here is a rough estimate. There is no official count available of adjuncts at any branch of CUNY. An attempt was made to get more complete statistics on union membership, but the PSC would not release any of their figures unless a special need for them could be demonstrated. One official offered to release some statistics, but only if the article were submitted to the official and if it corresponded to that official's views. There was insufficient time before the deadline for this article to go through either procedure.

2 According to Chancellor Kibbee, there were about 9000 full-time and 9000 part-time faculty at CUNY in 1975-76. "An Interview with Kibbee," **New York Times**, July 25, 1976.

3 Fact sheet included in **Graduate School News Report**, 1, No. 7 (April 1977), p.7 (unnumbered).

The next issue will contain an article analyzing the implications of the *Carnegie Commission Report on Higher Education and The Management and Financing of Colleges*, a report done by the Committee for Economic Development.