

COCAL VI, Chicago; Networking the Western Hemisphere

The sixth conference of the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor in Chicago August 6-8 featured speakers from all three major North American countries, and for the first time simultaneous French and Spanish translation was available at virtually all sessions.

Several resolutions were passed at the end of the conference:

- condemning the recent NLRB decision denying recognition for collective bargaining purposes to the graduate student union at Brown University;
- supporting the AFL-CIO's campaign for teach-ins on workers' rights at colleges and universities;
- designating the final week or carryover week in October each year as the time for Campus Equity Week (Fair Employment Week in Canada);
- demanding the exclusion of education from the free trade agreements due to the trend toward privatization and increased contingent labor in education;
- supporting the struggle of the workers of the Mexican Institute of Social Security against the privatization of social security and the pension system, and in defense of their collective bargaining agreement.

The final two resolutions were proposed by members of the Mexican delegation, who played a strong role in establishing the theoretical framework for the conference in the opening plenary session. Arturo Ramos Perez of the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico and the Universidad Autonoma Chapingo identified the growing use of contingent academic labor as an aspect of neoliberalism, which he defined as a political strategy to modify education to benefit the privileged classes, in part by destabilizing working conditions for faculty and thus enabling unequal distribution of goods. Ramos Perez stated that 60-70% of Mexican professors are employed as contingent labor.

Maria de la Luz Arriaga Lemus of the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico described this pattern of academic labor in Mexico as a generalized destabilization of working conditions in which hours are lengthened, social benefits reduced or revoked, and payment is by the hour or part-time so that professors have no paid time for class preparation and thus find it difficult to remain current in their fields. She described it as a "highly costly model not only for education workers for society as well" as the quality of education is diminished, producing a "devastating effect on a new generation of young teachers with no expectation of full-time jobs."

Enrique Ochoa of the Universidad Autonoma Baja California explained that the dominant higher education faculty union in Mexico is linked to the PRI and the president of UNAM and that the union has been known to retaliate against professors who challenge university politics or seek more democratic processes within the union. He said that in Baja 80% of UNAM professors are contingent and are paid on the average of \$7/hour.

The breakout sessions at the conference followed several topically oriented streams, the three most highly attended of which addressed strategy within larger contexts, organizing of new union locals, and contract bargaining issues. Also popular was a separate workshop on recent strikes and other job actions, featuring several interesting accounts from various graduate student organizing drives.

Elizabeth Hoffman of the lecturer council of the California State University union, CFA, presented a paper on the history of contingent faculty organizing within CFA over the past thirty year; John Lloyd, also from CFA, spoke on the growing threat of outsourcing and globalization to education workers. Californians Craig Flanery (CFA) and Bob Samuels (UC-AFT) generated some of the most heated debate at the conference in their proposals for more centralized coordination of COCAL at the national/international level.

Alisa Messer of CCC/CFT discussed her research in progress on attitudes and organizing problems among "moonlighters," i.e. part-time instructors with independent businesses or consulting operations who identify themselves as "entrepreneurs" rather than "workers." In response to this presentation, Enrique Ochoa suggested that perhaps the concept of intellectual property has more usefulness as an organizing tool than oft-invoked appeals to the self-identification of contingent faculty members as either "professionals" or "workers."

Other attendees from California included Mary Millet of CCC/CFT and David Milroy, Chris Storer, and Jackie Simon of CPFA. Chris Storer continues to maintain the website for Campus Equity Week on behalf of COCAL, cewAction@topica.com.