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## Why Contingent Faculty Must Lead

Submitted by Marc Bousquet on March 17, 2008 - 4:00am

This is a moment of historic change for the American Association of University Professors. With the majority of AAUP members now participating in collective bargaining, it has become necessary to accommodate federal labor law with a formal re-structuring. Over the next two or three years, AAUP will create three financially separate but philosophically interlocking entities. At the core will remain the traditional advocacy organization that continues the association's 90-year mission to speak for the profession as a whole. Closely allied will be an AAUP foundation free to seek grant support and development funding from major donors and a labor organization housing those chapters that bargain collectively. In this arduous and expensive transition, the association's staff and officers have uncovered and reformed issues in the membership department affecting dues income (via late or inaccurate renewal notices) and financial record-keeping.

The incumbent president of the AAUP, Cary Nelson, has overseen these efforts in the midst of another epochal shift: the recognition by the association and most other major faculty institutions that, as a result of a concerted assault upon tenure by administrations and corporate interests over the past four decades, the traditional figure of the tenurable faculty member now represents a modest fraction of the faculty overall. That number is currently one-third, and dropping precipitously. The figure of one-third is itself quite conservative, insofar as it doesn't account for the enormous quantity of teaching done by graduate student employees serving as instructor of record, and given the pronounced tendency of administrations to aggressively under-report the true percentage of faculty serving contingently.

Despite comprising a sizeable majority of faculty overall, contingent faculty have remained very much in the minority in faculty leadership positions, most of which, as service roles, are traditionally uncompensated, and often require time and status that few persons working on term contracts are able to muster.

This has contributed to what faculty activists have called the structural "invisibility" of faculty serving contingently and the somewhat belated discovery that contingency now represents the norm of faculty life. For the current generation of scholars, tenurability increasingly functions to provide a veneer of research productivity, to generate sponsored projects, and as an administrator candidate pool -- much the way that enlisted officers function in the military, as a caste with the privileges and responsibility of command, directing undergraduates, graduates, staff and the permatemped majority faculty in the daily operations of the business of higher education.

In recent years, however, the insecure majority faculty have made themselves increasingly legible on the public stage, most particularly through unionism: by dramatically re-shaping the agenda and policy discourse of the major higher ed unions (AFT, NEA, AAUP), by attracting the organizing attention of unions not previously associated with higher ed faculty (UAW, CWA, SEIU, AFSCME), and, depending on local history and state labor law, by either forming leadership slates and caucuses within mixed units or else forming independent unions of their own.

Of special interest is the growing trend toward successful organizing by contingent faculty on private campuses ([Pace University](#),<sup>[1]</sup> [George Washington University](#), the [New School](#),<sup>[2]</sup> [New York University](#)): with very few private school faculties willing to challenge *Yeshiva* -- a weak 5-4 Supreme Court decision that suggested tenure-stream faculty owed administrations a form of supervisory loyalty -- it is clearly faculty serving contingently who are the leading edge of unionism in private higher education.

With the rise of faculty serving contingently into the substantial majority, it is both a sign of the times and fundamentally appropriate that both candidates for the AAUP presidency work on term contracts. Already serving as a contingent faculty member when elected in 2006, incumbent Nelson has had to annually request reappointment and twice had his compensation slashed.

"As an adjunct faculty member, there was not a damned thing I could do about it," Nelson says. "Since I have both health care and vestment in a retirement system, I am one hell of a lot better off than most contingent teachers." For two decades prior to this experience, Nelson engaged in trenchant advocacy on the issues of permatemping, academic freedom for faculty serving contingently, and the employment rights of graduate students. But there is no substitute for actually living the life, Nelson concedes, noting that even the "modest level of personal experience" he has with serving contingently has spurred him to further efforts. In "[The Academic Working Poor](#),"<sup>[3]</sup> part of a video interview with him that I published last month, Nelson describes the profound economic distress of faculty serving contingently, some of whom have to supplement their wages by working in retail or standing in line for free cheese. In "[The Twilight of Academic Freedom](#),"<sup>[4]</sup> Nelson contends that the consequences of contingency are more than economic and that increasingly, the majority of faculty serving contingently enjoy few traditional academic freedoms.

Nelson's opponent on the ballot, perennial petition candidate Thomas E. Guild, is also serving contingently after accepting a retirement deal. Centering his candidacy on the issues in the membership department uncovered by Nelson's administration, Guild promises to use his "background in business" to make "changes" to the organization and has expressed reservations about what he calls the "controversial proposed restructuring." The only "controversy" regarding the restructuring, however, appears to be that raised by Guild himself, since at least 90 percent of the elected AAUP national officers and Council members support the restructuring as a necessary and overdue response to U.S. labor law. Both [Guild](#)<sup>[5]</sup> and [Nelson](#)<sup>[6]</sup> have published their candidate statements and qualifications on their Web sites. Using Realplayer software, you can also watch them debate on Guild's home turf in Oklahoma: [Part one](#)<sup>[7]</sup> of the debate includes opening remarks (hint: fast forward to about 6 minutes 30 seconds), and [part two](#)<sup>[8]</sup> includes the more interesting question and answer segment. Nelson and Guild discuss their vision of the association's mission for the contingent majority at 46:30 in part 2: If you can only watch a few minutes of the debate, that is the point to jump in.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should say that, like the overwhelming majority of AAUP Council members and past AAUP presidents making endorsements, I support Cary Nelson's re-election to the AAUP presidency. My own principal reason for doing so is that I believe he is by far the best candidate for addressing the historic crisis represented by the permatemping of the academy -- not just the best person in the race, but literally the most-qualified person alive to do that job. He was among the very first to observe that, as he says in the debate, that "the exploitation of contingent faculty is the most serious problem afflicting academia," ultimately converting the "university into a fast-food employer,

bringing people in one day and turning them out the next." Under his leadership, the organization has urged all of its tenure-stream members belonging to collective bargaining chapters to help organize both contingent faculty and graduate employees at their home institution.

That said, I look forward to a time when contingent faculty are vying for the AAUP presidency not just in the form of Nelson and Guild's "modest personal experience," but on the basis of a majority membership in the association. For the AAUP and other faculty institutions -- senates, unions and disciplinary associations -- to fully realize the agenda of the majority of faculty who live the new sad norm of term contracts, that majority will have to move into officer positions across the profession. There will certainly be difficult adjustments to make. Faculty serving contingently will have to accept the truth that only very few tenure-stream faculty have Nelson's commitment to transform the system, and that, ultimately, not even the AAUP can make a difference until they join and organize -- if not with AAUP, then with any of the other organizations actively representing the organized might of faculty serving contingently.

Unlike Nelson and Guild, who enjoy the security of retirement, most faculty members serving contingently who exercise leadership on the job and in their disciplines have to overcome much greater barriers than tenure-stream faculty: much greater insecurity, status discrimination, the prohibitive cost of unfunded service. And yet they are steadily doing so as a matter of individual and collective survival. In my view, when the day comes that faculty serving contingently occupy the presidencies of the American Historical Association, the Modern Language Association, and the American Studies Association, as well as the leadership of their union locals and represent a majority of the AAUP Council, then, and only then, will we truly be close to resolving the crisis in academic employment.

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[4] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4KSV8LoPc0>

[5] <http://tomguild.info>

[6] <http://www.cary-nelson.org>

[7] <http://laka.ucok.edu/ramgen/Academics/aaup/AAUP-2.rmvb>

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