

# The Neoliberal University

## Precarious Employment and the Struggle for Good Jobs in the University Sector

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Precarious employment is one of the hallmarks of what is euphemistically called “the new economy.” It has deep roots in the university sector. Recent decades have seen a move away from full-time secure jobs for academic workers, toward reliance on part-time, contingent, relatively low wage jobs. As a cost-savings measure, and as a way to provide flexibility in operations, universities rely on part-time teaching staff to increasing degrees. In some instances, more than half of all undergraduate teaching in Canada (but also in university systems across Europe) is done by part-timers.

Contingent academic workers, numbering in the tens of thousands in Ontario alone, find themselves in a situation where they have to apply for their jobs as often as every four months, with no guarantee that the work they rely on will be offered. Many have found themselves in this situation for more than 20 years, with an increasingly large cohort joining them each year, proving that there is indeed company in misery. Furthermore, despite the fact that many contingent academic workers have nominally high hourly wages, many live in poverty because of limits on the ability to work. For example, academic work is primarily seasonal work, with very little offered in the spring and summer months.

This has meant increasing income insecurity and employment insecurity. This is just as true for long service employees as newer hires. Precarious employment has also meant that it has been difficult to secure pensions and benefits, which are primarily available to full-time employees of a single university. An unfortunate reality, however, is that a sizable number of academic workers (primarily sessional instructors) do actually work full-time within the university system, but they are forced to work contracts at multiple institutions (often located in two or more cities).

The current strike by CUPE 3903 at York University in Toronto, Ontario, should be examined in light of the extent of precarious employment in post-secondary education. CUPE 3903 represents approximately 3340 contingent academic workers, including teaching assistants, graduate assistants and part-time instructors (sometimes referred to as sessional lecturers). The strike by CUPE 3903 is, however, but one case in the broader struggle for good jobs for university workers. CUPE’s Ontario University Workers Coordinating Committee (OUWCC) has been working for years to coordinate the bargaining efforts of university locals, in order to make gains for academic and support workers on campuses, and to fight to increase government funding of post-secondary education to benefit workers and students alike.

### The Neoliberal University

In the current context, universities are both enmeshed in, and reproduce neoliberal social relations. As an aspect of neoliberalism, universities have taken on many of the worst

elements of the flexible labour market. Work is increasingly offered as part-time, temporary and contingent. Gone are the days when universities relied on tenured faculty for the delivery of undergraduate education. It has been found to be much cheaper instead to hire sessionals at as low as 1/3 the wage cost (not even including the dramatic reduction in benefit, pension and professional development costs).

An expanding cohort of undergraduates is rarely being taught by a tenured professor. There is, of course, no evidence sessionals are less qualified educators. However, this does lead to a negative impact on students in need of reference letters. Since many sessionals teach at multiple universities, and at other jobs, it is also more difficult for students to get face-time with their instructors in order to get assistance with assignments and course material.

Universities have also internalized the competitive model of the market. Funding for graduate work and for research can be substantial for those who receive it. However, competition for scarce resources is stiff. Only a small minority actually get enough funding to not have to work for a wage, or to keep paid-employment to a minimum. Those without access to such funding, not because of poor quality of work, but because of too few opportunities for funding, find themselves having to earn a wage to make ends meet. More paid employment means there is less time to work on the degree, leading to later completion. A divide emerges. On the one hand are the few privileged ones who are funded, finish on time, and have a competitive advantage when seeking those tenure track jobs that do, on occasion, arise. On the other hand is a group of workers who get stuck in the trap of perpetual contingent academic work.

The neoliberal university is affected by privatization and underfunding in the same way that all public services are. Government underfunding reinforces the drive for cost savings, and it also guides university administrators toward forms of privatization — all of which are further encouraged by governments. Privatization comes in many forms, including private financing of research, commercialization of campuses, and increasing user fees in the form of tuition fees. The increasing cost of education itself reinforces the need to work through school, thus pushing workers/students into the trap of life-long precarious employment.

### **Struggles in the University Sector**

CUPE 3903 walked off the job on November 6 in response to these pressures, and to try to make important gains for its members. In this round of bargaining, several demands have been presented as strike issues: wages that bring members up to the poverty line; job security for sessional instructors; protection against the erosion of benefits; and a 2010 expiry date for the new collective agreement. Protection of benefits in this struggle is particularly important for all university workers, since CUPE 3903 has one of the best benefit plans for contingent workers. A defeat on this issue here will hinder the ability of others to finally win benefits. The 2010 expiry date is important to the broader struggle because it is the year in which CUPE, through OUWCC, has targeted as the year for coordinated bargaining in the sector.

Unions of academic workers are currently at the bargaining table at universities across the province — at the University of Toronto, OISE, Guelph and Carleton. Although the specific language being tabled may differ across the sector, the principles on the table are the same: job security, a living wage that is not eroded by inflation or loss of hours, maintenance of (or access to) pensions and benefits. Perhaps more importantly, university

locals (including academics, maintenance, trades, custodial, food service and administrative support workers) are fighting to win 2010 expiry dates for their collective agreements. That year has the potential to be of utmost importance for all university workers.

### **Ouwcc and the Struggle to Coordinate Bargaining**

The OUWCC is a one of five jurisdictional committees of CUPE Ontario. It has been working toward a strategy of coordinated bargaining to mediate against the fragmented bargaining imposed by the Canadian labour relations regime. Coordination will not only help strengthen locals in negotiations, but has the potential to make bargaining political, to force the provincial government to address underfunding and the lack of pensions and benefits for large numbers of university workers. The year 2010 was chosen because it is the year that had the potential to have the largest number of university locals in Ontario at the bargaining table, but also because all of the collective agreements for university workers in BC come up in that year. University workers' issues could be on the table for both provincial and federal governments.

For its part, the Ontario government has dismissed the principle of coordinated bargaining. John Milloy, Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities, recently stated that there will be no central table for bargaining issues because he wanted to respect the autonomy of universities. Such a statement is, however, a red herring. The government would not be interfering with the core functions of universities — i.e. course content, course delivery, and research. Instead, the government will be called upon to help standardize widely divergent working conditions, and provide common benefit and pension plans so that all university workers will have access. Currently, many workers have jobs at multiple universities, and work full-time in the system. But because each university considers the worker to be part-time, they deny access to benefits and pensions (that only full-timers deserve, apparently).

Employers across the sector have been attempting to block the move toward coordinated bargaining. In fact, in the current negotiations between CUPE 3913 and Guelph University, the employer's bargaining team was given explicit direction from the University president to not sign a deal that ended in 2010. In other cases, where there are multiple locals in bargaining at a single university, the employer agrees to 2010 for some locals, but fights tooth and nail to deny it to others. As employers who want to minimize the strength of unions, their position is equally understandable and reprehensible.

Right wing pundits have begun their "CUPE Watch" claiming that the union wants only to disrupt the system in 2010. While it is true that improving bargaining strength is a main goal of coordination, and the threat of a provincial (or perhaps national) strike of university workers would strengthen CUPE's position, the other option (fragmented bargaining) means that the real concerns of university workers will continue to be ignored. The status quo is stacked heavily in favour of employers, a fact that none of us can let stand.

### **Striking Against Neoliberalism**

Because CUPE 3903 has been pushed to the picket lines, its local struggle has understandably captured the attention of the media and the provincial government. In essence, the struggle at York University is against precariousness in employment and income for academic workers. A successful strike for CUPE 3903 is of utmost importance for all university workers, for a defeat would make the terrain of struggle for the rest much more hostile.

The struggle is also a much broader one, which includes more than 24,000 CUPE members in Ontario universities (not to mention the other unions that have made overtures to join the 2010 coordination date). There is the potential to create good jobs out of what is now precarious work, and to infuse more funding into a system that should be geared toward the public good, not private profit. This is a struggle the broadest Left should support as one more element in the growing struggles to overturn neoliberalism, and to begin to imagine again what a university might be in a post-neoliberal social order. •

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