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Bargaining for Adjuncts: An Assessment of Adjunct Union Growth in the Saint Louis Region

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Cover Page Footnote

Jameson Ramirez is a former adjunct who taught for seven years at Saint Louis University. He is currently a strategic researcher for SEIU Local 1 in St. Louis, Missouri. The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the author and were written during his time as an adjunct at St. Louis University. Collective bargaining is only possible through the input of all those involved, and likewise this research is a product of many important contributions from knowledgeable and supportive people whose grasp of the issues deepened my own awareness of the severity of the adjunct crisis in American higher education. Kathryn Kuhn in Saint Louis University's Department of Sociology and Anthropology encouraged me to put my experiences as an adjunct to writing and connect me to a broader network of adjunct activism. Marny Silverman of SEIU's Faculty Forward Network provided clarity and context regarding the organizing campaign as it unfolded at Saint Louis University. Strategic researcher Alaa Kamel of SEIU Local 1 of Missouri facilitated access to statistical data. Labor organizer Les Stitt of SEIU Local 1 offered constructive feedback regarding organizing campaigns throughout the region. Richard Colignon as department chair of the Sociology and Anthropology department at Saint Louis University, provided valuable support and affirmation for my work as an adjunct during my time at SLU. Finally, and most personally, I'd like to thank my wife Becca whose belief, encouragement, and patience empowered me to find my voice on these important issues.

Bargaining for Adjuncts: An Assessment of Adjunct Union Growth in the Saint Louis Region

Jameson Ramirez¹

“We have statistics of fallow land, but where are our accounts of fallow labor? And yet the fallow land improves, and man degenerates by idleness. That surplus labor is a national loss. If you spill corn or wine, you deplore it as a waste: but we do worse—we spill the labor that creates them.”

(Ernest Charles Jones, *Labor and Capital: A Lecture*, 1867)

Fallow Labor

In a series of lectures delivered across several industrialized cities of the U.K. in the Fall of 1867, the English political writer and Chartist Ernest Charles Jones introduced the term “fallow labor” (Jones 8, 1867). This term describes the surplus of unemployed laborers swelling in the cities whose sheer numbers represented not just a strategic point of leverage for the capitalist boss, but ultimately for Jones a “national loss.”

Across institutions of higher learning all over the country we are witness to another swelling of workers who represent the fallow labor of the 21st century academy: adjuncts. Unlike those degenerated by idleness in Jones’s telling, the adjunct is a worker crushed by the pressure of forced industriousness. The herculean effort put into maintaining this industriousness is noble in effort, but a result of greatly ignoble economic conditions. These conditions are principally the product of market-conscious university administrators, who see in the growing pool of adjunct laborers a strategic point of leverage that can advance the university’s financial interests and in turn weaken the shared governance nexus of tenured faculty. Ultimately, this situation represents its own type of “national loss.” Adjuncts left to lie fallow in the academic market become less marketable, and this systematized lack of upward mobility makes the prospects of ambitious adjuncts dim indeed.

¹ Jameson Ramirez is a former adjunct who taught for seven years at Saint Louis University; he is currently a strategic researcher for The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1 in St. Louis, Missouri. The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the author and were written during his time as an adjunct at Saint Louis University.

Tentative Titles, Untenable Roles

Academics often pride themselves on their ability to qualify the world in nuanced terms and in the process further refine and define the public's understanding of complex issues. Yet it seems that the lexicon surrounding the work of faculty who are sometimes referred to as “adjuncts” has only loosely been thrown together to inconsistently describe this socially stratified group. Despite being a part of the English language for centuries, the term ‘adjunct’ has gathered the dust of institutional neglect over the ages and it is both professionally expedient and politically necessary that we take charge of the language used to describe and frame us inside and outside the academy. In other words, to name ourselves is a way to know ourselves; knowing what we have been named (especially by the university administrative apparatus) matters for weaponizing our identity.

Taken from Latin and literally denoting something ‘added on’ or ‘joined to,’ the word first appears in written form in 1785. In this period the term is applied to members of a university institution whom offer temporary and/or additional instruction (Winters, 2015). It is important to note that the status distinction of the title in this 18th century context is commonly superlative and carries little hint of negative connotations. The prestige of the university adjunct was not necessarily debased by the distinction of being an addition or supplementary contributor to the academic community. We should be reminded that origins are often quite incapable of explaining or containing evolutions, and much has changed in the educational landscape around the way we use the term adjunct.

The reasons I opt for the terminology of ‘adjunct’ as opposed to ‘part-time faculty’ follow: In one sense, as aforementioned, I think it’s politically important that this disenfranchised group of workers re-valorize the term ‘adjunct’ in light of the historical pedigree of their origins. To intentionally name themselves is a way to define themselves and politically empowering an identity starts with owning its history. Margaret Winters argues that there are “semantic consequences” to the way we use titles and that while the meanings of these titles are not always under the direct control of any one particular individual, it is possible to develop through group action a new meaning (Winters, 2015).

In another sense, referring to these academic laborers as “part-time” is at some level an equivocation over the specific labor input/output of the adjunct. They may be called “part-time” but most are putting full-time hours into their work and are compelled to invest themselves fully in this type of work.

More pragmatically, in today’s institutional environment what does working as an adjunct mean to a university administration? The result of these administrative designations means that

adjuncts end up being paid almost as little as some fast-food workers (Truscott, 2017) and are generally offered no benefits (Hall, 2015). Hired on a semester-to-semester basis, they can be denied a new contract without the provision of an official reason (Muhl, 2001). This job insecurity and lack of fair compensation may force the adjunct to teach at multiple schools throughout a semester, managing sometimes hundreds of students in a single term in order to create a more financially stable situation. In other cases, when multiple teaching jobs are not available the adjunct may need to pick up other part time jobs in a completely different sector, such as Hillary Birdsong who is an adjunct instructor at Saint Louis University (SLU):

“In order to support myself I have two other jobs. I teach at SLU in the mornings, train at a gym in the afternoons, and work at a museum on the weekends. It is hard to find time to grade papers, plan lessons and meet with my students outside of class for extra help, but I do it because I value education and what it stands for.” (Birdsong, 2017)

The occupational vulnerability of adjuncts took on added seriousness in St. Louis, Missouri in the Fall of 2017 when adjunct members of the faculty at St. Louis Community College (STLCC) appeared before the college district’s board of trustees meeting. STLCC administrators were in the middle of tense contract negotiations with their newly unionized adjuncts as they faced substantial budget cuts and school-wide layoffs. Steve Taylor, a highly respected adjunct instructor recently recognized for his excellence in teaching at STLCC, was brutally body-slammed by a STLCC police officer when he stood up during the meeting to deliver some prepared remarks about the grave situation facing adjuncts there. Mr. Taylor suffered a cracked rib and facial bruising from the officer’s vicious tackle (Fenske, 2017).

Why would police be brought into a bureaucratic meeting in the first place? Could the presence of law enforcement really be about ensuring law and order in a board proceeding, or was this a thinly veiled warning to adjuncts attending the meeting that their presence would be met with the threat of force if they dared raise objections to their treatment?

To add further insult to Professor Taylor's injuries, college administrators charged Professor Taylor with "resisting arrest and disturbing the peace" (Fenske, 2018). Taken together, these actions against Professor Taylor and his colleagues demonstrate a concerted effort by university administrators to intimidate members of their own faculty and send a message to other adjuncts that their demands would be met not with reasonableness and dialogue, but with bureaucratic stonewalling and even physical violence if necessary.

Thankfully, Professor Taylor's individual story of abuse at the hands of a tone-deaf board of trustees took on a more optimistic turn when he was found not guilty of the charges in a St. Louis court. Professor Taylor has since filed a lawsuit against the school alleging "a violation of

his due process and free-speech rights, as well as unlawful seizure, unlawful arrest and false imprisonment" (Fenske, 2018).

The individual stories of the adjunct may differ in some detail or another, but they are all bound together by the common issues of too little pay for too much work, too little say in matters of their worth, and too little positive change in a workplace that alienates.

Academic Capitalism in the 21st Century

How did this system of inequitable treatment of adjunct faculty come about? What sociological forces compelled the academy to become a dynamo of inequity and create conditions that would lead to a fallow faculty workforce?

One way to understand this adjunct labor problem is to go to the term “academic capitalism” that was coined by Gary Rhoades and Sheila Slaughter in a remarkable paper analyzing the gradual overtaking of the institutional values and structure of the Academy by market-driven forces (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Engaging in fiscally calculated and strategic market-like behavior, colleges and universities across the United States pivoted towards an emerging neo-liberal, and neo-conservative mode of production and organization where metrics of educational value and priority were rooted in economic terms. In other words, the University ceased to prioritize the virtues of intellectual learning and replaced them with the values of economic earning. The push to drive profits up began to materialize in the way the instructional division of labor was organized. Historically, tenure-track opportunities were the norm not the exception. For example, in 1969 a mere 3.3% of appointments for faculty were qualified as non-tenure track (Miller 2015). According to the American Association of University Professors Research Office, as of 2015 over 70% of instructional staff appointments have been made up of non-tenure-track faculty positions and over 50% made up of part-time faculty appointments (AAUP 2017). Another way to appreciate this turnaround is to observe that between 1970 and 2003 there was an almost 400% increase in the number of part-time faculty (Herbert, 2016).

University administrators caught on to the simple fact that labor costs could be kept down by coming to rely more on the cheap labor of short-term contract, zero-benefits employees like adjuncts who would still be teaching students paying the full-ticket price of admission to their university or college. At SLU, where I taught for seven years as an adjunct, the university spends an average of \$105,000 annually including benefits on each full-time faculty. In stark comparison, for each adjunct faculty, the cost is only around \$18,000 annually.

A National Seat at the Table

While the threat of cuts to higher education funding are very real and end up trickling down to affect institutional stakeholders, we live in an age of manufactured austerity. The financial resources to develop and redevelop the academic landscape are there; the question is, are those stakeholders who have the most to lose by not being given a seat at the bargaining table willing to manufacture a powerful response?

Though adjuncts in this new higher education landscape of the 21st century are being used as unwilling tools for the promotion and consolidation of unstable, disposable, and cheap labor conditions, a new tool to cut out these oppressive conditions and causes has emerged over the past five decades and shown no signs of blunting: *organized academic labor unions*. The powerful advantage that a labor union provides an adjunct is that now with legally protected collective representation, the individual adjunct is able to find a seat at the bargaining table and through their unit negotiate as legal equals with their university administrators.

In the first nine months of 2016 there was a 25.9% increase in the number of private-sector faculty bargaining units (Herbert, 2016). Though the most traditionally active faculty union in these newly formed units has been the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) (Sproul et. al., 2014), this growth is also due to the organizing strategy and successes of another giant in the labor movement, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

The relatively recent entrance of SEIU into the adjunct unionizing movement is part of an ambitious plan to successfully organize over one million adjuncts and bargain for a base pay of \$15,000 per course for adjuncts (Miller, 2015). Under the banner of SEIU, the Adjunct Action Network was formed in 2014 and later renamed as Faculty Forward. It now has around 8,000 adjuncts from across the country making up its ranks with reportedly thousands more in the process of joining (Miller, 2015).

Though critics have urged caution at the scope and boldness of SEIU's master plan, some highly significant and gainful wins by bargaining units across the country have bolstered SEIU's credibility and offered adjuncts across the country hope that better conditions are possible under a union contract.

These meaningful contract victories are only part of the important contribution union organizations like SEIU are making to adjuncts across the country. By bringing groups of adjuncts together to form more stable and politically active networks, the adjunct awakening sustains its momentum. In 2016, through its Faculty Forward campaign, SEIU put together its first national conference for adjuncts joining the burgeoning union movement. Held at the

headquarters of SEIU in Washington D.C., the two-day conference served to educate those attending of the scope of the mission and significance of the moment. For some of these adjuncts it was their first time meaningfully connecting with others in their situation. For others, it was a valuable opportunity to expand conversations and educate their peers. Various workshops were held to teach adjunct leaders how to develop different skills such as identifying the best legal strategies for bargaining contracts or learning how to promote and advocate for adjunct-minded legislative agendas at the state and federal level. From these conversations adjuncts were able to put into greater context the urgency of the problems facing higher education in the 21st century.

Meet Me in Saint Louis

Adjunct union campaigns on the coasts have drawn much attention in the media in recent years, but new inroads by Faculty Forward in the heartland of the United States are also starting to garner national interest. In a cultural landscape where the relevance of agricultural metaphors are quite appropriate, one could say that we are beginning to witness the transformation of fallow academic labor in the Saint Louis area into a bountiful harvest of union organizing and contract wins. With over 4,000 adjuncts teaching in the Saint Louis area (Addo, 2016), unions like SEIU are well aware of the political significance of tapping into this market.

Faculty Forward began its organizing work in the Saint Louis area in 2014 (Addo 2016) and would eventually expand its efforts to over seven major higher education institutions, including such nationally recognized universities as Washington University in St. Louis (known as "Wash U" in the region). One of the great advantages that Faculty Forward brought to the adjunct community in St. Louis was its highly coordinated and strategic organizing machinery. With the help of trained and experienced organizers Faculty Forward spread throughout the region and began the difficult process of drawing together a network of adjuncts who previously only existed as a disorganized collection of itinerant instructors. A sociologically disturbing feature about the adjunct experience that is often missed in the face of more attention-grabbing problems like poverty wages is that of general peer-to-peer isolation. Adjuncts are the ghosts that haunt the halls of a department's building, disappearing into a classroom for the class period to teach and then leaving without a trace to the next school for another class, sometimes without ever having any meaningful contact with their colleagues. Administrations either intentionally or in an ad hoc way gain an advantage from this institutional dislocation of their adjuncts because the lack of a thriving, well-connected, and involved adjunct network can translate into a more passive, subordinate and goaded worker.

Faculty Forward organizers vigorously set to work on numerous campuses between 2014 and 2016, meeting individually with adjuncts, setting up meetings with adjunct faculty leaders and student-activists, and rolling out numerous "escalations" to help adjuncts move their

administrations towards a meaningful response and engagement (Stitt 2018). Empowering the adjuncts to talk to one another (either through email, one-on-one, or in meetings) and then enlarging the sound of their collective voice was pivotal to getting the campaigns kicked off effectively across campuses.

Maintaining solidarity among campuses was both strategically and symbolically key to advancing the adjunct agenda. It was exciting and empowering to witness adjuncts from one university show up loudly and proudly to a rally being held by their fellow adjuncts at another university, or willingly put their names on a campus-wide petition letter that would then be marched with great fanfare to the Office of the President. Faculty Forward skillfully provided a platform that the adjunct community could then utilize to promote its cause and more importantly, stay in touch long after the rallies had dispersed. Efforts to keep organized adjuncts engaged in the fight for better wages and more employment stability are ongoing and there is still work to do on the ground to preserve the gains that have been made.

In the beginning, such gains were not so easily achieved. Early organizing efforts were met with many obstacles and particularly obdurate administrations, especially at Webster University in the wealthy and largely white suburbs of West County outside of Saint Louis where adjuncts rejected the vote to unionize (Addo, 2015). The failure to achieve a union win at Webster was due in large part to a successful anti-union campaign run by school administrators that spread misinformation about SEIU's organizing campaign and strategically manufactured a wedge between historically conservative business faculty and historically more liberal faculty in the humanities departments. The pro-administration misinformation machine principally took the form of an "informational website" put out by the school to "educate" the adjunct about the "demands" of a union and essentially create the impression that the union was an outsider entity run by non-adjuncts.

Because historically adjunct faculty in the physical sciences and business schools have been more politically conservative in their view of socio-economic and political issues (for instance the role and purpose of unions), pro-management university administrations can use this ideological persuasion to their advantage. With the help of their strategically crafted misinformation campaign, university administrators at Webster managed to frame union organizers as agitators and third-party meddlers in university affairs. As things turned out, that framing convinced enough of these politically conservative business school faculty to reject calls and actions of solidarity with their pro-union adjunct colleagues. The final vote tally was 212 voting for collective bargaining, and 268 voting against (Singer, 2015).

While the union organizing campaign was unsuccessful at Webster University, SEIU would end up having greater success at several other area schools in the Spring and Fall of 2015.

Among the community colleges SEIU would notch up wins at STLCC and St. Charles Community College. Among private universities in the area the most notable organizing victories in the next two years would come at Wash U and the historic Jesuit institution, SLU.

Despite facing some concerted efforts to delegitimize adjunct efforts at Wash U, adjuncts won on a 138-111 margin (Addo, 2015). Wash U employed similar anti-union tactics as Webster, but it was in part due to high student involvement in the protests against the administration for their treatment of adjuncts that would tip the political scales in favor of adjuncts. It must be noted that student-activism on campus would be an influential variable in the calculus for winning a campaign. When negotiations over pay increases in a four-year contract were beginning to stall over the stonewalling tactics of the university administration, a strategically messaged plan to bring students and adjunct faculty together for a campus-wide walkout made its way to the Chancellor's office (and to the more powerful board of trustees). This leveraging tactic had its intended effect. Rather than face a more public backlash over (largely student-led) student walk-outs, the administration came back to the bargaining table.

Working off of the momentum at Wash U, adjuncts in the School of Arts and Sciences at SLU would successfully unionize in the Spring of 2016. After a year of active mobilizing and strategic messaging that included rallies, speeches, and even several arrests of pro-union student activists who chained themselves to the inside stairwell of a student center hallway, SLU adjuncts witnessed the certification of their union. Out of 156 eligible voters, adjuncts would vote 89-28 to form the school's first union for adjuncts (Addo, 2016).

The success of the union campaign at SLU was not achieved without its share of complications and obstacles, particularly apparent in the disconnect between the public persona of SLU and its more private reaction and management of its reaction to its adjuncts' activism. One might assume that because adjuncts at SLU worked for a Jesuit institution, their condition could not possibly mirror those of their less fortunate peers such as at Webster or STLCC. How, after all, could a Catholic university that declared unequivocally in its mission statement its "*commitment to the promotion of faith and justice in the spirit of the Gospels*" (SLU Catholicity Report, 2013) create unjust economic and workplace conditions for its adjuncts? Yet it would become clear throughout the course of the organizing campaign and bargaining period that this Jesuit institution would not necessarily back up its brochure rhetoric with board room conciliation.

I had the opportunity to be active in the organizing campaign and experienced from within the trenches of union organizing some of the obstacles that even an administration touting Jesuit values could throw in the way of justice for adjuncts. One of the first signals to organizing adjuncts that SLU administrators would not go to the bargaining table without a bit of a fight was

the formal rejection of an agreement to take a neutral position regarding adjunct unionization. Such employer neutrality agreements are now a more permanent fixture of labor-management relations and play an important part in setting up the "tone and tenor" of ensuing negotiations. Moreover, they are legally binding agreements and may carry consequences of enforced arbitration should the employer fail to live up to its commitments (Guzick, 1984). In another sense, signing on to an employer neutrality agreement is symbolically expedient in that administrations that agree to such a neutrality agreement can at least claim that they are going into negotiations with a semblance of respect for the legitimacy of the adjunct's position. The fact was the legitimacy of SLU adjuncts' will to organize was overwhelming: in an internal survey of adjuncts within the College of Arts and Sciences, over 75% stated they were in favor of union protections. Given this solidarity, SLU's administrative leadership had the sense to not put up a public fight against its adjuncts, but it had other ways of subtly "throwing rocks" into the gears of change.

Borrowing from the anti-union playbook used at Webster and Wash U, SLU also put up a website to "inform" its adjuncts about the union campaign unfolding on campus and frame the conversation around unions as a third-party intrusion on "in-house" matters. Furthermore, the administrative narrative on these propaganda platforms sought to manipulate the adjunct into thinking that if they just negotiated "one-on-one" with the administration then perhaps they could "work something out." Never mind the simple fact in some cases SLU adjuncts had sought to work something out directly with university administrators but found their overtures ignored or turned away.

Another tactic involved the hosting of numerous town halls led exclusively by administrators that sought to give the appearance of transparency and democratic engagement. While the manifest intent of the town halls may have been to get public comment on the prospect of a union for adjuncts on campus, over the course of such meetings the impression of a more latent motive could not be ignored. It became clear that some of these meetings were being monopolized by particularly anti-union voices of the faculty (one of whom vociferously complained that a union would actually make her situation worse by taking away benefits she had apparently gained in her department) and conveniently for the administration created a false impression that SLU faculty (both non-tenure track and adjuncts) were fractured and at odds with one another about goal of unionizing.

In what would appear to be more than mere coincidence, a few months before organizing efforts began in earnest, the administration had rolled out some concessions to adjuncts such as an increase in their wages and a lowering of their fees for the purchase of parking permits. Though such measures were not without merit, it must be pointed out that the wage increase (a flat \$200 increase in per-credit compensation for each class) was not enough to make a

meaningful improvement in monthly living expenses. Moreover, this slim wage increase only applied to adjuncts who had worked at SLU for over six years. Given that around half of adjunct faculty teaching at SLU had no more than five years teaching experience, its potential for positive effect was reduced.

Originally, Faculty Forward had sought to implement a “wall-to-wall” type strategy among SLU faculty by bringing together non-tenure-track faculty and adjunct faculty in the same bargaining unit. The beneficial strategy behind this plan was that it would maximize unit density and concentrate bargaining power in a more diverse block of faculty. The school administrators fought this plan vigorously, particularly by invoking the legal precedent set by the historic Supreme Court decision in the 1980s in *Yeshiva vs. NLRB* which ruled that certain faculty must be categorized as “managerial employees” and as a result of the stipulations of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) could not be counted among the types of workers who could be unionized (DiGiovanni, 2015). The administration argued that most of its non-tenure-track faculty were “managerial employees” and thus not permitted in the union ballot initiative. To this moment non-tenure-track faculty at SLU remain marginalized from the union process, but they will prove to be an important block of faculty to return to at a later time to re-organize and help achieve union representation in the university.

Winning the right to unionize is one part of the process to secure better conditions for St. Louis adjuncts. The other part is effectively negotiating a contract that establishes a meaningful floor of benefits and workplace protections that can then be improved in later contracts.

The bargaining process, though more protracted at institutions like Wash U (year and a half) and STLCC (over three years), has resulted in measurable gains for all the schools who have reached an agreement. Particularly, I want to highlight the advantages gained at SLU given that I was actively involved at the bargaining table. According to an internal survey run by Faculty Forward among SLU adjuncts during the year of bargaining, there were three main areas of priority that emerged from the responses: 1) better compensation, 2) longer term appointments, and 3) protection against unfair dismissal. Members of the SLU bargaining committee were proud to work out an agreement that covered not just these three principal areas, but also added some other benefits such as access to instructional services and guaranteed compensation up to a certain amount for cancelled classes. In terms of wages, SLU adjuncts could expect a greater increase in their course compensation over the life of the contract with some more senior adjuncts seeing their per-credit compensation going from \$1,375 in 2018 to \$1,500 in 2021.

Though the bargaining committee had hoped to win at least one-year appointments for its adjuncts, it had to end up compromising with the administration by gaining for specific adjuncts

who qualified what would be called in the SLU contract bargaining agreement (CBA) as “preferential appointment status”(SLU CBA, 2017). This language, while not guaranteeing a qualified adjunct a contract for the following semester, would protect the adjunct from a situation in which a department could hypothetically not renew a contract for a more senior adjunct and hire someone new in their stead.

The winning of a grievance and arbitration clause in the contract was also notable and served to reinforce the preferential appointment status clause. Historically, the state of Missouri has been an “At-Will” state, which means in legal theory that an employer has the legal right to dismiss an employee for any reason (Pitchford, 2005). Thus, the gaining of an arbitration procedure provides one potentially make-or-break stop-gap measure for adjuncts who sense that their discharge is more owed to capriciousness or malice than to just cause.

According to research by SEIU Local 1, among Webster University, University of Missouri St. Louis, Maryville University, STLCC, St. Charles Community College, Wash U, and SLU the projected union density (or "market density") is around 29% (Kamel, 2017). Ideally, a market density rate of 80% is necessary to create the socio-economic leveraging power needed to make collectively bargained agreement standards the norm rather than the exception in a particular labor market. Clearly there is still much to accomplish before the St. Louis region can reach this near-saturation point, but this growing block of adjunct faculty are set to make the Saint Louis region a key player in the national arena of labor organizing.

Writing the Next "Adjunct Action Syllabus": A List of Recommendations

Apart from the important elements of adjunct organization, unionization, and contract bargaining that must come into play to help protect adjuncts in their 21st century workplace, what other tools are effective in promoting the agenda of organized adjunct labor? Listed below are recommendations that when taken together, will add to the toolset of an adjunct movement looking to take further action. These recommendations enable the adjunct to play a part in the following three dominant modes of action: education; activation; and legislation.

Education

Given that the vocation of the adjunct is rooted in education, it is fitting and necessary that adjunct action begin in the classroom. Since developing a more vivid awareness of the precarious socio-economic situation of adjuncts in the St. Louis region and across the country, I began to make it a part of my instructional liturgy on the first day of class to enlighten my students who tend to assume in more glowing terms that the academic environment for a typical faculty member is one of general collegiality, stability, and occupational prestige.

On the first day of class, students are often shocked to discover that as an adjunct I belonged to a category of faculty that makes poverty-level wages (DePillis, 2015), and that during the first four years of teaching, I was receiving some public assistance—an experience that one study found was common to over a quarter of adjuncts (Weissmann, 2015). It is hard to pinpoint exactly where in popular culture students pick up on the over-generalized and often inaccurate notion of adjuncts' pedagogical pedigree, but the myth and romance of the professorial type is hard to dispel, especially when the university itself does its part to blur the lines between faculty roles and hide the depth or shallowness of faculty value.

The academic myth behind this trope is fed by university brochures which often portray dynamic and encomiastic images of faculty engaging an auditorium full of rapt and eager students. The fact that college admissions departments also neglect to mention these fine, but existentially profound, differences between faculty titles as they enthusiastically lead prospective students through halls and across quads to meet and greet these faculty also feeds a false narrative about adjunct faculty. Ultimately, these branding strategies romanticize an existence for many adjuncts that is far from cultural expectation.

Activation

Building coalitions of academic workers is another key strategy, even if it is not through the formal mechanism of a labor union. Specifically, I recommend supporting and empowering the agendas of graduate students who are also beginning to agitate towards greater union involvement. This particular category of worker is significant not just for the future of higher education, but more broadly, the future of the academic labor movement. Currently much of the attention of pro-management university administrators is on squashing or at least slowing the growth of non-tenure-track and adjunct faculty organizing. This strategy is shortsighted and ultimately will fail to stop the pro-worker agenda of collectively organized faculty for the simple reason that it is taking for granted what powerful role graduate students can play in a future labor market landscape.

The current generation of graduate students can be the next generation of employed and tenured academics. The fate of academia and tenure in the 21st century is currently a matter of growing debate and professional uncertainty of course, but that state of affairs is necessarily determined by how this current generation of faculty-in-training choose to become politically active. This opening for new political activism is where labor unions can play an increasingly sizeable role. If organized labor can manage to make inroads with this large bloc, the labor movement itself will benefit from the infusion of new life, energy, and members. Building close relationships within a category of white-collar workers that traditionally have inhabited ivory towers far up and away from the boots-on-the-ground conditions of traditional labor organizing

matters for how organized labor can stay relevant in an ever-changing 21st century economy. In other words, it is important for the labor movement to normalize the idea of organizing, collective bargaining, and broader labor movement involvement within the next generation of academics.

Legislation

Adjuncts should not overlook the role that legislative activism plays in addressing the issues of labor. The political sphere clearly encompasses all matters of labor and can serve to formalize and normalize in a legalistic sense the agenda of an adjunct movement. If politicians like those of the Republican party, or any political interest group with a pro-management bias, can use the legislative apparatus to attack workers, then adjuncts and political actors with more progressive politics have the same mechanism at their disposal. Advocating for pro-worker policies when reaching out to our lawmakers is an important first step and serves to remind our elected representatives that these issues are more than fringe-concerns. Lending vocal and active support for proposed pro-worker legislation is also important. In 2017 Senator Dick Durbin (D) of Illinois along with (now former) Senator Al Franken (D) of Minnesota introduced a bill to enable adjuncts to be eligible for public loan service forgiveness (Durbin, 2017). Such measures could make a significant difference in the lives of adjuncts, especially if many of them graduated with substantial sums of debt.

The political task is daunting of course, especially in light of the blight of legislation passing through statehouses that promote so-called "right-to-work" (RTW) legislation. RTW politics emerge from the pro-management bias of a conservative, Republican ideology and is essentially an attempt to disempower unions by preventing them from enforcing dues collections from their members, cutting out their primary source of financial support. In other words, this is legislation that actively protects free-loaders and rewards those who do not pay their fair share at the expense of those who do, which is why I think the "Right-to-Shirk" moniker is more fitting. While implementing an anti-worker law like RTW in Missouri has been the goal for decades of pro-management Republicans in the Missouri legislature, the most recent RTW assault came in 2017 under a majority-GOP legislature and then GOP Governor Eric Greitens who ran his campaign on the promise of transforming the "Show-Me State" into a RTW state. RTW was signed into law in February 2017 but received immediate and strongly organized pushback from unions across the state (Bott, 2017). According to Missouri law, in order to overrule the prevailing law and put in new legislation that could protect worker-rights, organized labor and its allies would need to gather over 100,000 signatures so as to put the law on hold and automatically trigger a referendum during the next midterm elections in Fall 2018 (Hancock, 2017). In a strategic move meant to weaken public opposition even before the people had voted, the Republican controlled legislature decided to move the vote on "Proposition A" (as the RTW

measure on the ballot would be called) to August with the hope that turnout would be substantially less during a summer month. Organized labor throughout the state, including SEIU, were not deterred and managed to collect over 310,000 signatures in the first show of force against the new law. The fact was, this strong show of support was a harbinger of good things to come for organized labor. In a closely watched election that would have repercussions all over the country, Missouri voters crushed the RTW law by voting "No" on Proposition A on August 7, 2018. In an almost 2 to 1 margin, around 68% of votes cast were in favor of repealing RTW and preserving the fundamental place of unions in the Missouri workplace. Even in strongly Republican areas of the state such as Franklin County, voters opposed Proposition A on a margin of 3 to 1 (Erickson & Suntrup, 2018).

In an age of declining union membership and concerted attacks by big business to strip workers of protections, this was a significant victory for organized labor in general, and unionized adjuncts in particular. Adjuncts found themselves joining ranks with janitors, construction workers, and other hard-working Missourians from different backgrounds, industries, and political persuasions to show that they could come together and unite for the common good against their common enemy: anti-worker forces of law and custom.

Conclusion

Adjunct unions are the “sleeping giant” now awakened and impossible to ignore, even by formidable anti-union foes. In a prescient and forthright article titled “Four Things You Should Know About the Adjunct Faculty Labor Movement,” Michael Bertoncini and Thomas Dorer—two nationally known lawyers who represent pro-management employers—state that university administrations should accept the inevitability of the adjunct labor movement and its place in the landscape of higher education. They cite some noteworthy statistics that corroborate that pronouncement. Between 2012-2013 and the 2015-2016 academic years at least 35 private universities and colleges were witness to successful adjunct union campaigns. So successful, in fact, that according to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) Election Reports, over that same period of time adjunct unions triumphed in 39 of 44 NLRB elections with a stunning 88% success rate in those elections (Bertoncini & Dorer, 2016).

In the spirit of Ernest Jones’s earnest question to his readers in 1867, I can say confidently that these are our victorious accounts of our fallow labor in this century and the picture is not as grim as it once was. Idleness and neglect in this part of the gig-economy are being combated by union activism and investment. The American adjunct still has much ground to cover, and the ground may still be littered with political potholes and pitfalls. However, the goal is clear: justice and equity through unionization is attainable for adjuncts in the 21st century.

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