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Gary Rhoades

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## **Power Despite Precarity: A Conversation with the Authors, Joe Berry and Helena Worthen**

Gary Rhoades<sup>1</sup>, with Joe Berry<sup>2</sup>, and Helena Worthen<sup>3</sup>

Joe Berry and Helena Worthen have been living the title of their recent book (Berry & Worthen, 2021) as activists and as scholars, exercising and modeling *Power despite precarity* in their impactful work. They have done so in the best democratic traditions of the labor movement, in conjunction, coalition, and common cause with many other activists, advocacy groups, and unions. And they have done so individually, and in tandem, as in this book. Indeed, Joe wrote to me after the interview that, “my position in the movement and especially as a writer, would not have been possible without Helena...I would not have written anything...beyond a few leaflets and class syllabi.” What follows is a conversation with Joe and Helena about their book, focusing on the history of and strategies for the contingent faculty labor movement. Indeed, their book is, as they indicate in the acknowledgment, “A channel of movement knowledge.”

The book is an historical case study of the California Faculty Association (CFA) (and the entire lecturers’ movement including the previous union, United Professors of California, AFT) from 1970s to the present, situated in a broader historical context dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century of four transformations and the casualization of faculty work. In a project that started as a joint retirement project with a former CFA leader, John Hess (who passed before the manuscript was written), the book walks the reader through past factors, alliances, and strategies, and fights through which CFA came to be known as having negotiated one of the best contracts and working conditions in the country for contingent faculty. It connects the very personal and the concrete to larger struggles and movements. Much of what Joe and Helena wrote about, and shared in the interview regarding the past, rings true to the present and the future of organizing. One matter is an overriding focus on organizing, in every conversation and through many mechanisms, over many years. The book and the interview provide concrete, compelling examples of what such an organizing culture actually means on the ground, in practice, with lessons for union leaders now at the local and national level. For example, one feature of this culture was the “listening exercise,” in which people were numbered off and as Joe relates, Hess would tell folks, “You listen to somebody for 15 minutes, and you don’t say a \*\*\*\*ing word.... you don’t even say yes, you try to be poker faced.” The idea was to get the person’s story. As Joe

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Rhoades is Professor of Higher Education, University of Arizona

<sup>2</sup> Joe Berry is retired from City College of San Francisco, a labor educator, and active in Higher Education Labor United, AFT 2121, and in Democratic Socialists of America

<sup>3</sup> Helena Worthen, Labor Education Program, University of Illinois (retired), now Berkeley, California

emphasized, there was a discipline and a democratic dimension to the experience, and it became part of CFA's (and the broader contingent faculty movement through Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL) lore and culture.

Such a focus on and culture of organizing began with a contract rejection vote, a leadership contest and the election of a new CFA president and officers in 1999. As Joe and Helena write and relate, the new leadership reflected and effected transformation in the local, towards a union with a more democratic vision and an activist orientation for its role and work. Some of that lay in the identities of the new leaders, who included former and current lecturers. More than that, though, it lay in the political ideologies that animated them—"Susan [Meisenhelder], the new CFA president, was a socialist...John was a socialist lecturer, and, some of the other key early leaders among the lecturers were socialist-friendly." They had a broader picture and "saw us as part of the working class and of a working class movement."

Even more than that, the new leadership was activist in praxis, drawing on, benefiting from, and participating in organizations outside the union. One example of that is part of the CFA lore, which is not only in Joe and Helena's book and interview, but that I have heard from several CFA leaders over the years. Early on, the new leadership started engaging in direct action tactics and events, drawing on the expertise of the Ruckus Society, in drawing attention to their issues. And they started becoming more involved in their national affiliates, engaging in what Berry and Worthen call the "Inside/Outside Strategy," seeding and catalyzing change through their roles in national committees and caucuses of their affiliates, the American Association of University Professors and (at that point) the National Education Association, and later the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) as well. Part of that was also CFA leaders being involved in national advocacy organizations and campaigns, such as the New Faculty Majority, Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL), and the Campaign for the Future of Higher Education, the latter of which CFA leaders were central players in its launch and work.

Part of the value of Berry and Worthen's historical case study of the CFA is how it traces leadership changes and continuity over time. Here I probed Joe and Helena about my experience of CFA in facilitating and managing such transitions in leadership, partly because I have long been struck by the ability of CFA to cultivate, foster, and make space for new participants in key spaces and leadership entities and positions. Joe responded with a quote and expression he'd heard from a labor leader in Chicago, which was drew on a similar story from ward politics in the city, that captured a culture often found back East, "I don't want to see nobody that nobody sent." He contrasted that with the CFA's culture that "facilitates generational handoffs," and the constant mentoring of new secondary leaders, especially among lecturers, and that can be seen in an intergenerational tradition. And, exemplifying that, he and Helena spoke of at least three

generations of lecturer activists who had been supported and mentored by key players from earlier generations of CFA and the movement.

Related to the above, Joe also spoke to the receptiveness of CFA's leaders to the voices and ideas of contingent faculty. "It helped that the early, post 1999 Full-time tenure-track CFA leaders didn't have to have credit for every good idea." He then contrasted that with the "baronage" model of succession that characterizes some unions in other parts of the country.

In answer to my question about contextual factors that might help us understand the openness and activism of CFA lecturer (contingent) faculty and leaders more generally, Helena pointed to the distinctive dynamism of California and its public higher education system. A central part of that was, "we need to talk about community colleges and the California Master Plan," generally, and of particular institutions, such as San Francisco City College which played such a key contributing role in the progressive politics of the Bay Area. The expansion of the community college and state college systems in the 1970s and 1980s, and the increased hiring of contingent faculty in those higher education sectors created a breeding ground for activism, and led California to be one of the central origins of the contingent faculty labor movement nationally. Joe and Helena pointed to the 2000 meeting of the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor in San Jose, a meeting out of which Campus Equity Week (an annual set of actions nationally to call attention to the condition of contingent academic labor, and to call for equity) was spawned. So, too, the California Part-time Faculty Association was active in these efforts, and an influential context and ally for lecturer activists in the CFA.

Part of the historical story that Joe and Helena tell in their book and the interview is that the context, the new CFA leadership, and the lecturer activists themselves breathed new life into existing structures in the union, such as the Lecturer's Council. The latter is a story of the inside/outside work of organizing, of creating and building strength in caucuses that are within the larger union but that leverage greater influence of, in this case, the entire faculty constituency. With the new CFA leadership, a staff member, John Hess, was assigned to work with the Council. And the space of that council, and the additional resources it achieved, then began to entail and embody much of what Joe and Helena discuss in their interview and book—an organizing space exclusive to contingent faculty in which the building of trust and of strength began. It also served as a site of listening to and embracing new voices as well as intergenerational mentoring and passing on of knowledge. In telling this story, *Power despite precarity* offers insight into the inner workings of organizing and building strength over time in ways that shape the union's work at multiple levels.

One of the great benefits of the book's creative, historical case study is that offers a detailed and insightful reading of the CFA contract, and of how it came to embed provisions that make it one of the national exemplars in regards to the rights of lecturer (contingent) faculty. The idea for taking this approach was Helena's, reflecting her disciplinary training, and akin to an important Labor Studies Journal article from two decades ago (Worthen & Berry, 2002) that started with a piece of conversation, related it to a particular issue in contract negotiation, and connected that small piece of language to larger abstract points and patterns. As Helena said, "the words matter...they matter as a result of multiple iterations of bargaining, past practice, and arbitration over time." And although words may sometimes not seem like much, they can be used, they can be imagined and negotiated to take on new meaning.

A key example of this in regard to contingent faculty is the term, "careful consideration." That term has deep historical roots, being found in the CFA's first contract in 1983 (Hoffman & Hess, 2014, p.13). The specific language was,

Departments must maintain lists (or pools) of lecturers who have been evaluated previously and provide these lecturers with "careful consideration" for subsequent appointments.

Ironically and tellingly, the CFA leaders who negotiated this language in the first contract were not advocates for contingent faculty. Quite the contrary. Indeed, there is a lot of wiggle room around that language. As Berry and Worthen's book conveys, it takes imagination and various iterations of grieving this language, of it being arbitrated to definitively construct it as a right of lecturers to significant due process that management must demonstrate they have followed. In addition, it requires courageous lecturers willing to pursue such grievances to make such due process rights a reality. In subsequent negotiations, with the CFA's new leadership in the 2000s, such provisions became a foundation for securing the right to longer term contracts in the collective bargaining agreements. So, a few words might not seem like much, but they can be used. And Berry and Worthen's book makes a major contribution in providing a template for pursuing contract analysis in ways beneficial both to practitioners and scholars.

In closing the interview, I asked Joe and Helena about more recent and future developments, after the publication of their book. In particular, for example, I asked about the 2021 collective bargaining agreement of University of California lecturers in the University Council-AFT Local. Joe's assessment was that "it puts their contract in competition with the CFA as the best contract for contingent faculty in the country." One key was that previously, in Joe's view, their contract had much good language that did not apply to people in their first six years. This was a residue of one of the main issues that caused UC lecturers to organize originally in the 1980's, a common "6 years and out" practice in many departments. Though that rule had been eliminated, the strong division in conditions and job security between folks in their

first 6 years and those after that had remained. Strengthening their contract in that regard, namely gaining job security and due process rights for the majority of members who were in their first 6 years, was critical.

In line with their book and lives, Joe spoke to the issue of how UC-AFT pulled it off. “They got the contract by building campus labor coalitions and statewide coalitions that gained them enough support for a credible strike threat.” Contributing to that as well, he noted, was that the tenure-track faculty expressed support for the strike through their Council of University of California Faculty Associations, which gave UC-AFT more leverage vis-à-vis the university.

In closing, both Helena and Joe spoke to the importance of coalitions and organizations outside the principal (inter)national union affiliates, and currently to the example of Higher Education Labor United. Not only are such entities examples of the Inside/Outside Strategy that they detail in the book, they also involve connecting locals to the national labor movement. What they find particularly compelling about HELU is its “seriously big vision, of wall-to-wall and coast-to-coast.” It is the sort of higher education labor movement that none of the many unions in higher education can or will initiate. For that is at the core of the storyline in Joe and Helena’s book, the fundamental importance of contingent faculty and of locals connecting to larger labor and social movements. Therein lies the path to exercising *power despite precarity*.

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