

Unions come courting on campus

By Stephanie Simon
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College faculty at dozens of campuses nationwide are organizing into labor unions to demand better pay — and to challenge the American higher education model, which increasingly relies on itinerant part-timers to teach students at even the most prestigious universities.

Sensing an opportunity to bolster their declining ranks, national unions are pouring resources into the movement. In the past two years, they collectively have added thousands of contingent faculty to their membership rolls. Their efforts may get a boost from a recent National Labor Relations Board ruling that creates the most favorable conditions for faculty organizing in three decades.

Successful unionization drives have been held at elite private colleges such as Georgetown, at public flagships such as the University of Oregon and at small niche colleges such as the Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles. The non-tenured faculty who have propelled the movement — leading a flurry of successful unionization votes in recent months — say they feel an unexpected kinship with the fast-food workers who have been staging rolling protests at Burger King and Taco Bell. Their schedules are unpredictable, their wages low and many feel that their contributions go unrecognized, even though they make up more than half of all teaching faculty in the U.S.

“I saw that I was on a dead-end career path,” said Elizabeth Spencer, a college English instructor who helped organize a successful unionization drive this winter for adjunct faculty at Temple University in Philadelphia. “I thought unionizing would be a way to correct some of those frustrations.”

The faculty uprising has unsettled college administrators. On most campuses, they have accepted votes to unionize and opened contract negotiations. But they’ve also issued public warnings that they can’t lavish new resources on part-time faculty without either raising tuition or cutting investment in other priorities, such as upgrading science laboratories.

And they’ve urged faculty members to think carefully about all the implications of unionizing — such as forking over 1 percent to 2 percent of their wages for dues — before jumping to align with Big Labor. Faculty on a few campuses have heeded those warnings and rejected unionization drives. But more have pressed ahead: In just the past few weeks, adjuncts have voted in unions at nine colleges, from Vermont to Missouri to California. Planning is underway for a splashy protest, National Adjunct Walkout Day, on Feb. 25.

Part-time instructors have also organized to lobby the Labor Department for policy changes that would make it easier for them to claim unemployment benefits during semesters when they’re not assigned any classes.

The traditional education unions, including the American Association of University Professors, have all put renewed emphasis on organizing part-time faculty. But they hardly have the field to themselves. United Auto Workers is organizing thousands of teaching assistants in New York and says it’s received numerous calls from adjuncts seeking help unionizing. United Steelworkers recently absorbed hundreds of adjunct faculty in Pennsylvania.

Perhaps the biggest new player on the scene is the Service Employees International Union. The SEIU has been organizing the fast-food worker protests — and has also launched an aggressive campaign, dubbed Adjunct Action, to bring 1 million non-tenure-track faculty members into its fold. Both the SEIU and the American Federation of Teachers are now running citywide organizing campaigns, attempting to unite faculty from different institutions under one umbrella to bolster their clout.

SEIU President Mary Kay Henry said she sees clear parallels between the Intro to Biology instructors at elite universities and the burger flippers at McDonald's.

“Whether you have a GED or a PhD, it's clear that this economy is not working for millions of working people,” Henry said, “and the seeds of change are taking root.”

The concept of faculty unions is not new: They've existed for decades at some institutions. But a 1980 Supreme Court ruling severely restricted collective bargaining rights at private colleges. As a result, most organizing has taken place at public institutions, especially community colleges, where 42 percent of full-time and 28 percent of part-time faculty are unionized, according to William Herbert, who runs a national center on higher education labor trends at Hunter College.

Part-time adjuncts have long been considered difficult to organize because they have erratic schedules, lack campus offices (or even mailboxes) and often divide their time between multiple institutions as they try to stitch together enough teaching assignments to pay the rent.

But those conditions, once considered obstacles, are now seen as the prime forces motivating adjuncts to band together.

Social media has made organizing easier. And the recent NLRB decision chipped away at the restrictions in the 1980 Supreme Court case by making it tougher for universities to define faculty as managers who are not allowed to unionize.

The movement has also been spurred by studies showing just how essential adjuncts have become to the U.S. model of higher education.

In 1970, the overwhelming majority of teaching faculty — about 80 percent — were full-time, tenure-track professors. Today, the reverse is true: About two-thirds of teaching faculty are not on a tenure track and about half are employed only part-time, federal data show.

Adjuncts are typically hired on short-term contracts of just a semester or two. Pay varies considerably but can be as low as \$2,500 to \$3,000 per class.

Some institutions give part-time faculty health and retirement benefits; others don't. Adjuncts often complain that they don't have access to the basic tools they need to teach successfully, such as a private office to meet with students. Their classes can typically be canceled on short notice, leaving them with no income for the semester.

To call attention to those conditions, longtime adjunct instructor Maria Maisto founded the New Faculty Majority in 2009. The group has organized rallies, campaigned on social media and sent Maisto to testify on Capitol Hill. In the past year, she said, those efforts have finally gained traction, especially since the SEIU got involved.

“We can really talk about it as a movement now,” said Maisto, who teaches English classes at Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland.

Not all adjuncts, however, are on board.

Kim Ragan Sovell, an adjunct marketing instructor at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn., was taken aback when she started receiving emails from SEIU last spring urging her to consider unionization. At first, she said she was reluctant to engage because she feared it could affect her employment: “I’m on contract, semester to semester, and at any given moment the university could say ‘I don’t need you anymore,’” Sovell said. “So I’m not in any position to want to rock the boat in terms of talking about a union.”

Then the SEIU announced it had collected signed statements from at least 30 percent of eligible adjuncts expressing interest in a union. Reaching that threshold triggered an official vote on unionizing. Sovell felt it had all happened far too fast, especially given that a new university president had just taken office and had not yet had a chance to address the concerns of part-time faculty. She and a colleague launched a campaign urging adjuncts to vote no.

They succeeded: By a vote of 136 to 84, part-time faculty at St. Thomas rejected the SEIU last summer. Within months, the administration had moved to address many of the issues that union had raised. The university boosted adjunct pay, extended benefits such as tuition discounts, invited part-time faculty to have a voice in university governance — and even promised to start recognizing adjuncts at the annual awards ceremony to honor long-serving professors.

Sovell was thrilled. In her view, adjuncts had won far more — and in a far more collegial environment — than they could have through unionization.

But labor advocates argue that it’s rare for adjuncts to get concessions without collective bargaining. “A union forces both sides to the table,” said Ron Bramhall, a full-time adjunct in the business college at the University of Oregon. “Before, the administration could make any decisions they wanted.” The SEIU is particularly proud of a recent contract at Tufts University outside Boston that gave part-time faculty a big raise and funding for professional development, along with longer contracts for senior lecturers. The union, in turn, agreed to new procedures for evaluating adjuncts’ teaching skills.

James Glaser, interim dean of the Tufts School of Arts and Sciences, said the administration was pleased with the contract. But he added that it will cost the university “significant resources” — resources that will not now be spent on priorities such as financial aid and facilities improvement. Administrators nationwide are watching such trade-offs closely.

At the Council of Independent Colleges conference this week, Devorah Lieberman, the president of the University of La Verne in Southern California, sponsored a roundtable discussion about responding to the needs of part-time faculty amid intensifying union activism. So many college presidents came to the panel that Lieberman had to pull over an extra table.

Her conclusion: “It’s not business as usual anymore.”