College Labor News

Issue #1 • Fall 2018 • college-labor.com • Baltimore, Maryland

We need a change!

Stephen Thompson

Welcome to the first issue of *College Labor News*, a newsletter created by college and university employees in Baltimore.

Why create this newsletter? Consider the following example. A student taking 15 credits this fall at a local university will pay $23,670 in tuition for the semester, which translates to $1,584 per credit. So for each three-credit course with 30 of these students, the university will bring in a whopping $142,560 in tuition. But an adjunct teaching the course will make only about $4,000, which is less than three percent of the tuition students pay. And note that these numbers are not hypothetical—they are taken directly from the website of a local university.

Of course, tuition and compensation amounts will vary from place to place. But conversations with colleagues on different campuses, and tuition numbers that are easy to check online, reveal that the problem is widespread. While colleges and universities rake in huge sums of money, adjuncts struggle to pay their rent.

This is part of a national trend. As Paul F. Campos wrote in the *New York Times*, there is a widening gap between tuition and instructor pay. In real terms the average pay for people who teach college in the US is actually lower now than it was in 1970, while tuition costs are much higher (see "The Real Reason College Tuition Costs So Much," NYT 04/04/2015).

So where is all the money going? As Campos explains, administrative costs are a huge factor: "administrative positions at colleges and universities grew by 60 percent between 1993 and 2009, which Bloomberg reported was 10 times the rate of growth of tenured faculty positions."

And while administrative compensation soars, colleges and universities are relying more and more on adjuncts to teach courses. As reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, between 2003 and 2013, the share of faculty hired off the tenure track went from 45 percent to 62 percent at public bachelor's degree granting institutions, with a similar increase at private institutions ("When Colleges Rely on Adjuncts, Where Does the Money Go?", *CHE*, 01/05/2017).

It should be no surprise that as colleges increasingly rely on hiring adjuncts, who are frequently excluded from faculty governance structures, administrators are free to spend more and more money on themselves. This highlights a deeper problem: the fact that adjuncts have little or no say in how their institutions are run.

We created this newsletter because we know that things don't have to be this way, and we are excited about the work people are already doing to change the status quo. We want to build stronger links between these efforts, and compare notes to see which strategies have been most effective. And although this newsletter was founded by adjuncts, we recognize that in many ways students, service workers and instructors are all in the same boat. We know that by organizing to build power together, we can create less stressful and more fulfilling lives, and gain a real say in running our institutions.

In this issue:

Solidarity in action: lessons from the Loyola University Chicago strike

Madeleine Monson-Rosen

After contingent faculty at Loyola University Chicago voted to unionize in 2016, negotiations for their first contract dragged on for a frustrating two years. Finally, in April 2018, professors fed up with stalled negotiations and low pay decided to walk off the job.

This brief strike quickly shifted the balance of power. Shortly after the walkout concluded, contingent faculty ratified their first contract, which included substantial victories: increased job security, $900 fees for instructors when their courses are abruptly canceled, and pay increases of as much as 51 percent.

This walkout wasn't *only* a strike, though. It was also a demonstration, planned jointly by the union, student activists, and the Poor People's Campaign, marking a season of struggle and solidarity between workers and students. For faculty, the strike was a rebuke to Loyola's administration, which persisted in inserting "poison pill" language into the contract. For students the walkout was a response to incidents of police brutality and racism on campus.

The strike and student demonstration received substantial media coverage, but not much discussion of what brought these groups together. For some insight, I spoke to my friend and former colleague Snezana Zabic, an adjunct writing professor at Loyola, about what made the effort there so successful.

Zabic is a veteran of the contingent faculty labor struggle. She has participated in three successful union fights, once as a grad student at the University of Illinois, Chicago (UIC), whose graduate workers' union negotiated its first contract in 2007, and then with UIC's faculty union (representing all full-time faculty) in 2012.

For Zabic, that one-day strike at Loyola represented the best kind of solidarity. Loyola's striking faculty committed to supporting student activists in an ongoing struggle against racism on campus, and students showed up to support instructors, amplifying their demands for better wages and reasonable schedules. The administration employed the same tactics in both fights: delaying, refusing accountability, and then pretending confusion about why both groups were increasingly active.

This strategy backfired, however, and served to build support between the two groups rather than pitting them against each other. Student and faculty organizers deployed the hashtags #timesuployola and #notmyloyola in order to communicate the struggle and build support on social media. This public show of solidarity online was one way that students and faculty built support both on and off campus, while Loyola administrators seemed to think if they ignored activists they—and their demands—would just go away.

In its negotiations with the union, Loyola administrators seemed to depend, alternately, on delaying negotiations and fighting for small symbolic "victories" for management—for example, excluding theology faculty from the union on religious grounds. Zabic recalls, "Until almost the end, they were successful in arguing that theology department adjuncts don't have the right to be a part of the unit, but theology faculty just kept coming to meetings." According to Zabic, Loyola's administration seemed to think if they delayed, or insisted on language that divided the workers, faculty would lose the support of students and parents.

But in fact, the opposite occurred. Zabic characterized Loyola's strategy this way: "The calculation is that either you threaten to strike but then you don't and then you look weak, or you *do* strike and then you lose support of the students and parents. But that didn't happen at Loyola, because we did strike and we *did* get support from students and parents."

For Zabic, the lesson of the strike and the student protests is clear. "We supported them and they supported us," says Zabic, "solidarity in action." Those of us working to build power for contingent academic workers should also take this to heart: this solidarity in action urges us to see the fight to organize contingent academics as part of a larger struggle: against police brutality on and off campus, and against institutions determined to exploit faculty and students alike.

McDaniel adjuncts find common ground with students and service workers, and ratify first union contract

Bob Seidel

At McDaniel College in Westminster, MD, adjunct faculty outnumber full-time faculty by more than two to one. We teach the great majority of graduate courses and about 20 percent of undergraduate courses. And we haven't had a pay raise in ten years.

In 2014, we began to organize with support from Service Employees International

Union (SEIU) Local 500 (Coalition of Academic Labor). In 2016, we won a representation election and began bargaining with the McDaniel administration. In 2018, we signed our first contract. It includes a three percent raise for all adjuncts, and an additional three percent raise in the second year of the contract for adjuncts who have taught for more than five years.

But those of us who led the organizing and bargaining are not satisfied with the contract. A three percent raise has limited significance because our pay was low to begin with. We know that, to win what we need and deserve, we need to continue organizing.

And we can't limit our organizing to adjuncts. Like other bosses, a college administration will attempt to play off different groups of employees against each other and play off consumers (students and their families) against employees. A couple of years ago, when food service workers at McDaniel organized their union, the administration blamed them for an increase in room and board charges. But tuition, room, and board charges go up every year with or without workers organizing.

McDaniel adjunct faculty.

While we were doing our initial organizing, some of us met with students organized in the Progressive Student Union on campus. They were beginning to organize students against the annual tuition, room and board cost increases and the lack of transparency in the college's budget process. Learning that adjunct faculty received very little to provide courses and hadn't received an increase in years added to their list of reasons for wanting to know details about the college budget.

Adjuncts ourselves wanted the same information and a change in the attitude of the administration to us. We wanted them to make us feel like full members of the college community and that they valued our teaching as much as that of full-time faculty. Adjuncts and students both wanted to know where the tuition is going and that the administration fully valued all teaching.

So adjunct organizers and student organizers worked together. Students helped us to identify adjuncts they knew who would likely be receptive to joining the union. We supported the students on organizing strategies around tuition, room and board. And we worked together on convening a campus community "town hall" about budget transparency led by the students. They put together a panel including a student, an adjunct, a food service worker, and a groundskeeper. Hundreds of people including students, full-time faculty, adjuncts, and administrative and other staff attended.
Students who had jobs in food service also supported the other workers there when they were organizing their union.

Have we achieved full budget transparency and other reasonable demands? No. But we've come a long way. And our organizing has been stronger by joining with other campus constituencies who have clearly related issues.

Adjuncts rally in Annapolis and defeat state senate incumbents

Richard E. Otten

This past April, as the Maryland state legislative session came to a close, adjunct professors and community leaders held a rally in Annapolis. They came to deliver a simple message: "Take a hike, Mike." That "Mike" is Mike Miller, who has now been Senate president for three decades.

Miller has consistently stopped important policy ideas from coming to a vote in the Senate—including a bill that would give community college instructors the right to unionize. After working for years to pass the bill, only to be blocked by Miller, activists announced the formation of the Take a Hike Mike campaign, seeking to bring about change in the leadership of the Maryland General Assembly.

I was proud to serve as emcee of this rally. The speakers included Michael Feldman from the Fight for $15, Howard County Community College adjunct instructor of studio art Joan Bevelaqua, Not Without Black Women founder Brittany Oliver, and SEIU Local 500 President Merle Cuttitta.

Richard E. Otten speaking in Annapolis.

Feldman discussed what's it's like to live on poverty wages in Maryland, one of the wealthiest states in the country, and Miller's failure to pass a new minimum wage bill. Bevelaqua, who has been fighting for collective bargaining rights in Annapolis for as long as I have, described Miller as petty, aloof, and irrational for refusing to allow our collective bargaining bill to reach the floor of his chamber. Oliver told us that she does not feel safe when she lobbies the legislature for issues of social justice because Miller does not take allegations of sexual harassment seriously. President Cuttitta closed the event by announcing, "If you're a worker, a woman, a person of color looking for a flag to rally around, we just planted this one."

In the June primary election, the Take a Hike Mike campaign endorsed an informal slate of senate candidates challenging incumbents, and claimed two massive victories. In Baltimore City, MICA adjunct instructor of sociology Del. Mary Washington defeated the longtime chair of the Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee Joan Carter Conway, who had served in the senate since 1997, and in Charles County, Air Force veteran Arthur Ellis shocked 32-year incumbent Senate Finance Committee Chair Thomas M. "Mac" Middleton.

Even if insurgent senators do not manage to unseat Miller as Senate President, the senate will look very different: younger and less white. With Chairman Middleton defeated and Vice Chair John Astle retired, activists lobbying to expand collective bargaining rights for Maryland's public employees will face a new, less entrenched Finance Committee, beholden to a less powerful president.

We look forward to rejoining the fight in the 2019 session of the Maryland General Assembly.

New book documents health toll for stressed-out US workforce

Stephen Thompson

This September will mark five years since the death of Margaret Mary Vojtko, a former adjunct professor at Duquesne University. Vojtko taught at Duquesne for 25 years, where she made less than $25,000 annually and was let go without receiving any severance or retirement benefits. She died from a heart attack shortly after learning she would no longer be offered courses to teach. Her death gained national attention and she became a symbol for the struggles many adjuncts deal with, including low pay, lack of job security, and inadequate health coverage.

A new book by Jeffrey Pfeffer, a professor in the Graduate School of Business at Stanford, shows that Vojtko's death is far from being an isolated incident. The book, titled *Dying for a Paycheck*, is a detailed study of how job-related stress leads to heart attacks and other serious health problems. Pfeffer also applies statistical analysis to measure the number of people killed by stress at work in the United States every year, and arrives at a stunning total: approximately 120,000 people.

Pfeffer identifies several factors that contribute to this total. Two of the biggest culprits turn out to be job insecurity and lack of adequate employer-provided health insurance—things that adjunct instructors are certainly familiar with. Pfeffer provides strong evidence that these things exacerbate work-related stress. In the process, they contribute to increased heart attacks, obesity, and mental health problems, all of which translate into higher annual death rates.

The book also includes more fine-grained information concerning personal health and working conditions. In an interesting section (see Chapter 6), Pfeffer reviews data showing that when people have less control over their jobs and work environments, they are more likely to suffer from heart problems and mental illness.

Although Pfeffer argues that stressful work environments are bad for companies as well as employees, he emphasizes that workers should not expect anyone to fix these problems for them. As he writes, "workers—be they freelancers or employees—need to take care of themselves." But some of his specific

suggestions are less than compelling. For example, he concludes Chapter 7 by simply urging employees to "take responsibility for finding workplaces where they can thrive". Elsewhere (page 145) he urges people to work fewer hours and take more vacations. Unfortunately, for many workers, adjuncts included, this might not be a practical option.

So what should we do? Some changes can be made at the level of the individual workplace. Adjunct professors at Maryland Institute College of Art, as well as McDaniel College in Westminster Maryland, have recently organized unions and ratified contracts with increased job security provisions. These are things adjuncts at other colleges can do right now to build less stressful lives.

At the same time, we should not be afraid to build ambitious national campaigns that unite adjuncts together with workers in other sectors. As Pfeffer points out in the book, a European-type universal health care system would significantly reduce stress for workers across the economy, improve public health, and save tens of thousands of lives per year if implemented. Adjuncts and other workers can help to make this a reality by joining the growing political movement for universal healthcare (also known as Medicare for All) in the US.

To conclude, Pfeffer's book is valuable because it takes a fresh look at how quality of life, working conditions and public health are linked. I would argue that when thinking about solutions for stressed-out workers, he puts too much emphasis on individual choice, and neglects the power workers have to improve their lives by engaging in collective action. But the book still provides a useful overview of how the US economy is failing to adequately serve people's needs.

Students picket Nike over college apparel sweatshops

Kate Wagner

On August 11, students held a picket against the Nike store in Georgetown, Washington DC. United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), the group that organized the event, says that Nike is pulling all apparel jobs out of Indonesia in response to a union organizing effort there. This threatens 30,000 garment workers' jobs—including workers who sew apparel for Georgetown University and other academic institutions. The picket came in response to Indonesian unions' call for international solidarity.

The event organizers seemed excited about expanding the campaign against Nike on college campuses this fall. Meghan Brophy, who joined USAS as a student at Barnard College, explained: "it's really empowering to fight for economic justice nationally and internationally, in solidarity for workers' rights. Alone we're like fingers, but together we make a fist."

Fed-up Hopkins nurses are organizing a union

Stephen Thompson

Johns Hopkins Hospital is one of the most prestigious medical institutions in the world. But when some nurses talk about what it's like to work there, the environment they describe sounds more like a sweatshop than a top-notch academic medical center.

In an interview with *Left Voice*, one Hopkins nurse describes low pay, long hours, and understaffing that puts patients at risk. She also

points out that, because of poor working conditions, the hospital has trouble retaining experienced nurses: “On shift the other day, I looked around and noticed that with just eight months of experience, *I’m a middle-seniority nurse*!” In response, Hopkins nurses are organizing a union with National Nurses United.

To learn more about the organizing effort, I sat down with Josh Pickett, a nurse who has worked at Johns Hopkins Hospital for two and a half years. He told me that administrators at the hospital pay themselves huge salaries—for example, in 2012, hospital president Ronald Peterson received *fifteen million dollars*. But Pickett says these high salaries come at a steep cost: “That has been done by cutting nurses’ benefits, consolidating units, doing more with less.” The hospital even saves money by using deficient equipment. “There were faulty gloves that would always break and issues with vital sign machines that weren’t working.”

Pickett said that nurses wanted to unionize because it would give them the power to address these problems and improve patient care. Interestingly, academic research does support the contention that when nurses unionize, patients are better off. For example, one analysis in the *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* concluded that “the presence of an R.N. union is associated with a reduction in mortality of about 0.8 percentage point”. Other studies have found similar positive effects. The reason is easy to understand—when nurses have some control over their work environments, are not overworked, and are not rushed from one patient to the next, they are better able to do their jobs.

Nevertheless, Pickett said hospital administrators are fighting the union effort, even spending hospital money on professional union busters who make $500 per hour or more. “The union busters are allowed to go into the unit at any time, and take nurses away from patient care during their shifts to go to these mandatory meetings. But when regular nurses on their break want to go and talk with other nurses in the break room or outside the unit, or on their down time, we’re prevented from doing so. We’re kicked off of the unit. We had security called on us by the administration.” Nevertheless, some of the administration’s strong-arm tactics seem to be backfiring. Pickett told me that Hopkins security officers themselves are poorly payed, creating a basis for solidarity between the different groups of workers.

Pickett seemed excited about the prospect of being part of National Nurses United. “They are a completely nurse-run and operated union. It’s not operated by, like, outside people who have nothing to do with medicine. From top to bottom, you have to be a bed-side nurse to be part of the governance structure of the union. Once we unionize, we will elect our own representatives from our unit,” Pickett told me. “It’s a very democratic union.”

Pickett also expressed solidarity with adjunct professors. “The nurses understand what they’re going through, and understand that they, like us, are being used to create the profit that’s not being adequately spread around.” He added: “If we all decide to unionize and have a voice at the table, that will create a better Hopkins and a better environment for everybody.”

Come to our fall semester get-together!

Come meet other adjuncts and campus workers! For time and location please contact us at CollegeLaborNews@gmail.com.

About *College Labor News*

College Labor News is a newsletter created by adjunct professors in the Baltimore area. Visit us online at college-labor.com. To contact us, please send an email to: CollegeLaborNews@gmail.com. We welcome comments from readers and pitches for new articles. We’d love to hear from you!