

Contingent Faculty Activism Pushes Legislation into Congressional Budget Reconciliation



The rising movement among contingent faculty has pushed bills onto CA Gov. Newsom's desk and into the budget reconciliation process in Congress. California's State Assembly Bill 375 would lift "the 67% law, affecting thousands of community college (CC) faculty, 70-75% of the total CC faculty workforce. The "67% law" limits faculty hired in this way to teaching no more than two thirds of a full load. Lifting it would only adjust one pressure point in the work-lives of these faculty, but it would allow the them to consolidate their assignments and perhaps teach at one or two different institutions instead of two, three or more. It's a tweak, but it would help pay the bills. Not surprisingly, this low-wage tier of workers, mostly without benefits, hired as precarious workers without job security, is disproportionately women and people of color.

You can urge Newsom to sign AB375 by going to <https://govapps.gov.ca.gov/gov40mail/> But more important than this particular bill is the national movement behind it that pushed it onto Governor Newsom's desk. This movement has been coming for the last 25 years. Contingent (the current term for adjuncts, part-timers, precarious) faculty have formed unions and self-organized into a broad activist network of conferences, publications, social media platforms, non-profit formations, coalitions and caucuses. Then when COVID hit, contingent faculty turned out to be throwaway workers. Higher ed, which has become a profit-seeking industry, took advantage

of the fear and chaos to apply the shock doctrine of disaster capitalism. Public colleges and universities responded with cutbacks and layoffs. Many small private colleges and universities folded or were purchased by larger entities. The traditional protections for full-time faculty, such as tenure, were slashed wherever possible. This galvanized the movement.

What came to the forefront of public attention during the run up to the 2020 election were stories about student debt. The Bernie Sanders campaign incorporated the debt issue under the flag of "Free College," a phrase known in California because of the way City College of San Francisco, celebrating its fightback against a hostile and unfair accreditor, tried to recover enrollment that had been lost during that fight by guaranteeing grants to cover tuition to city residents. "Free College" became a watchword of the Sanders campaign. Among the young people who were working on the Sanders campaign were many graduate student employees, people who were carrying debt themselves. Many of them were also doing effective union organizing across the country and anticipating job-hunting in higher ed. For them, it was not just about debt; it was about the pay and working conditions of their industry. Some of their arguments, like more tenure line jobs, made it into the Free College platform.

Then came the November 2020 election, followed by the agony of the Trump attempted coup, and the movement actually gathered strength. The organizing terrains ranged from very local groups coming together to caucuses at the national union level to the formation of new national groups. In July 2021 a grouping calling itself The Higher Education Labor Summit met, sponsored by Scholars for a New Deal for Higher Education. Its stated purpose was to intervene in the "College for All" bill (Sanders and Jayapal), to ensure labor conditions for all higher ed workers, not just faculty – especially the majority precarious faculty – were improved, and to write a vision statement clarifying what those labor conditions should look

like.

Therefore at this moment (October 2021) the tip of the spear for contingent faculty at the national level is a group that emerged from that summit, Higher Ed Labor United (HELU). "National" is worth repeating because the spear itself is made up of efforts, even by small groupings of faculty who have not yet formed a union, at the local level.

HELU's vision statement has gone through a number of revisions and debates about transitioning some contingent faculty into tenure line jobs, whether that is worth fighting for in comparison to fighting for equality on other fronts like wages, continuity of employment, etc. HELU's sudden rise to visibility is evidence of this being not just a single fight, but an actual movement with contingent faculty at the core. AB 375 is one part of that fight. As of this writing, organizations representing well over half of all faculty, and many higher ed staff, including the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL), the unions at the University of California, the California State University system, and many community colleges, have affiliated with HELU. The real action on these issues is now in the budget reconciliation process, where Bernie Sanders, as Chair of the Senate Budget Committee, is trying to work it through.

These fights are not isolated bursts of energy. They are linked to a bottom-up, self-organized contingent faculty movement that is expressing itself at different levels all over the country. They all part of a bigger fight for a free, accessible higher ed system like we once had under the 1960s California Master Plan. "Building Back Better" should also include taxing the rich for this common good and a higher education system staffed by people with living wages and benefits and job security that allows them to speak the truth as they see it. To find a way to help, go to <https://higheredlaborunited.org>.