

Overcoming Adjunctification & Contingent Labor

March 5, 2017



The neoliberal policies implemented since the 1980s in Mexico and around the world have worsened the conditions of academic workers, imposing labor flexibility and precariousness on most of the teachers in higher education. This new academic majority needs a political revival. The reorganization of this sector has become an urgent task for academics and their unions.

Precarious labor, corresponding to the model of arbitrary recruitment and intensive exploitation of different kinds of workers, based on labor flexibility and deregulation, has led to new forms of poverty, structural unemployment, an informal economy, the corporate abuse of work time, etc. The weakening of trade unions, the disassembly of social subjects and political actors, the loss of class awareness and depoliticization, and so on, are all expressions of a new paradigm of precariousness in the social relationships of twenty-first century capitalism. This situation has made “normal” conditions of work that were inconceivable in the past, conditions like low incomes, instability and unprotected labor, arbitrary and unilateral flexibility decided by employers, lack of benefits and health insurance, and so on.

Given this general scenario, academic labor reproduces within the university the same model of precariousness we find in society at large. In Mexico contingent and part-time academic workers represent 80% of all instructors in public and private institutions. We need to study and come an understanding of this situation in order to achieve the repoliticization and collective reorganization of academic workers.

Adjunctification: Insecurity and Low Wages

Adjunctification is the process by which institutions of higher education increasingly employ adjunct professors. Adjuncts or part-time academics of Mexican universities are paid about 7,000 Mexican pesos per six-month course, or about US350. So, if in the United States an adjunct needs to teach five or six courses per semester to earn a little better wage, in Mexico an adjunct would need to teach 10 or 12 courses just to survive. Of course, no university will employ an adjunct to teach more than four or five courses, so, we have to work in two or three different universities or we have to sell our bodies or something to survive!

In each course we teach we have from 35 to 50 students. Adjuncts in Mexico represent 80% of the faculty today, so the corps of full-time faculty make up only 20%. Many of the full-time academics teach in the masters or doctoral programs, where they have often have only five or ten students in teach course, so there is really a great difference between the conditions of full-time faculty and

adjuncts. Of course, as all we know, adjuncts don't have time to do research or to take new courses.

The problem of the adjunctification of higher education in Mexico can't be solved without a general change in all the national government. We urgently need a national project as well as a higher education project. We have had almost 40 years of a severe and extreme neoliberalism and the scenario now is worse for the organization of democratic unions, but this is the only way to change the situation, Mexican professors have to unionize and win again the right to strike as well as other rights that we have lost.

One of the most central and awful ideas of the neoliberal philosophy is individualism, but only the collective action will let us to become strong again in the new context. In Mexico, simply unionizing the teachers won't be enough. If we don't choose a democratic federal government on the next presidential elections in 2018, we won't change anything, because we won't have real options. We will only be able to resist, not to carry out the deep transformation.

Some Encouraging Experiences

For example, the union that helped to organize the next Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL) in Mexico, the SUPAUAQ (Academic Union of Autonomous University of Queretaro) has a big problem. The government of the state of Queretaro, which is not a democratic government, but a conservative government of the National Action Party (PAN) decided not to recognize the elections for the executive committee of that academic union. So, now, the union members are fighting to defend their organization, but it's not easy, because of neoliberal changes in the law that allow the government to make decisions about the internal life of the unions in Mexico.

We need to sensitize the unions that exist now, including the unions of full-time faculty, and not compete against them as enemies, but rather incorporate them into the debate over the problem of adjunctification and precarization of part-time academic workers. For example, after COCAL met in Mexico in 2012, Mexican academic unions—including a completely undemocratic union—decided to work together to improve salaries, conditions, and gain more opportunities for research for part-time academics. We know it's a small achievement, but finally the face of this vast majority of adjunct faculty became visible.

Those of us who have already been activated and organized have to call for the organization of academics who are in a precarious condition, we have to make the problem public and to denounce it, and we have to organize hand in hand with other great forces for the struggle for labor rights. Anyway, any small fight is valid in these difficult times.

Since the COCAL's tenth convention took place in Mexico, academic meetings have been held to organize against job insecurity. For some years the problem of adjunctification has been spreading and this has made us and the issue more visible, but we still need to educate the public. A very important thing that can be done is to write and to publish articles, essays, and journalistic pieces about the problem.

If adjuncts, even though we make up 80 percent of all instructors, are still invisible, the situation of women adjuncts is worse. I think too we need to feminize the fight against academic precariousness with the support of male teachers who are aware that inequality is unfair. Meritocracy is a myth. In the context of neoliberalism it doesn't matter what you do, you can stay in the same position forever.

Four Proposals

Finally four things that I think we need to strengthen the adjuncts struggles in Mexico:

1) Our voice has to reach the streets and the other social movements. We have to unite our voices and our power. In Mexico we have some interesting recent experiences, such as the massive protests and strikes of the National Coordinating Committee (CNTE), the reform caucus in the Mexican Teachers Union (el SNTE), and the struggle in reaction to the awful and sad episode of the forced disappearance of 43 students of the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers College. Even though the Federal government has the control of the media in Mexico, and though the resistance has not been permanent, still those movements were publicized around the world.

2) Our voice also has to reach the Mexican Congress to defend the Federal Education Law and to get more money for public education. We need to pressure the Mexican Congress to allocate more money for public higher education. I know that this represents a big problem because of the concept of autonomy of the universities, but the redistribution of salaries doesn't have to mean that we lose academic freedom. And we need to get democratic and — why not? — socialist representatives in the Congress. We have to take control of the Congress, and not wait for neoliberal senators of the right political parties to make good decisions for the people.

3) We have to develop the theory that will allow us to see the panorama of the struggle, and to understand and to explain the general context. We have to talk again in all of the unions about socialism, communism, democracy, equality, justice, and about making love and not war.

4) Finally, to overcoming adjunctification and contingent labor system, we need face the overwhelming statistics and to fight for the reorganization of work in order to equality in academia. We need to achieve the repoliticization of the academic workers in higher education in Mexico and throughout the world.

So, the message to ourselves and to the society has to be that we don't deserve to live as precarious workers. We don't deserve bad governments. We don't deserve that kind of life. We deserve dignity and we need solidarity among all of the workers of the world.

**María-Teresa Lechuga is an adjunct professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and an activist in the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor.*

This is a talk presented at Global Resistance in the Neoliberal University: A PSC International Conference, New York, March 2017.

The photo accompanying this article shows María-Teresa Lechug speaking at the COCAL X conference in Mexico in 2012.