

# Tenure is the Easy Target but the Wrong One

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A rising fight that focuses on tenure

Disaster capitalism is being applied to colleges and universities at all levels, cutting classes while expanding casualization of the faculty. Not surprisingly, the mainstream media has chosen to focus attention on tenure, not on the overall conflict in the higher ed industry.

## Why is tenure being attacked?

The very word “tenure” reeks of privilege, which makes it an easy target, but the attacks on it are really just part of an orchestrated attempt to lower labor standards by decreasing job security for workers across the board while weakening higher education (especially public higher education) as one historic source of critical thought, disseminator of the influence of science in society, and origin of many opposition movements. The attacks are ginned up to appeal to envy – why should some workers have a job for life (one that is perceived as easy, pleasant, and benefited) when the rest of us are tumbling around in the scary labor market?

But tenure is not in fact “a job for life.”

## What is tenure?

Tenure is a particular kind of job security known as *just cause dismissal protection*. It means you can't get fired (discharged) or disciplined (punished) for no good reason. “Just cause” means a good reason accompanied by investigation into the evidence for that reason plus due process for the accused. For academics, the word for this is tenure (from the Latin, *tenere*, meaning to hold on) because of the belief that it was socially good for educators and researchers to be able to hold on and pursue and teach the truth as they saw it without fear of reprisal. This kind of job security — just cause dismissal for discipline and discharge— is a common feature of union contracts in workforces in those areas that still have unions. It is the opposite of “at will” employment, which is what we all work under if we don't have a collective union contract.

In academia, tenure has also carried with it historically the right of faculty to have a meaningful voice in the academic governance of their institutions. Tenure has not been, and is not today, a guaranteed job for life that protects people against discipline and discharge for good reason. Tenured faculty can and do get fired if there is a good reason. (They also get fired for bad reasons.)

### **Yet these attacks on tenure make breaking news**

Just from recent weeks: Molly Worthen (no relation) writes a guest essay in the NYTimes blaming the tenure review process for overspecialization in a lot of academic fields. Then Harvard reports that a commission on the topic has found their process opaque but “structurally sound.” The Regents of the University of Georgia propose and pass a policy that modifies its post-tenure review process to effectively weaken it. Kansas and Iowa are just two states where bills to eliminate tenure came up in the state legislature. Even mainstream TV gets into the act with tenure review being one of the subplots for *The Chair*. This is all in addition to the normal drumbeat of academic managers decrying tenure as an obstacle to administrative flexibility.

### **... but they miss the point**

While the rising attacks on tenure are important (and important to oppose), they miss the point. Tenured and tenure-track faculty are only 25% of total higher education faculty – fewer, if you count all those who are doing faculty work like graduate student employees. What really matters is the conditions of the majority for whom tenure is the impossible dream. These are the 75% of faculty who are hired as contingents, their semester-to-semester appointments “contingent” on funding, student enrollment, and the whims and favoritism of administrators. While 20% of these contingent faculty are in unions (and may have some degree of job security in their union contracts) that leaves the 80% of the hundreds of thousands who have to balance their commitment to their students against the chance of “pissing someone off,” as John Hess, a leading organizer for the California Faculty Association, put it.

### **Where the conflict really lies**

The real conflict is with those who would benefit from living in a society where they and their children and grandchildren are taught by people who do not have sufficient job security to speak the truth as they see it. This “truth as they see it” is not just the question of whether dinosaurs and human beings co-existed: it includes issues like climate change and its causes, science in general, the Israeli-Palestine conflict, evolution, critical race theory, socialism and others. Then there are issues like class size, zoom instruction, grading and masking that pit faculty against managers who themselves are under pressure in an increasingly profit-seeking industry.

### **Who should have just cause for discipline and discharge-type tenure?**

While “tenure” refers to academic and education workers, the justification for just cause job security applies to all types of work. People in every kind of job need to have the power to critique their jobs as they do them, to their fellow workers and the public. The way that academics are special is that we deal almost exclusively in the realm of ideas. That is our service: providing people with concepts and the skills for manipulating and applying them.

At this moment, a major new voice for better labor conditions for all workers in higher education – not just faculty but also clerical workers, blue-collar and the increasing number of contracted-out workers– is HELU, Higher Education Labor United, which came out of a campaign ignited by Scholars for a New Deal for Higher Education and massive rage at student debt. This culminated in a broad-based and union-sponsored summit held last July. Influenced by young student campus

employees involved in the Sanders campaign, HELU successfully lobbied to get labor conditions into College for All and is now working to support the Build Back Better bill with labor improvements and the necessary link to the infrastructure bill intact. HELU's vision statement <https://higheredlaborunited.org/about/vision-platform/> is one that should be a guide for a future, and better, higher education in the US.

Job security for all workers, not attacks on tenure, should be where the media focuses attention. Otherwise, the future is gig work for most of us.