

(from *Cogs in the Classroom Factory: The changing identity of academic labor*. Deborah Herman and Julie Schmid, eds. Praeger (Greenwood), 2003)

“WELCOME NEIGHBOR”

In December 1999, when I became a part-time, temporary, contingent, adjunct lecturer at Harold Washington College, in the Chicago City Colleges, the polite and soft-spoken department head apologized for the pay (\$1350 for a three credit course, no benefits) and had trouble meeting my eyes. He seemed very embarrassed to be hiring me at all. I did ask him if we had offices and he said, yes. I was pleasantly surprised and I mentioned to him that I had worked some places with no offices for part-timers. His reply was that they used to have thirty-three full-timers in Social Science and space was very short, but now they are down to eleven, with sixteen part-timers so there is plenty of space.

I was even more surprised when I found, in the office, a wonderful welcoming note from my officemate, "Welcome Neighbor" it began. In sixteen years of part-time teaching in three states I had never before gotten a welcome like that. Soon we were exchanging notes. I soon found that she was, like me, part-time and that she also taught at Roosevelt University, where an adjunct union organizing drive was just then in progress.

As I settled into the semester and the office where I spent the hour before and after my twice-a-week evening class, I began to look around. The office was small, the walls dirty and looked unpainted for years, the furniture was battered. The desk held the detritus of many years and seemingly many occupants. A small plastic fan sat on a table—a silent indication of the airlessness of the space. A well-used cheap plastic office phone sat on the desk, with two names on the option buttons, neither of them mine. The office had two full-size vertical file cabinets and two horizontal ones with shelves on top. There was one main desk and a small table next to it. Three chairs: one a desk chair, one a small secretary's chair, and one a side chair for a student, all upholstered in the bright orange popular in the late 1970s and early 1980s. All were stained and dirty. The table and file cabinets, institutional buff, still had moving stickers on them saying “Ship to R... H..., Social Science Dept., 4th Floor, Harold Washington College, 30 E. Lake St.” I remembered that the College building had been built in the 1980s and even later named for Harold Washington, the first Black mayor in “the most segregated city in America.” He had died of a heart attack in office, some say hounded and pressured to death by white machine politicians in the then famous “Council Wars.” Formerly the college had been called Loop College. These

pieces of furniture had obviously made the trip when the building was opened. Then I noticed the name on all the labels, RH. He was someone who had retired and never been replaced by another full-time tenured teacher.

Soon, I was getting curious. My office mate had suggested, via her welcome note, some of the drawers and shelves that I could use, but now I wondered about the others. I tried the upright files first. Locked. A mystery. Papers, tests, old lunches or even body parts hermetically sealed and locked in Steelcase? Later in the semester, the department secretary came in with a large handful of keys to try to open the locked cabinets, at my officemate's request she told me. She was unsuccessful and the mystery remained. The other, unlocked, files held some of RH's work for programs long past, dating in some cases back to the 1960s. Other open shelves held books up to thirty years old.

A MUSEUM OF COLLEGE TEACHING, AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

I was beginning to feel, especially as a labor history teacher, that I had wandered into a museum of what college teaching used to be—a stable, professional occupation where someone got hired and spent a career building their resources in an office like this one. All that was left, materially, of that long ago career and the system that allowed it to exist was contained in this musty little room. I began to look at all these artifacts with different eyes. The secretary's chair and small table probably meant that, occasionally at least, RH had some clerical support in this office, even if only a work-study student. The single desk meant that this had not been a shared office, but rather the personal home base for a full-time faculty member. The large number of files and shelves meant that he (and he was a "he") had the time and resources to develop programs and courses in some quantity over the years and to use, and revise, the product of that labor repeatedly, using lots of paper. This college had once spent money on new furniture since all, except for some of the file cabinets, were of the same vintage. He must have been an organized fellow too, since there was an old set of plastic desk accessories and organizing containers sitting on the desk, in the gray translucent plastic favored in the 1980s.

I now realized it was more than a museum, it was an archeological site.¹ This was the physical remnant of what college teaching, even in the lowest level of higher education—an urban, working-class community college—used to be before contingent, part-time labor replaced

tenured, full-time faculty. It was also before the imposition of substantial tuition both changed and cut the student body.

AV TECHNICIANS AND VENDING MACHINES

As I found my way around the single multistory building that made up the college, I found more archeology. In the AV department was a complete set of old video production equipment that now sat unused since this once-thriving operation was now staffed only by part-time students and technicians and one trained professional, a librarian who had to work the library desk part of every day as well. The library itself had only part-time librarians on the reference desk in the evenings, making many questions only answerable with a phone call to the full-timer during the day. Library class tours, once virtually universal for survey history classes like the ones I was teaching, were no longer possible due to staffing cuts. The duplicating office had more machines than the reduced staff of one full-timer could use. As I wandered further I soon discovered that this pattern was repeated throughout the college. The building itself, built in the early 1980s as the budget cutting was gaining steam, had been planned to be four stories higher. These floors were just shaved off the plans and never built. Perhaps it was the result of insufficient “clout” on the part of the local administration. (This is Chicago, after all.) As a result, there was no food service except a few truly disgusting vending machines, no faculty lounge, none of the basic amenities for students or faculty that had been routine in all colleges in the 1960s, when I was an undergraduate. This archeology revealed that not just teachers had been affected, but students as well.

THE UNION

Into the site of this “dig,” some weeks later, floated a mimeographed sheet, which turned out to be the latest newsletter (May 5, 2000) of the this college’s chapter of the county-wide American Federation of Teachers (AFT) union local. Local 1600 represents the full-time faculty and some other staff. It does not represent the part-timers, who are called lecturers here. This chapter newsletter revealed that the administration of the Chicago City Colleges was asking for a new set of concessions in the current contract negotiations, including a second round of increases in class load for any new full-time faculty hired after the contract was ratified. The union was resisting, so far, but had already made this particular concession (from eight to nine sections a year) once and so, perhaps, would also concede the current demand to go from nine to ten. After all, no one voting on *this* contract provision would be directly affected by it. Another section of this union chapter newsletter detailed a recent set of increases in pay and benefits given to top administrators, vice presidents and above, which included \$500/month car allowances, fully paid family health insurance till death, and other expensive perks. Never had archeology seemed so intriguing to me, or so directly linked to the present.

WORKPLACES THAT HAVE VANISHED

At this point in the semester, while teaching the evolution of work and early industrialization, I realized that this “dig” I inhabited had a broader symbolism than I had realized. In fact, many other occupations had been “casualized” and otherwise transformed over history, but most had not left the rich set of artifacts that a college teacher’s office held. Most of these jobs had not ever supplied their practitioners with a private space of this sort. In other cases the site of the work itself had shifted from artisan shop to factory, and so the archeological record of the transition would be scanty indeed. I thought of how independent master cobblers, with their journeymen and apprentices, producing and selling to a local market, had become, first, subcontractors to the large shoe merchants. Later, most of them had become factory hands, hired by the day or the piece, doing small routinized tasks that neither demanded nor valued their wide-ranging craft skills. Their workmates in these new factories were women and children, many of them immigrants, who could learn the necessary skill in short order and were forced to work for a fraction of the wages the old “cordwainers” had commanded. A few of the old “master craftsmen” had adapted successfully, becoming large contractors or even factory owners themselves, but they stood out from the norm like white bird droppings on a black sand beach.

I remembered hearing how clerical work had once been the ladder to success and commercial management for somewhat-educated white, middle-class boys. In the early twentieth century most office work had become a dead end, frequently very routine and now even physically dangerous for its mostly female and minority workers, with the intensity of computer data entry and word processing causing epidemic rates of repetitive stress disorders.

But all of this change had left little for later historians or archeologists to look at—a few old tools, perhaps some photographs, but the old sites were largely gone as production had moved to the centralized factories and, later, to other regions and even to other nations. The continuity of place had been lost. I realized what an unusual and valuable example my own little archaeological “dig” was.

But how did this history apply to me? Was this process of casualization inevitable and I simply had the bad luck to have come into this workforce in the 1980s just as the “Golden Age” of the academic “craft” was passing? Was this really an example of “historical inevitability” that could have been lifted whole from the pages of Marx’s *Capital*?

THE BRASS RING—THE SAN FRANCISCO GENERAL STRIKE

I went back to work, trying to think of something else besides the brass ring that seemed to have been taken off the carousel just as I bought my ticket. I forced myself to outline my syllabus for next semester, when I would be teaching recent United States history survey. And then it hit me. Right there it was in front of me, even illustrated in the text, the 1934 San Francisco General Strike. Here was a battle waged, initially by the longshoremen and seamen, to reverse just the conditions of casualization (they called it the “shape-up”) that I was immersed in. *And they had won!*

It had taken years of preparatory struggle and organizing, many lost jobs, and two shooting deaths, but they had won! They had inspired the entire working class of San Francisco, and the whole West Coast, with their fight, not just for a few more cents per hour, though they desperately needed that too, but by their willingness to sacrifice for the goal of self respect on the job. In their case, this translated into the end of the mass hiring crowds each day where the bosses would pick out their favorites for the privilege of a day’s, or even a few hours’, work. In those times longshoremen and sailors were the lowliest of day laborers. These were the jobs men did when there was no alternative. Waiters had a better life. And to get even these pathetic few hours of backbreaking, dangerous and unhealthy labor, workers frequently had to pay off the hiring boss in the form of sleeping in his sister’s boarding house, patronizing his uncle’s bordellos, buying him “presents,” and, certainly, doing whatever the worker was told with smiling alacrity.

“My God,” I thought, “they must have felt very much like we ‘adjuncts’ feel right now; doing honest labor, but giving up a little of their humanity every time they tried to get a day’s work (or, in our case, another class).” Then they won a centralized, union-controlled hiring hall with a worker-elected dispatcher and the world was turned upside down. Within a generation, the lowest of the low became the “kings of the waterfront” with the highest wages and most job security (and the strongest union) of any non-craft manual work. I remembered the pride in their faces when they marched in parades in San Francisco with their white hats and their cargo hooks.

WHAT WINNING CAN LOOK LIKE

It had not all been sweetness and light after 1934. Automation, in the form of containerization, eventually cut new hiring to a trickle and the union had only protected the current workers, not the next generation, with the result that there were many fewer US longshore workers (and sailors) than two generations before. There had been limits to even Harry Bridges' and the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union's (ILWU's) sense of working-class solidarity and their stomach for seemingly hopeless fights in the 1950s. Nevertheless, the memory of what they did achieve brought tears to my eyes and a more rapid beat to my heart.

After this "Eureka moment," more examples came to mind. The farm workers, after three generations of struggle, had finally, however briefly, regularized work in the California fields, destroyed the hated labor contractor system, replaced it with union hiring halls and had brought health care and other social services to this workforce, who made contingent teachers look like nobility.

"But," I thought, "health insurance would be really nice, since I'll never see fifty again and may not ever live to see socialized health care instituted in America."

The United Farm Workers (UFW), like the ILWU, had done this not only by organizing on the job, but by building a movement that reached out to entire communities for allies and fought for a broader vision of social justice than just wages and hours. It was broader even than just job security and dignified fair hiring procedures for themselves. The ILWU (now, in 2001, without the "men" in their official name) had appealed to the formerly excluded African-American workers to respect their strike lines and not scab in exchange for a promise for fair hiring and an end to gross discrimination after the battle for a union hiring hall was won. They had kept that promise and, by the time I lived in San Francisco in the 1970s, the Longshore local there was mostly African-American. The ILWU continued to be the most progressive, solidaristic wing of the West Coast labor movement up to the present, bringing democratic, militant unionism to workers as diverse as booksellers and bicycle messengers.

The UFW was the godparent of the whole Chicano movement in the 1960s, and was based upon a strategic alliance with Filipino farmworkers as well. They appealed to the students of the 1960s, especially the Latinos, to rally around *La Causa* and built a national grape boycott that mobilized progressive America. Here too, all was not perfectly fair, democratic or uniformly principled. Who in the movement can forget the terrible lapse when Caesar Chavez

allowed cooperation with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (the hated “Migra”) at the border? Or the tremendous embarrassment felt by many when he visited Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos in Manila? Nevertheless, much was won, and not just by farmworkers, but by the whole movement they sparked in Chicano/Latino communities across the nation. The hundreds of committed young organizers they trained now help lead many of the most progressive unions and community organizations nationwide.

Then I really let my mind go and realized the most improbable example of successful resistance to casualization, and perhaps the biggest single group of contingent workers in the economy, the building trades. Here were workers who had not only succeeded in overcoming their status as day laborers (still true in many parts of the world), hired mainly for their strong backs, but had become the aristocracy of the labor movement. They had gained control about one hundred years ago of the hiring of their labor through union hiring halls and had fought bitterly to force contractors to come to terms. They had made construction a job a worker could reasonably hope to afford to retire from and still walk away able-bodied. The United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners (Carpenters) also led the struggle for the 8 hour day and helped to found the workers’ holidays of May Day and Labor Day in the process.

Construction craft unions’ history was also marred by unconscionable racism, sexism and a general strategy of exclusion. Most of these unions were so successful in their exclusiveness that they fought all attempts by African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and women to enter the trades and anti-discrimination court orders (“consent decrees”) dating from the 1960’s and 1970’s are still in effect for some of these unions. Their influence in the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was frequently extremely backward, such as when Carpenters’ President Bill Hutchinson led the opposition to the organization of the workers in the mass production industries, arguing that “unskilled” factory workers, many of them immigrants and their children, could never be good trade unionists. This obdurance essentially forced the Committee on Industrial Organization (CIO), led by United Mine Workers of America (Miners) President John L. Lewis, to leave the AFL in the 1930’s in order to organize the workers in the factories in the only possible form, single organization industrial unionism.

In recent years, however, the force of employers’ renewed, and nearly successful, drive to destroy the unions completely in the interest of higher profit has brought many building trades workers and unions back around to a vision of broader social unionism, movement building, and bottom up organizing that would be familiar to Carpenters founder, socialist Peter J. McGuire.

This vision would likely be unrecognizable, and surely surely amazing, to old “stand-patters” like the late New York plumber and AFL-CIO President from the 1950s to the 1970s, George Meany, who bragged he had never been in a strike and saw no need to organize new workers. This was the man who, along with the CIO’s Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers (UAW), engineered the merger of the AFL and CIO in 1955, largely on conservative AFL terms, and then presided over the first years of labor’s decline in numbers and influence.

Recently we see one of the historic building trades unions, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) developing the very prototype of internal support for new organizing with their Construction Organizing Member Education and Training (COMET) program which has been adopted by the entire AFL-CIO in the form of Member Education and Mobilization for Organizing (MEMO). In many parts of the country, and for the first time in many years, one now can see building trades banners in solidarity demonstrations for other unions in struggle.

Heady with all this inspiration, I decided to take a break and call up a couple of students who had been missing class lately and see what was up. As I looked through the student information questionnaires I give out at the start of every semester, I noticed the question on current work. Nearly all community college students now work, most full-time, and my eyes fell on one student’s form. There it was, big as life, and I had not even thought of it when I was feeling so sorry for myself. *UPS*. Just saying the initials made me feel better. Of course!

The 1997 UPS strike, the first major United States national strike victory in a nearly a decade, had been fought largely by, and about, people just like my student here. The recent growth of part-time, poorly paid and insecure labor at UPS had been a major scandal and a key reason for the rise to power of the reform movement in the Teamsters in the early 1990s. When the contract came up, the new leadership had pledged a real fight to reverse this trend and win back some full-time jobs, with preference going to the present part-timers. A massive national strike, the first largely publicized and organized via the Internet’s World Wide Web, had brought out nearly 100% of the workers, and had won the support of the entire working class, who were then inspired by the unexpected victory over one of the largest corporations in the world. The strike had hit a massive chord of sympathy among the downsized, casualized, part-timed, re-engineered, teamed up, contracted out, outsourced, broken down, and generally fearful, but deeply resentful workers in all employment sectors. This was true in Europe as well, where planned solidarity jobs actions were a significant factor in forcing the eventual settlement. They

had won a fight for dignity and fairness under the slogan “A Part-Time America Won’t Work” that reached far beyond their own membership.

COLUMBIA COLLEGE PART-TIMERS: WHY NOT US?

The next week brought my final hopeful reminder, just in case I had missed the point. I was pleased when a friendly Illinois Education Association (IEA) union organizer told me that a small new local union of part-time faculty had been formed at a downtown private college, Columbia College (the Part-time Faculty Association at Columbia, Pfac/IEA/NEA). They had achieved a first contract, but had been forced to agree to a bargaining unit that excluded over 350 junior part-timers, under the threat by the administration of delaying the election for months in National Labor Relations Board hearings. Now the local was trying to go back and add the “left out” to the unit and to the union, and they were looking for an organizer (part-time temporary, of course) to make the calls. Like most contingent faculty, I was always on the lookout for another part-time job, even one as endless as organizing.

I took the job and, in that first conversation with the local president, who was a computer instructor new to unionism himself, I asked him how he first got involved and how the union began. He told me that part-time college teachers’ gripe sessions had been transformed into organizing discussions by the example of the Teamsters’ UPS strike. He said that they thought if part-time package loaders, some of whom were their students, can do it, “why can’t we?”

As I finish this piece I just found out, that with five days to go, we won our little add-on unit modification effort, with a few cards to spare and more in the mail. This victory demonstrates two lessons. The first is that even relatively new part-timers will respond to a union message in overwhelming numbers if we can actually talk with them. The second is that the college administration, now sufficiently reconciled to the union to agree to voluntary recognition for this group if we got a majority to sign union authorization cards, may have surmised that we would never make it, since they only give us a correct list three weeks before our end-of-semester deadline. If they thought so, they were merely the most recent employer to underestimate their own workers—a frequent strategic mistake that all unionists must learn to take advantage of. This will be the third bargaining group of part-timers certified in a private Chicago college in two years. It is not yet a movement, but I can hear the clock ticking.

JANUARY 2001

In revising this chapter for publication months later, I am struck by how little changes with the updating. Pfac successfully renegotiated their contract, bringing in those hundreds of new members. Their newer sister local at Roosevelt University, the Roosevelt Adjunct Faculty Organization (RAFO/IEA/NEA) is deep in bargaining for their first contract with an administration whose ideas of job security and academic freedom for adjunct faculty could be summed up as, “You teach and say what we want, when and where we want you to, and go away when you are finished.”

Meanwhile, the national meeting of the American Council on Education (higher education’s top administrators’ trade association) was held in Chicago. I attended and discovered that their focus was on competing with the corporate for-profit schools (University of Phoenix, DeVry, etc.) on their own terms. I found that these terms included “unbundling” the tasks that make up faculty jobs (curriculum development, presentation, tutoring, advising, correcting student work, grading and evaluation) and doling most of them out to a variegated, less skilled and lower compensated contingent workforce. Now that most faculty work has now been casualized, with the majority of post-secondary teachers nationwide now hired without job security, much less tenure, the second part of the transformation of faculty work is now in the offing, deskilling through division of labor.

This entire process would be desperately familiar to our old nineteenth-century artisan cobbler if he could be brought back to life. He might also have more than a few words for us about the motives of our employers and how we might fight for a different future. In the absence of our working-class ancestor, let me suggest a few tentative considerations for the future.

WHAT THE OLD COBBLER MIGHT SAY

First, the old days of the “professorial guild” are gone forever, along with the perks and individual prerogatives that went with membership in it. What will ultimately replace that pattern of faculty life and work is the most important question for all of us in, or interested in, higher education today.

We have a new-majority faculty, presently contingent, but in all its variation including graduate employees, “adjuncts,” part-timers, non-tenure track full-timers, and a hundred other labels at all levels of higher education, from noncredit adult educators to even faculty in some graduate programs. Only this new-majority faculty has both the potential collective power and the collective enlightened self interest to lead a fight for a different future for higher education than that which befell shoe manufacturing and the artisan cordwainers.

The lessons of the victories, however partial and transitory, of fellow workers like those on the docks, fields and construction sites, teach us that we cannot wage this fight alone, though we do have a responsibility to lead it. We will need to open ourselves to alliances with our students, their parents, other campus workers and their unions, and the labor movement and working class generally. It is their social interest in a better, fairer, more inclusive and equitable system of higher education that will both transform our struggle for equity as faculty into something broader and also will give us the additional social force to win. Within this struggle no tactic should be rejected out of hand, but none should be embraced that does not create a broader stronger movement.

With the lessons of the democratic social movements of the past to guide us, we can help create a future where higher education serves the real interests of the working class majority, not just the elite or the employers of labor. When that occurs, higher education will both be staffed and controlled by its fairly treated workforce and will be a force for a more equal, less stratified and exploitative society in general. Higher ed will also be even more fun to teach in.

Endnotes

1. After writing this, I discovered a similar reference. See Nelson, Cary, *Academic Key Words* (New York: Routledge, 1999): 210. Nelson's story is of a new full-timer who discovers that he has been assigned to a former part-timers' gang office and he chooses to keep the stenciled notice "Part-Time Faculty Office" on the wall "wanting some residue of the school's labor history to remain."

List of Acronyms (in order of appearance in the text)

AFT	American Federation of Teachers
ILWU	International Longshore and Warehouse Union (formerly International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union)
UFW	United Farm Workers
AFL	American Federation of Labor
CIO	Committee on Industrial Organization (later Congress of Industrial Organizations)
UPS	United Parcel Service
IEA	Illinois Education Association
Pfac	Part-time Faculty Association at Columbia College
NEA	National Education Association
RAFO	Roosevelt (University) Adjunct Faculty Organization