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Unions address the precarious lot of full-time, nontenure-track faculty

By: Virginia Myers Kelly

After teaching graphic design at the University of Michigan for some 15 years, Beth Hay got a phone call informing her that her office was being emptied. By the time she arrived on campus, her books, files and mementos were out in the hallway. That trauma occurred in 1996, but Hay was reminded of the precariousness of her situation again in 2002, when her full-time work was cut in half, her benefits were taken away and a new policy limited her to one class, one semester at a time. At age 50, the job she loved, the teaching that made her feel as though she “was the luckiest person in the whole world” is gone. She’s taken on work at a community college, ekes out independent health insurance payments and barely makes the mortgage, “surviving by the skin of my teeth,” she says.

Hay’s experience resonates for an increasing contingent of professionals in higher education. They are full-time, nontenure-track faculty—credentialed professionals who work full time but are on one-year or multiyear contracts that lack the job security and professional control that characterize tenured positions.

As contingent academic workers go, full-time nontenured faculty are not as exploited as part-time/adjunct faculty or graduate employees. Nevertheless, they are part of what the AFT has identified as a growing academic staffing crisis: the decomposition of the tenure system through the replacement of tenure-track faculty with legions of perpetually precarious faculty jobs.

National Center for Education Statistics data tell the story: 65 percent of all faculty are not on the tenure track. Nineteen percent work full-time, off track. In the 16 years between 1987 and 2003, the number of full-time faculty swelled by 39 percent. Well over half of this increase—68 percent—was in nontenure-track positions. Hiring patterns repeat the trend: Since at least 1995, more than half of all new full-time faculty have been nontenure-track hires.

Where once, most faculty came to work confident in their job security, comfortable with income and benefits, and focused on teaching and research, now many come to work worried whether they’ll have a job next semester, distracted over whether their course content might offend the dean, and wondering how they might get a raise with no

performance review. They work for smaller paychecks, fewer benefits and no voice in the campus community.

For faculty like Hay, hope and help have come from forming a union. Hay is a member of the Lecturers' Employee Organization/AFT, which formed in 2002 and represents 1,800 full-time, nontenure-track faculty and part-timers at the University of Michigan. LEO's first contract addresses job security, length of appointments, salary considerations, performance reviews, health benefits and a seniority system. The contract also provides a grievance procedure, empowering faculty in the face of arbitrary acts or contract violations.

Unions like LEO can take a page from the experiences of longtime AFT affiliates like the University Council-AFT in the University of California system. UC-AFT has been the bargaining agent for lecturers and librarians on the nine campuses since 1984. In 20 years of negotiating contracts, the union has been able to secure full benefits, equivalent pay to the tenured faculty, professional development funds, job protections and a negotiated evaluation system. The latest contract also gives it new rights to participate in departmental governance.

In all, AFT affiliates represent more than 15,000 full-time, nontenure-track faculty. Last year, the AFT program and policy council appointed an advisory committee of nontenure-track faculty to look at the growing staffing crisis and draw on union experiences to address it. This month, the PPC released the committee report, *Professionals and Colleagues: Standards of Good Practice in the Employment of Full-Time Nontenure-Track Faculty*. The report examines what committee member Sandy Flood, chapter president for the Northern Illinois University (NIU) instructors chapter of the University Professionals of Illinois/AFT, calls higher education's "dirty little secret"—a two-tiered faculty system.

"The effect on quality of education worries me," says fellow committee member Dawn Saunders, United Professions of Vermont/AFT. "Anxiety and uncertainty undermine one's professional confidence and truly diminish what one has to offer."

Disposable faculty cost less

Universities preoccupied with cost are looking to save bucks on the backs of the professors, and that means "education on the cheap," as United University Professions/AFT president William Scheuerman describes it. "They're so, so hot on saving money these days," agrees Bill Godfrey, a UUP member at the State University of New York at Stony Brook who served on the AFT committee. Thirty years ago, the state provided 80 percent of the State University of New York budget; now the state's portion is 30 percent. Cost-saving measures have created an explosion in the use of part-time adjunct faculty; now they're beginning to influence the growth of full-time, nontenure-track faculty as well. And salaries for this group are moving further away from those of tenure-track faculty.

“Salary remains the number one issue for the 200 people in my chapter,” says Flood, at NIU. “I teach junior-level classes full time for half or a third of what my colleagues are earning just because I am not on the tenure track.”

At Temple, where the proportion of full-time, nontenure-track faculty has shot up from 12 percent of all full-time faculty to more than 30 percent, starting pay for nontenure-track English faculty is \$15,000 to \$18,000 less than for new tenure-track faculty, according to Jay Andrews, Temple Association of University Professionals and a member of the nontenure-track advisory committee. “While many of us have much better teaching evaluations and a stronger publishing record than our tenured colleagues, those achievements are ignored.”

Besides lower salaries, there are higher teaching loads and positions threatened by administrators anxious for flexibility in hiring—and firing.

Will I have a job next week?

At the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, job security is the biggest issue, says Bonnie Halloran, LEO president. One administrator institutionalized the lack of job security at the School of Art and Design as a way to keep his program current. He fired all full-time lecturers, then invited them to apply for part-time positions and to reapply for these same jobs every semester. He sees this part-time work force as “his conduit for fresh new artistic ideas,” says Halloran, “and then he throws them away.” This concept of disposable faculty is repeated on the full-time nontenure track: The philosophy department fired seven lecturers because, under LEO’s new agreement, if the university renewed their contracts, it would have to be for three years, and the department chair refused. In another department, one lecturer who has been full-time for the last 12 years was denied renewal on her appointment for the same reason.

At the University of Vermont, in spite of real gains negotiated by United Academics of Vermont/AFT/AAUP, lecturers and other nontenure-track faculty are still subject to job loss. Two of the negotiators of the first contract have lost their jobs. In addition, says Saunders, “Our university seems to go out of its way to keep people from getting that last class that moves them into the full-time unit, or breaks up their appointments so that even if they work full time, they are treated as part-timers. To me, that is exploitative in a very classic way.”

Even when faculty do get their contracts renewed, it’s often at the last minute. “You never know year to year if you’re going to have a job,” says Jay Andrews, at Temple. One summer the administration canceled his course, a discovery he made only because a student told him. He’d already taught one session of the class and was never paid for it.

Goodbye, research and service

Most full-time, nontenure-track faculty focus on teaching, and they typically take on heavy class loads. This leaves little time for research or community service, denying faculty the rich palette of university life by limiting their participation in campus governance, keeping them from the research that could feed their teaching and someday

lead to tenure. “The traditional sense of the scholar as researcher, teacher and involved in service is being harmed here,” says Andrews. He and many others are regularly excluded from faculty meetings and e-mail lists. When the general education curriculum was reworked, for example, nontenure-track faculty had no voice in the process despite the fact that they teach half of those gen ed courses. Similarly, they had no say in a recent dean search.

Even at UCLA, considered one of the best systems for nontenure-track faculty, these same faculty members are “basically in charge of the teaching mission,” says Bob Samuels, UC-AFT president, but locked out of the faculty senate, where curriculum decisions are made.

The very culture of a college can be exclusionary. Nontenure-track faculty were left out of a new faculty dinner with the president at NIU, and a member who served 30 years was not invited to a retirement party. At the University of Michigan, a wall of photographs includes all faculty, staff and students in the School of Art and Design—except the lecturers.

“Even with a collective bargaining agreement in place, with more rights and better salaries, the unspoken situation remains: exclusion,” says Sandy Flood, at NIU.

The good news is that many of AFT’s locals have made strides toward fairer treatment for this contingent labor force.

In Vermont, UA has established a promotion track so lecturers can apply for senior lecturer rank, which gives them a salary bump and makes them eligible for full- and half-year sabbaticals. After their second year, full-time, nontenure-track members are renewed for two- to four-year terms—a big improvement over the one-year or one-semester terms they had before the contract. All members are eligible for professional development funds.

Temple recently gained for its nontenure-track faculty retirement matching contributions, tuition remission, paid study leave after 10 years of continuous service, full and equal domestic partner benefits, elimination of the seven-year limit on employment, and a sliding scale for health and dental benefits.

At UC, in addition to the benefits cited above, UC-AFT members have continuing appointments after the sixth year and a major review with no re-application necessary. And “churning”—the practice of releasing faculty just before their six-year review—is prohibited. Bob Samuels admits it’s one of the best contracts in the country, but it is far from perfect. Nontenure-track faculty salaries come from “temporary funds” frequently threatened by state budget crises. Evaluations depend solely on students, and grade inflation reflects faculty worried about the impact students may have on their careers.

Despite her experience at Michigan, Beth Hay remains optimistic. Because of the contract, the union was able to seek a review that moved her into a Lecturer II category. This gave her a “presumption of renewal” and a level of security she and others did not have before. “Where there had been no recourse, there’s now an organization to turn to,” she says.