

Contingent Faculty Unite: Report from COCAL VI

By Joe Berry

Over 200 people, contingent faculty activists and their allies, assembled August 6-8 at Roosevelt University and Columbia College for the sixth Conference on Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL VI). For the first time, the conference included a significant delegation from Mexico as well as participants from throughout Canada, including Quebec, and all over the United States.

Besides the heavier international participation, one of the contrasts between COCAL VI and earlier conferences was the much more extensive focus on strategy. This included a series of three workshops on local, national/international and whole-society vision strategic strategies, as well as plenary panels where national faculty union leaders and leaders of other organizations of contingent workers were asked to put forward their strategic perspectives.

Another addition to previous conferences were a series of pre-and-post conference activities that included a mural tour, a Haymarket Labor History tour and a trip to the Second City comedy club.

It should be noted that COCAL VI was only possible because it built upon the achievements of the previous COCALs, back to 1996, in Washington, NYC, Boston, San Jose, and Montreal. It was their efforts that drew together a truly binational movement network that could then engage in the discussion and activities that were COCAL VI.

For many people, the highlight of the first day was the march through downtown Chicago where a “Progressive Report Card” was presented to five of the local institutions that employ large numbers of contingent faculty. With final grades ranging from C+ to F, the Report Cards made clear that while unionization clearly improves the situation, general standards remain low and many faculty are still working in truly intolerable situations.

The march dramatized for many visitors how important it is to have a large enough percentage of contingent faculty organized in order to really push up area standards to something resembling what exists in highly organized areas such as California. The march also received press coverage from the major commercial media, both the Chicago Tribune and the local ABC television station.

The conference itself reflected a high level of sophistication in many discussions. One example of that was a pre-conference author’s panel where most of the presenters and the books they were representing were themselves contingent faculty rather than outsider researchers.

In addition to the three strategy workshops there were also three workshops on campus organizing and three on contract bargaining, all of which attracted large attendance. Additional workshops focused on such issues as contingent advocacy in professional associations, the experience of graduate employee unions, discrimination on the job and in the movement, recent job actions, and legislative and political initiatives.

Particularly provocative for those who attended was a workshop on teaching for equity: promoting justice for contingent workers in the classroom, where participants discussed the techniques for effectively “coming out of the closet” as a contingent to one’s students, risks involved, and the value of collective support in doing so.

Three social events symbolized how far the movement has come in the past eight years since the first Congress of Adjunct, Part-time, Graduate Teaching Assistants, and Non-tenure Track Faculty in Washington in 1996. One indicator was a reception held after the demonstration at a local club that was sponsored jointly by the often warring Illinois Federation of Teachers and the Illinois Education Association, as perhaps their first public jointly-sponsored membership event. The Illinois AFL-CIO also provided financial support for this reception. This sort of joint endorsement of the independent contingent faculty movement would have been unthinkable just a few years ago, especially in Illinois.

The following day, at a reception at Roosevelt, awards were given out in the memory of Dave Wakefield and Jim Prickett, two movement activists from the California Community Colleges who died prematurely. The awards, given to Rodger Scott of San Francisco and Margaret Quan of Contra Costa Community College District honored two recent retirees for their lifelong contributions to the cause of contingent faculty, particularly in the California Community Colleges where organized struggle has been

going on since the mid-1970s. These awards represented the first time that COCAL has consciously recognized its own history and begun the process of honoring its own ancestors.

The third social event was also a marker. At the conference dinner, Saturday night, participants heard from Stewart Acuff, Organizing Director of the AFL-CIO, who was pleased to come and speak about the difficulties and promises of organizing generally, to a group that he knew was actively involved in just that back home. He was quite well received as was the AFL-CIO's workers rights teach-in program that is attempting to build support for the right to organize through teach-ins on college campuses.

Finally, the conference held a closing plenary at which it heard some strategic reports and made plans for future activities, such as the continuing success of Campus Equity Week. This session, though short, represented the first time in the history of the movement that a general discussion of what can and should be done was conducted that included active participation from the United States, both English and French Canada, and Mexico. No one that heard it failed to recognize what a step forward this represented for the movement as a whole.

A number of resolutions were considered and passed. After that session, though it was the Sunday of a three day conference, dozens of people stayed to caucus first by national union organization, then by region, to make plans how to implement many of the ideas that had been discussed in plenaries and workshops. An advisory committee of over twenty then met to debrief and evaluate the conference and officially encourage our colleagues in Vancouver and the Pacific Northwest generally to follow through on their tentative initiative to hold COCAL VII there in 2006.

Full conference information, pictures, and a revised program reflecting the actual conference as it transpired are available on the conference web site, www.chicagococal.org