

Reclaiming the Ivory Tower

Roosevelt University Adjunct Joe Berry Writes a Guide for a Contingent World

By **John K. Wilson**

Of all the dramatic changes in higher education in the past three decades, perhaps none is as important as the growing dependence on contingent faculty. In the next few years, the number of contingent faculty in higher education will exceed all of the tenured and tenure-track faculty. So it is a fitting time for Chicagoan Joe Berry's new book, *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower: Organizing Adjuncts to Change Higher Education* (Monthly Review Press).

The subtitle is significant: organizing adjuncts is essential to changing higher education. Unless we confront the problems caused by a faculty dominated by temps, the major problems facing us (corporatization of campuses, loss of shared governance, attacks on academic freedom, declining economic value of faculty work) will only be exacerbated. As Berry notes, "A generation or more ago, most college faculty were salaried, but pretty independent professionals, with the protection of tenure after a few years." That reality has dramatically changed, but all too often academics (including the AAUP) try to pretend that nothing is different.

Berry's short but useful book provides a quick analysis of the problem posed by exploited contingent faculty. A substantial part of the book is devoted to practical advice on how to go through the steps of organizing adjuncts. Berry is an organizer above all else.

As a long-term adjunct himself, Berry understands that contingent faculty are not the problem; they are an essential component of higher education. The problem is that adjuncts are so vulnerable to exploitation, and treated as second-class (or third-class) citizens in academe. Berry's book is full of anecdotes, beginning with the adjunct who had to win a MacArthur "Genius" award before getting a permanent position.

Berry also understands the barriers to organizing. He recounts the adjunct who lose their jobs for daring to start a union. He reports the many difficulties of bringing together adjuncts.

Berry has a bigger vision than simply organizing individual campuses. He promotes the intriguing idea of "regional" union organizing, such as bringing all the colleges in the Chicago area under unions that could set minimal standards for all faculty. It is unfortunate, but accurate, that Berry doubts if the AAUP could ever undertake such a project, since it lacks organizational strength and has no bargaining units in the Chicago area.

The adjunct, Berry argues, is a bridge between different worlds, the worlds of working-class students and the tenured professoriate. He believes students are sympathetic to the plight of adjunct faculty if they are made aware of the circumstances under which they work and how it negatively affects the quality of their education: "It does not seem as strange to many students to support a struggle of campus workers as it did ten or fifteen years ago."

He also sees the adjunct as a bridge between the often elitist professors and the service and clerical workers on campus. Berry is more skeptical, though, about graduate assistants: "Many of them resist recognizing the likelihood of their future as contingents." However, the increasingly difficult job market is beginning to make clear a terrible reality identified by Berry: "College teaching is one of the few places where people sometimes take a pay cut upon completing their training."

Berry sees tenure and organizing as the solutions for the adjunct crisis in academia, to make sure that institutions cannot exploit their faculty and must treat everyone fairly.