

Changing Workplaces Review Presentation

Windsor, July 7th 2015

Introduction:

Good morning, my name is Frances Cachon; I am a Professor at the University of Windsor and Chair of Windsor University Faculty Association's Sessional Committee—sessional meaning professors who work on a per-course basis.

Windsor University Faculty Association (WUFA) represents faculty, librarians, sessional members, and ancillary academic staff at the University of Windsor. I am proud to be an active member in an association that represents tenured/tenure stream faculty and per-course-contact academic staff in the same bargaining unit. We are grateful for WUFA's on-going support and progressive leadership.

I have travelled from Ontario's most Southern inhabited island, Pelee Island, to be here today. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to the changing nature of work in Ontario and the need for revisions in our employment and labour law to better protect and support academic workers.

Context: How has work changed in our sector?

As a general rule people do not think of professors as vulnerable and precarious workers. In fact, Professor ranks among the top twenty most prestigious occupations. This ranking does not however account for the dramatic restructuring of Ontario's universities over the past two decades, specifically the casualization of academic labour.

Having worked as a contract academic faculty member since 2003, first at the University of Western Ontario and now at the University of Windsor, I am intimately familiar with the shift to precarious work within the academy. I know all too well the financial, psychological, emotional, and personal/relational consequences of working on a course per course basis. It is a life of constant insecurity, not knowing what course(s) or even *if* I will be teaching and by extension my income from semester to semester. These conditions make life extremely challenging for contract faculty, for example, it is difficult to secure and maintain a mortgage.

Despite the diversity of names given to contract academic faculty at various post-secondary institutions (i.e. limited term, sessional, part-time, adjunct, or contingent), our working conditions are uniformly precarious—we are paid a disproportionately small stipend for teaching a course, we have little to no job security, and our scholarly (i.e. teaching and research) contributions are often unsupported and/or unrecognized. Plus, our students and the wider public are generally unaware of the inherent challenges of our employment.

Although firm numbers are difficult to determine due to a lack of accessible data—it is clear that contingent, insecure employment is increasingly the new norm within the academy. For example, the Ontario Confederation of University of Faculty Associations (OCUFA) estimates that the number of courses taught by part-time contract faculty at Ontario universities has nearly doubled – increasing by 97 per cent between 2000-01 and 2013-14.

The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) estimates that one out of every three-university teachers across Canada is working on a limited term, part-time, or per course contract. This means that Canadian universities are increasingly reliant on precarious professors to teach between 30 to 50 per cent (and possibly more) of undergraduates—a *situation that is ethically and structurally untenable*.

Sessional, then, is a huge misnomer. Casualized academic labour is not being used to fill a temporary labour gap; it is now a structural labour reality. I regularly teach a full-course load (= 6 courses per academic year). My job is the most taxing part-time gig I have ever had the pleasure of holding. Nevertheless, I am deeply passionate about what I do. I have earned a doctoral degree, I currently hold a Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grant, and I have been recognized for both teaching and research excellence—none of which insulates me from the anxiety and stress associated with insecure and precarious academic employment.

Although we may not associate professors with precarious employment, we do associate education with improved employment prospects and social mobility. The narrative of meritocracy is certainly packaged and marketed by universities in their recruitment efforts to students and their families. The absurdity then, of highly educated, highly trained individuals, working with little to no job security, for low pay, with little institutional support and recognition ought to give us pause.

Maintaining an active research portfolio is also extremely difficult for contract academic faculty, given the heavy teaching load required to secure a decent income. This is especially problematic given that career advancement is predicated on academic publishing—work that is ‘voluntary’ and/or unremunerated for contract faculty. For me this is further complicated by the fact that I am a mother of two young children, with little ‘free time’ to undertake voluntary research activities.

I am here today because I am hopeful that we may begin to address the new realities of the academic workplace. In fact, I became an advocate regarding the casualization of academic labour after witnessing the unconscionable treatment of a contract academic colleague who was employed at the University of Windsor for over twenty-five years. She was a dedicated employee—she taught first and second year large enrolment classes—literally thousands of students. Despite

years of service, when she was diagnosed with breast cancer she lacked financial security and had limited access to health benefits and/or a sick leave. Consequently, she had to teach while receiving chemotherapy and undergoing a double mastectomy—cancelling only ONE class! When her program was discontinued her associated teaching contracts simply ended. No formal termination was required, no performance review, and no severance entitlement. After over twenty-five years of employment as a university professor she had little to no pension to speak of, and there was *zero* acknowledgment or recognition of her contributions to the university. Sadly, at one point she even had to live in a women's shelter when her marriage dissolved. Her story is tragic. *My colleague deserved better!* She embodies the invisible academic—giving the best of her working years to the university, underpaid, undervalued, and then ultimately disposed of and forgotten.

Essentially—this is the reality of contract academic labour—we are all painfully aware that our labour is often invisible and essentially disposable. Ontario's post-secondary institutions must uphold higher and more ethical employment standards.

Many contract academics simply give up—walking away from the academy, exhausted by the exploitive conditions of their employment. Not only is precarious academic work a huge waste of human resources it is also a terribly detrimental to the quality of education. How can we stress the importance of education if this is how we treat our educators? How can Ontario's universities continue to stress the value teaching and their undergraduate students—when these institutions are relying on contract professors to meet the teaching needs of their institutions?

I hope the law will be updated to address the structural inequalities in the academic workplace. I hope academic workers will be given adequate protections making it difficult for universities to rely on precarious contract academic labour.

Recommendations

1st: Equal treatment for contract faculty: the law should ensure that part-time, contract workers receive the same treatment as their full-time colleagues.

For example, contract work should be defined and compensated as a percentage of full-time work. In our sector, contract faculty are too often paid less than their full-time colleagues for performing work of equal value. We need minimum standards that require equal pay for work of equal value regardless of a worker's classification. This could help contract faculty, especially those working a per-course basis, obtain fair compensation.

Minimum standards that require equal access to benefit programs regardless of a worker's classification would also help contract faculty obtain access to benefits.

We also need to provide part-time workers access to a full careers and full participation within the academy. For example, long-serving contract faculty (i.e. five years of service) should be provided with better job security (i.e. continuous appointments) and support to do research/publishing.

2nd: The use of discontinuous contracts to prevent the achievement of workplace rights should be eliminated.

For example, contract faculty who have five years of service with a university should be entitled to severance pay under the law. However, service on multiple contracts will often not count as continuous employment, preventing access to proper severance pay. This needs to be amended.

3rd: Scheduling should be fair and balance the needs of employers and employees.

Please explore ways that the law can ensure employers provide reasonable notice of work and hours. We support the updating of employment standards to require a *minimum* of two-three weeks notice. Late contracts are an endemic issue—resulting in unreasonable workloads and excessively long workdays. For example, contract faculty are routinely notified that they will be teaching a course right before the beginning of term. As a result we have a very limited window of time to prepare a syllabus, organize readings, and develop lectures. These conditions of are extremely stressful and make our uncertain working lives even more difficult and stressful. Frankly, I have received greater support to fulfill my employment obligations as a manager of a bakery or working at Burger King—where I was NOT responsible for thousands of students' grades.

IN CONCLUSION,

The casualization of academic labour is not a temporary concern; it is a new structural reality. People will say to me, “if it is so horrible, why don’t you leave? You could get a far better job. You have lots of skills and you have a great work ethic” But, it is not that simple—academics commit years of their lives to obtaining their credentials—I love what I do, I love my students, I love teaching, I love my discipline, and my research. I am deeply passionate about post-secondary education, I consider teaching a privilege and a tremendous opportunity. We must begin to recognize and support contract faculty as professionals who make important contributions to the quality of post-secondary education.

Ontario’s universities are increasingly dependent upon contract faculty to service their undergraduate teaching mandates. We are looking to the government for leadership to ensure that the law responds to the restructuring of academic labour.

THANK YOU.