In early April the Adjunct Faculty Association sponsored a major academic conference at the United Steelworkers international headquarters. Countering Contingency: Teaching, Scholarship, and Creativity in the Age of the Adjunct featured papers by local adjunct faculty, and by scholars and graduate students from around the country. The conference drew a hundred participants for three days of lively discussion, debate, networking, and planning.

Working since summer 2012, Countering Contingency’s planning committee was comprised of adjunct faculty from a number of Pittsburgh colleges and universities. In their welcome statement, the committee explained the goal of the conference: “The current academic labor system’s trajectory...offers a horizon of loss—loss of pay, courses, joy in teaching, course selection... This conference aspires to counter the nihilism of non-tenure-track faculty exploitation with biophily, a love of life... We see this conference as an opportunity to deepen our understanding of this moment in higher education and, together, to create a new path forward.”

Countering Contingency’s participants answered this call enthusiastically and wholeheartedly. United Steelworkers International President Leo W. Gerard opened the event citing shocking facts about adjunct working conditions and pledging the USW’s support for our struggle to win dignity and security.

Presentations over the following days often focused on the many problems adjunct faculty face at work and between jobs, on both material and psychological levels. Stephen W. Mason of Washington & Jefferson College told a story demonstrating how “the problem is attitudinal. Adjuncts aren’t people but things, inferior beings, externalities, scapegoats—something to be ignored, feared, or despised.” West Chester University’s Margaret Betz analyzed the particular challenges faced by “contingent mothers,” and Slippery Rock’s Salita Seibert considered the effects of the “language of contingency.”

Several presenters also focused on the ideologies that allow the exploitation of adjunct faculty to continue and grow. Ian Butcher of Duquesne University critiqued student evaluations, while Point Park’s Matthew Ussia discussed how we can overcome the “myth of the empowered individual.” Jeffrey J. Williams, professor at Carnegie Mellon, analogized the tiering of the higher education workforce to the “strategy of segmentation” seen in other deprofessionalizing occupations like medicine, and Debra Leigh Scott and Chris...
LaBree’s film ‘Junct’ brought in adjunct voices from across the country.

Dominating the conversation at Countering Contingency, however, was the need to find solutions, and most presentations looked squarely into the future. Robin J. Sowards, Joshua Zelesnick, and Jeff Cech talked about strategies for organizing adjunct faculty unions that they’ve developed in their work with the AFA-USW at Duquesne. Joe Berry, author of Reclaiming the Ivory Tower, focused on the importance of strong relationships, hope, and collective action in countering the fear and fatalism that obstruct adjunct organizing efforts. Demonstrating solidarity between unions in the adjunct struggle, David Rodich, Executive Director of the Service Employees International Union Local 500, discussed SEIU’s metropolitan organizing strategy, which is currently underway in Washington, D.C., and Boston.

Presenters also described ways to push for improvements outside of conventional NLRB elections. Olympic College’s Jack Longmate outlined the Program for Change implemented through collective bargaining at Vancouver Community College, arguing that unions and advocacy groups should all speak with one voice in favor of the Program’s emphasis on job security. John Baranski of Fort Lewis College explained the value of solidarity unionism in accomplishing important changes on the local level. And past Modern Language Association President Michael Bérubé described how professional organizations like MLA and AAUP can be useful allies in the fight for adjunct rights.

On a truly innovative panel, University of Pittsburgh lecturers Robin Clarke, Marylou Gramm, and Tamar Bernfeld, along with their students, examined ways to think of precarity as a pedagogical tool. Minting Yu and Shiwei Li, two of Gramm’s international students, gave moving papers narrating how adjunct faculty can be more attuned to the “power of feeling foreign” than regular faculty. And Clarke’s teaching assistant Andrew J. Zarnich described the important lesson his class learned when Clarke taught them about adjunct faculty pay and hiring practices.

A set of papers from the conference, as well as a full list of presentation titles, will be available at the AFA’s website at www.adjunctfacultyassoc.org.

Pittsburgh Adjunct Discussion Group

The Pittsburgh Adjunct Discussion Group brings together adjunct faculty, graduate students, and community members for monthly conversations about issues relevant to part-time and contingent teacher-scholars in the Pittsburgh region.

The PADG’s mission is twofold:

1. To build connections between people and across departments, disciplines, and campuses. PADG meetings provide welcoming, safe, and lively spaces in which to hold honest conversations about the everyday concerns of adjunct faculty, as well as to trade stories, make friends, and create networks of mutual support.

2. To educate ourselves about a range of topics that affect adjunct faculty. The PADG draws on the diverse experience of its participants and local experts to increase our collective knowledge of contingent survival strategies, available resources, and pedagogical techniques.

For more info, contact pghadjunctdiscussion@gmail.com or see www.pittsburghadjunctdiscussiongroup.com. The PADG is not affiliated with the AFA-USW.
AFA-USW Pushes IRS to Protect Adjunct Faculty

The AFA-USW entered the national debate about adjunct working hours and the Affordable Care Act (ACA) this spring. In March, we hosted a public meeting at the Carnegie Library in Squirrel Hill to bring together faculty, students, and community members to discuss the impact the ACA could have on Pittsburgh’s adjunct faculty.

The ACA, also known as “Obamacare,” stipulates that all employers with 50 or more full-time employees must offer “affordable” health insurance to them or the employer may have to pay a penalty (if those full-time employees receive low enough pay to qualify for federal premium tax credits for exchange-based insurance). The ACA defines “full time” as 30 hours per week or more, but adjunct teaching work is measured by the course, not by the hour.

As a result, the IRS has urged employers to use a reasonable method for crediting hours of service for adjunct faculty and called for comments on what guidelines it should adopt. The AFA-USW submitted detailed comments (available online) arguing that the IRS’s rules must include all of the work needed to teach a course, including classroom time, lesson planning, course design, course administration, content research, assessment, office hours, and communication with students outside of office hours.

The IRS also solicited oral testimony at a hearing in April, and ours was presented by Roy Houseman, the USW’s legislative representative in Washington, D.C. Our oral testimony emphasized that the purpose of the ACA is to reduce the number of uninsured people and that the IRS should therefore formulate specific, enforceable guidelines to prevent employers from cutting employees’ hours and thereby increasing the number of uninsured employees. We also noted that although administrators claim that providing health care would be too expensive, their projected budgets always assume both needlessly expensive coverage and no reallocation of funds that are currently spent on non-academic university activities.

The AFA-USW coordinated our oral testimony with other adjunct faculty advocacy groups, including the New Faculty Majority, SEIU’s Local 500, AFT, and NEA. Consequently, we were able to form a united front at the hearing, which gave our collective message much more weight. We’re particularly grateful to the colleagues and community members who attended our March meeting and for their invaluable feedback on our proposal and creative suggestions for framing the issues.

The Lesson of Georgetown

Duquesne’s administration remains unwilling to recognize our democratically-elected union, and the unreasonableness of that position was brought home to us forcefully when we heard about the organizing efforts of our brother and sister adjuncts at Georgetown University, one of the best Catholic research universities in the world. SEIU Local 500’s organizing campaign met with an immediate response from Georgetown’s administration, namely a letter to all faculty stating that Georgetown’s administration “respects employees’ rights to freely associate and organize, which includes voting for or against union representation without intimidation, unjust pressure, undue delay or hindrance.”

The Georgetown administration’s position is based on their “Just Employment Policy” (online at Georgetown’s Office of Public Affairs). It includes, among other things, (1) a commitment to paying a “just wage” that “Takes into account the costs of housing, health care, child care, transportation, taxes, food[,] and other basic necessities,” (2) a commitment to the view “that all workers have a right to freely associate and organize (and [to] other protections of the NLRA),” and (3) a commitment to ensuring that both Georgetown and all of its subcontractors “provide full time jobs when possible and part time or temporary work only when necessary.” We applaud the Georgetown administration’s forthright commitment to Catholic values and its recognition that treating all of its employees with dignity and respect not only doesn’t conflict with its Catholic character but is, in fact, demanded by that Catholic character. Other Catholic colleges and universities should follow Georgetown’s lead.

The adjunct faculty at Georgetown just held their NLRB election, and their ballots were counted on May 3. They won by a commanding margin of three-to-one. In Washington as in Pittsburgh, adjuncts are fighting for better working conditions and winning.

Adjunct Equity Social Media Badge Contest

The AFA-USW invites submission for a contest to design an Adjunct Equity social media badge with the goal of providing our allies an easy way to express solidarity on Facebook, Google+, and the like. The winning design should be graphically interesting, easily recognizable, and point to the goals of our campaign: better pay, healthcare, and job security. (A good example of a successful badge is the equal sign for marriage equality.) Send your sassy and finished design as a PDF, PNG, JPG, or TIFF attachment to dafa.voc@gmail.com by July 15.
O ur members’ pay and working conditions continue to improve as a result of our organizing and advocacy. When we began organizing in 2011, most part-time faculty in the McAnulty College were paid only $2,500 per course and had seen no raise for years (despite regular raises for administrators and full-time faculty). Since then, the pressure we’ve applied has resulted in a series of raises. Most recently, the administration agreed to raise the minimum pay per course to $3,500 for all Duquesne part-time faculty beginning fall 2013, a 40% improvement over our original $2,500 and a major step towards reasonable compensation levels. (To give you a sense of what’s “reasonable”: the Modern Language Association recommends a minimum of $7,090 per course for 2013-14, and part-time faculty in the University of California system, for example, are paid around $10,000 per course under the contract negotiated by their union.)

We have also long been arguing that part-time faculty should have access to support for producing original research, especially considering that the “Research” page on the University’s website claims that it supports all faculty research: “each faculty member is expected to be a great teacher as well as an outstanding scholar.” So we are delighted that the Center for the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, with the support of the Provost’s Office and the Division of Mission and Identity, will offer research grants for part-time faculty during AY2013-14. More comprehensive support is necessary to effectively cultivate research, but we applaud this bold step in the right direction.

Although the administration remains unwilling to recognize our union, we feel that its other recent decisions are positive signs. For example, we were pleased at the decision to offer the provost position to Dr. Timothy Austin, whom our representatives agreed was the best of the three candidates, and it’s a promising sign that the administration was responsive to input from the faculty on this hiring decision. Since we obtained permission to send a representative to the Faculty Senate assemblies, the concerns of part-time faculty have increasingly been part of the Faculty Senate’s conversations and its ongoing efforts to improve shared governance at Duquesne. The Faculty Senate, with information we provided, has also asked CIT to add all part-time faculty in the College to the Faculty Senate’s Blackboard page, which includes a wide array of important governance information, and we aim to expand that access to all part-time faculty in the University as soon as possible.

Correspondingly, we have been hard at work creating formal structures for part-time faculty participation in governance at the department level. Elected union stewards now represent their department’s part-time faculty, or will be doing so soon, in English, History, Modern Languages, and Philosophy, and we aim to extend this structure to the remaining departments in the College this fall.

All of this shows how much we can accomplish even in the absence of legal certification from the NLRB or recognition from the administration (which does not require NLRB certification). And we remain willing at any time to work with the administration to craft a contract that benefits everyone and protects the University’s mission, a goal to which everyone in the University community is surely committed.

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ow Is the Time to Get Involved!

Metro Organizing Meeting May 22 at USW Headquarters

All Pittsburgh adjunct faculty and supporters are invited to the first meeting of the AFA-USW’s Pittsburgh-wide organizing committee. This Metro Volunteer Organizing Committee (MVOC) will coordinate the Local campaigns at all the colleges and universities in the area, giving us an opportunity to share our expertise and assist one another in our organizing work. If you don’t feel comfortable openly organizing on your campus, you can help someone else organize theirs and then they’ll return the favor! The MVOC meeting will be held on Wednesday, May 22, at 6:30 p.m. on the first floor of the United Steelworkers international Headquarters at 60 Boulevard of the Allies (street parking is free after 6:00 p.m. downtown). If you are unable to make the MVOC meeting, feel free to email dafa.voc@gmail.com, and we’ll put you in the loop for future meetings. Our proposed plan is to hold MVOC meetings monthly and LVOC (Local) meetings monthly, two weeks apart from one another.

The First Annual AFA-USW Pittsburgh Adjunct Picnic

You and your fellow Pittsburgh-area adjunct faculty, students, community members, children, partners, and dogs are cordially invited to attend the first annual AFA-USW picnic on June 1 at Mellon Park. Meet and mingle over burgers, hot dogs, veggie burgers, and a potluck of dishes to welcome summer, celebrate the end of spring semester, and build energy for our work in the coming academic year. Contribute a dish if you like, and bring any friends who want to get involved with any of the adjunct organizing efforts underway in our city (AFA-USW affiliated or not).

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