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Whither the PTU?

By Vincent Tirelli

The Part-Time Instructional and Research Staff Union (PTU) was a group of CUNY adjunct lecturers who organized in 1983 to try to improve the working conditions for CUNY adjuncts. I joined the PTU in 1986 and was an active member for two years. The PTU has not been active since 1988,

Union encouraged adjuncts to sign union authorization cards in an attempt to decertify the PSC as the collective bargaining agent for part-timers. I want to relate some of the PTU's story because the current New York fiscal crisis presents us with a bleak future regarding educational funding, and

Commentary

but my experience has taught me some valuable lessons.

Some folks think that adjunct lecturer jobs are merely another way of giving graduate students money while they labor through their "apprenticeship" in order to learn their craft. But the adjunct system does not so much bring to mind the image of the guild system as it does modern forms of labor such as the exploited factory worker or the migrant farm worker. In these days of shrinking budgets, administrative needs often take precedence over education needs. This means larger classes, fewer resources, and a preference by "management" for a labor pool that can be easily shifted around as dictated by budgetary needs. In this process the adjuncts become the interchangeable parts.

During the New York State fiscal crisis of the 1970s, CUNY responded to budgetary problems by doing what so many other colleges nationwide have done—they hired vast numbers of part-time faculty, in order to save millions of dollars in salaries and benefits annually. What kind of response will City University make this time, and what will it mean for adjuncts? More importantly, for the moment, what can we expect from the Professional Staff Congress (PSC)—the union that nominally represents all CUNY faculty and staff—as our bargaining agent?

The number of adjuncts employed by CUNY has risen dramatically; they now make up over forty percent of the teaching staff. Who "represents" these part-time workers? The PSC has a legal obligation to negotiate in good faith for its bargaining unit. Nevertheless, there has developed a two-tier faculty system in which almost half of the bargaining unit, i.e. part-timers, are consistently excluded from any significant representation.

In 1983 and again in 1986, representatives of the Part-Time Instructional and Research Staff

I do not have much faith that the Professional Staff Congress is going to protect our interests.

The PTU has had two active periods which correspond to the two "open-window" periods in which groups may challenge the incumbent union (the PSC) to a certification election. This election would determine which group has the right to represent the bargaining unit, i.e. the CUNY staff. It is only during the legally designated challenge period that the PTU (or any group) may lawfully engage on campus in activities such as campaigning—encouraging adjuncts to sign union authorization cards—in order to decertify the incumbent union. The PTU's claim was that part-timers constitute a separate community of interests, and it was this specific group within the bargaining unit that we sought to represent, because we were convinced that the PSC would do nothing to significantly improve working conditions for adjuncts.

Reasons to be Skeptical

I welcome any efforts that the PSC makes on behalf of adjuncts. But I am skeptical, and with good reason. Early in the 1982-1983 academic year, PTU members Jeff Gerson (Political Science) and Jonathan Lang (Philosophy) had asked PSC Executive Director Arnold Cantor and President Irwin Polishook for permission to establish a separate chapter for adjuncts within the PSC, as well as

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Victim of Protest?

Yolanda Alvarez is an undergraduate student and single mother who attends Hunter College. One of the protestors involved in the on-going strike at Hunter College, Yolanda was interviewed by Rolanda Watts of Channel 7 News on May 4th and was on the air for 5 minutes.

Yolanda had taken out a guaranteed student loan from New York State a few years ago. On April 23rd, she was told that she will not be eligible for financial aid next year, and that the State will not pay for her aid this semester.

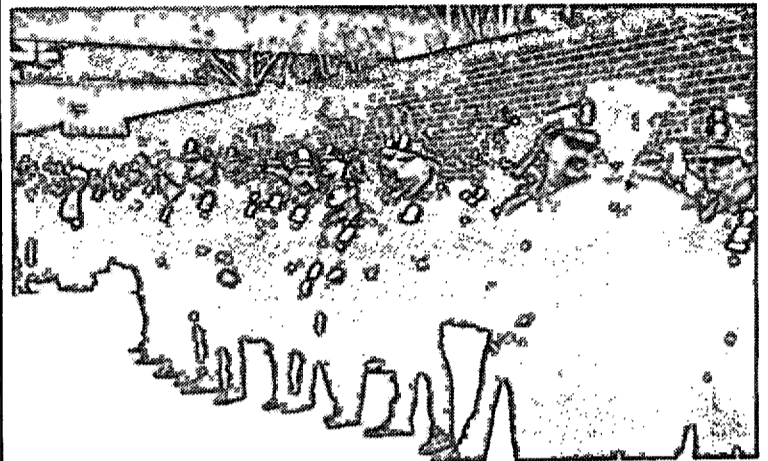
When Yolanda called Albany to protest the State's action, she was told by a Ms. Deeds that her loan had been placed in default, and that the only way she could continue receiving financial aid was to begin repaying her loan immediately, at the rate of \$100 per month. Yolanda told Ms. Deeds that even though she would like to pay the State the amount requested, she could only afford \$30 a month. "I told the woman that I was on disability, and that after paying my medical bills I could only pay that amount." Mrs. Deeds told Yolanda that \$30 payments were unacceptable. "You people should get jobs and not go to school," she told Yolanda. When Yolanda protested this decision, saying that they had placed her loan in default without informing her, Ms. Deeds replied that the only way that she could get the loan default removed is to be "in a hospital bed on a respirator."

Yolanda felt that it was a coincidence that she found out about the default only in April, when the student protest began at Hunter. "I want to go to school, but they won't let me. They will only let me go to school once I pay the \$3,000 loan. What I can't understand is that there are \$40 billion in unpaid loans. They don't get bothered and I do. It's just harassment."

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CUNY Students Strike Police Brutality Alleged

By Andrew Long & Christine Hutchins



New York's Finest at John Jay College of Criminal Justice

Faced with the possibility of a \$23 million cut to the CUNY budget, student protests have once again erupted in at City University. CUNY campuses have been awash with rallies and demonstrations for the past three weeks.

May 1st — Students rallied at the World Trade Center to protest the proposed cuts. A total of eight students were arrested. According to the May 7th issue of *The Meridian*, the student newspaper of Lehman College, "the police where visibly brutal in their arrests."

May 2nd — Students at Hunter College blocked traffic on Lexington Avenue for approximately three hours. The next day, rallies at the Hunter College campus began at noon. Students disrupted a telecast of the Daily News Golden Gloves boxing match held on campus in an attempt to gain publicity, and began a five-day occupation of the administration building. Paul LeClerc, president of Hunter College, issued a statement on May 4th stating, "I do not condone or accept the student occupation of Hunter College East," and asked that students "work together with us in an appropriate and constructive fashion to make our unified voices heard in Albany and in the public arena." By May 7th the Hunter College East was open to the public, although protesters were allowed to remain camped outside LeClerc's office.

May 7th — Students at LaGuardia Community College chained the doors to the campus administration building and held it until the next day, when police and campus security guards broke the chains and removed the students.

May 8th — Students at City College broke through a line of security guards in front of their administration building and occupied it until the following day.

May 9th — Full-scale discussions between students and administration officials at Hunter College began. Meanwhile, student unrest continued at Lehman College, where students occupied the library, and at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, where a protest rally was staged in front of the North Building.

Police Brutality Alleged

May 10th — The rally at John Jay College of Criminal Justice erupted into violence when police moved in to make arrests and were met with a volley of bottles. During the ensuing confrontation, ten students were arrested and four students and two policemen required medical attention. Students rallied at North Hall throughout they day and at 4:30 P.M. attempted to meet with President Gerald Lynch. He refused to meet with the students. In response, the students formed a human chain around the 10th Avenue building. The private security guards who were posted at each doorway in

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Around & About The Center

Whither the PTU?

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a separate rider on the contract, thus giving adjuncts a role in contract negotiations. The requests were denied, according to Lang, on the grounds that if such requests were granted, then every group which constitutes a different faculty level would want a separate chapter, e.g. a chapter for associate professors, one for assistant professors, etc. Gerson and Lang argued that part-timers constitute a unique community of interests. They began to pursue the idea of a separate, break-away union. (Gerson and Lang both received their Ph.Ds in Spring 1990, proving that activists do graduate.)

In the Spring of 1983, Paul Wagner, an adjunct, decided to run for PSC Vice President for Part-Time Members of the Instructional Staff. He was part of a group called the Association of Part-Time Faculty (APTF), which merged with the PTU in 1986. APTF wanted to work within the PSC and try to improve adjunct conditions. Wagner was able to get about two hundred adjuncts to sign up for the PSC as dues-paying, voting members. The PSC Executive Council managed to have the rules changed shortly before the election. Under the new election rules, instead of only part-timers voting for the Vice President for Part-Time Members, as the PSC Constitution had previously allowed, the amended PSC Constitution allows "the entire membership" to vote for this office. According to Gerson, the PSC portrayed this as a "democratizing" measure, since in addition to the above changes the new rules also allowed part-time members to vote for the general officers who represent senior and community colleges, a right previously denied to adjuncts. In other words, now adjuncts could vote for the executive leadership, of whom many run unopposed anyway; and everybody, both full-timers and part-timers, may vote for the adjuncts' representative. Thus Paul Wagner was defeated by the votes of full-timers; and Susan Praeger, a member of the winning slate, won the election for Vice President for Part-Time Members and has not been seriously challenged in an election since that time.

The manipulations of the election procedure by the PSC convinced the PTU that the PSC leadership is not interested in helping adjuncts, but only with helping the University use adjuncts to balance the budget. In my brief interactions with Arnold Cantor and Susan Praeger (at a February, 1987 forum on adjuncts sponsored by DSA-CUNY), the impression that I came away with was that they just do not understand the gravity of the adjunct

dilemma. Their expressed beliefs indicated that they saw the PTU as a bunch of upstarts looking for trouble. Are we upstarts and troublemakers to want to be fairly represented by our union?

The 1986 Campaign For Decertification

During the 1986 attempt by the PTU to decertify the PSC, I was only partially optimistic that we would get enough adjuncts to sign union authorization cards in the time allotted. I say "partially" because although there was an abundance of support for the PTU among adjuncts, the obstacles to a certification election were great. We could not get any help from any other union because the PSC is part of the American Federation of Teachers and of the AFL-CIO. There is a no-raid pact among member unions which prevents any of them from helping an "outside" group in a challenge against a member union. Nevertheless, with a small staff of volunteers and in a short period of time we signed up well over a thousand members. Though we fell short of the required number needed to challenge the PSC to a certification election, the fact that we came close to it under such adverse circumstances shows the depth of the dissatisfaction that adjuncts have for the PSC.

We did not have an abundance of resources to even find, much less sign up the legally necessary percentage of adjuncts (at least 1/3 of @ 5,000) to challenge the PSC to a certification election. It was an enormous task to locate, within the three-month challenge period, adjuncts who frequently change the location of their workplace, not to mention their home addresses. In any case, even without achieving our goal of decertification of the PSC, the process of our campaign brought with it some small victories by politicizing the issue of union representation for adjuncts. Considering the obstacles placed before us, we did amazingly well.

CUNY Neutrality?

The PTU argued that the University administration did not act with neutrality, even though required by State law to remain neutral during a union organizing campaign. A revealing moment occurred during a preliminary conference, held March 11, 1987, at the New York State Public Employees Relations Board (PERB), the institution that governs these matters. In support of the PSC, CUNY Associate Counsel Jane Denkensohn explained why part-timers should continue to be represented by the PSC. She cited

the long-term "mature" and "stable" relationship CUNY and the PSC have developed over the years. In other words, why rock the boat?

The PTU argued that the University was not neutral in four instances: in the timeliness of CUNY's response to our request for the names and addresses of adjuncts; in its interpretation of the length of time of the challenge period; in interfering with our members while they were engaged in campaign activity on campus; in reducing the time requirements for adjunct health benefits during the challenge period.

When we requested of the University the list of all CUNY adjuncts, we were first given a computer printout listing more than 10,000 faculty members. The list did not explain who were full-timers and who were part-timers. The PTU's attorneys persisted and we finally received a list of adjuncts, but valuable time had been lost. It was October 17th when we received the list. We had old mailing lists, but adjuncts move more frequently than other human beings and they are not easy to pin down at the colleges either, because their place of work often changes due to the job security package negotiated by the PSC.

While the PTU maintained that the challenge period in which groups can challenge the incumbent union on campus was for six months beginning May 1, 1986, CUNY Associate Counsel Denkensohn informed us that it was for 90 days beginning on August 1, 1986. The "open-window" period in which we could file a petition for certification with PERB was between November 1, 1986 and November 30, 1986. Thus we had the months of August, September, October, and part of November to organize. Forget about August at CUNY. That left us with less than three months to sign up the necessary thirty percent of the adjuncts. We needed more than the thirty percent enrollment to insure that PERB had no doubts as to our having reached the necessary number. CUNY never seems to be quite certain how many adjuncts it is employing at any given moment. We had our work cut out for us.

On at least two occasions, the University security prevented our members from signing up new members on campus. These two incidents occurred just after the "open window" period, but we claimed that this period should be extended, due to CUNY's untimeliness in providing us with a list of adjuncts. After the two incidents—Tom Smith at Brooklyn College and John Antici at Queens College—we filed unfair labor practice charges against the University. PERB decided partially in our favor. We sought the

extension, but as time wore on, this point became moot. What we won was a six-month challenge period.

PERB's decision offers some hope for the future. The challenge period, we were told by the University, was the three months prior to the beginning of the "open-window period." We always thought it should be six months, in part because of the near impossibility of organizing during the summer months. When PERB handed down its decision that the challenge period should be six months, it was a partial victory for the PTU—a sort of compromise decision in the unfair labor practice charges that we had filed. We were not awarded the extension we had sought in 1986, but PERB's decision gives us or any other group that challenges the PSC a more reasonable amount of time in which to do it. However, the current contract expires August 31, 1990, thus the "open window" period for this contract has already expired.

Smack in the middle of the 1986 challenge period in which the University was required to remain neutral, "an agreement was reached between the PSC and university management" which changed the qualifying requirements for adjunct health benefits from ten consecutive semesters in the same department at the same college to six consecutive semesters and the "same-department" requirement was dropped, as reported in the September, 1986 issue of the *PSCcuny Clarion*.

Although the PSC will

probably deny that we were responsible for a reduction in time-requirements necessary for adjuncts to receive health benefits, it seems that this gain was a result of PTU pressure. It apparently was done to undercut the PTU's growing support. In the 1987 contract agreement, the PSC negotiated adjunct qualifying requirements for health benefits down to two courses for two consecutive semesters in the same college. I am convinced that this concession was gained due to PTU mobilization.

Whither Representation?

During our 1986 campaign, I expected that the PTU would put pressure on the PSC and that we would publicize and politicize the adjunctification of the university. We did that with some success, but it is a continuing struggle.

Whether we prefer a separate union for adjuncts or to be part of a PSC that fairly represents us is a legitimate point of debate. But the real point is that the PSC will not represent us if we do not force the issue. This is one of the lessons I have learned. The other lesson is that as things stand we can only make the PSC represent us by posing a political threat to its leaders. The leaders of the PSC are blind to the exploitation in which they participate. It is not just a bad deal for adjuncts. It is harmful to City University as a whole. ☞

Vincent Tirelli, a former Chair of the Doctoral Students' Council, is a student of political science.

An Open Letter to all Cultural Anthropology Students and Faculty

On the eighteenth of May, twenty students of Cultural Anthropology met and agreed to form an organization to address the concerns and promote the interests of Cultural Anthropology students in the CUNY graduate program.

Our intention is to create an ongoing forum to address issues including: communication between students and faculty; the

need for improved grievance procedures; the need for greater and more effective student representation in departmental decision-making processes; and the development of cooperative solutions to larger structural constraints.

This organization is open to, and encourages participation of, all Cultural Anthropology students.

Correction

Due to editorial and production errors, statements by international political figures cited by Brian Guerre in his article, "Communism, Democracy & U.S. Imperialism" [*The Advocate*, April 1990] were incomplete. The first quotation, attributed to former U.S. President Richard Nixon, should have read: "We use 30 percent of all the [world's] energy... That isn't bad; that is good. That means we are the richest, strongest people in the world and that we have the highest standard of living... This is why we need so much energy, and may it always be that way." The second quotation, attributed to Japanese Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu, should have read: "We are ready to support the democratization of Eastern Europe and help them bring about a new order."