

Berry, J., and Worthen H. (2021) *Power Despite Precarity: Strategies for the Contingent Faculty Movement in Higher Education*. Pluto Press.

Review by Jeremy E. Baker

Power Despite Precarity: Strategies for the Contingent Faculty Movement in Higher Education should be required reading for anyone who gives a damn about contingent¹ faculty. As a non-tenure track faculty member and a veteran unionist, the book spoke to me. The authors achieve the rare balance of keeping their work approachable for beginners but detailed enough for experienced activists.

Power Despite Precarity is broken into three portions. The first portion is an oral history of academic organizing in California. Significant portions of this section of the book were based on interviews with John Hess and other front-line organizers. Hess's understanding of both organizing and Marxist theory adds an enjoyably militant tone to this section. The second portion examines the historically-based causes of academia's labor organizing difficulties. This section is reminiscent of Zinn's 'A People's History,' particularly its emphasis on the story of grassroots faculty organizing. The final portion reads like an organizing handbook complete with legal advice, answers to frequently asked questions, and thoughts on breaking down elitism and false consciousness among academics.

Chapter One starts the exploration of the relationship between radical and more conservative union activity; this is a thread that continues through the book. The entrenched conflict between service-oriented bureaucratic culture and social movement unionism (Lopez, 2004) is certainly very real in modern organizing. This divide often manifests in arguments over what is 'professional' and what is 'unprofessional' (p. 19). Barry and Worthen argue this form of elitism is a tool that management uses to divide full-time and contingent faculty. Thus, the authors identify arguments over who is or is not 'professional' as a matter of false consciousness. Berry and Worthen point out that as long as tenure-track academics are thought of as 'the standard,' union organizing in academia will not reach its full potential (p. 73). The authors propose that this barrier may be diminished if we shift to viewing teaching as a craft, consisting of a set of skills, rather than a profession (p. 17).

While emphasizing the need to find common ground that can be shared by all faculty, the authors highlight some of the many issues specific to contingent faculty. These include dealing with the flurry of titles held by contingent workers, the fact that teaching in a contingent position will

¹ What exactly to call non-tenure track faculty is one of the first issues addressed by the authors. Other commonly used titles for these workers include adjunct faculty, lecturers, temporary faculty, and part-time faculty. These terms vary mostly based on institution, but inconsistencies between departments within institutions is not unheard of. The authors settle on contingent faculty early in the book to emphasize the tenuous nature of these positions.

(almost) never lead to a tenure-track position, huge class sizes, low wages, last minute schedule shifts, extreme isolation, and the deeply troubling reality that the average contingent faculty must work for multiple employers to make ends meet (p. 32). In addition to these major issues, contingent faculty are also subject to near-daily institutional insults including shared workspaces with no privacy, working out of offices with no name plates or mailboxes, being forced to turn in keys each semester, and having to buy their own parking passes (p. 34). While any one of these slights may not be that big a deal, the combined effect of these institutionalized microaggressions send constant reminders to contingent faculty that we are both expendable and lesser to our full-time counterparts.

The second portion of the book examines the historic roots of the structural issues that have long plagued efforts to organize academics. This entirely appropriate application of C. Wright Mills' sociological imagination grants considerable insight into organizing contingent faculty by comparing our current struggle with the historic journey of the American labor movement in the 20th century. Barry and Worthen point out that the same trends in other industries have also taken hold in academia. I found the comparison between Taylorism and modern standardized testing to be quite apt. As America became obsessed with business ventures in the 1980s, administration in higher education became convinced that colleges should be run on neoliberalist principles (p. 77). Similarly, as corporations of the 1990s became obsessed with downsizing and staying 'lean,' academia started to move away from the tenure-track standard to a model dependent on the labor of contingent faculty. The authors are careful to point out that this move toward casualization was not driven by a unified push from the top of the university system (at least not at first.) Rather, the trend was driven by the actions of many middle-managers in hundreds of departments who were trying to make ends meet (p. 81). Thus, if the administrative culture of higher education had internalized a concern for workers' rights, the move to casualization may never have happened. However, this was not the case. Hundreds of individuals made their decisions from capitalist, middle-management mindsets and acted exactly as we would expect them to.

The final portion of the book resembles a handbook for union organizing. It addresses many issues that are commonly discussed in such handbooks (such as the importance of strategic planning), but it also addresses more complex issues of organizing. I was impressed by the nuanced discussion of sticky topics such as conflicts between unions, the fact that decertification elections may occasionally serve strategic purpose, and that some contracts just plain suck (p. 36). I have personally shied away from pursuing these topics in my own writing for fear that my work could add even an ounce of fuel to union busting efforts. However, the authors presented this conversation with the clear conviction that discussing these sensitive issues is critical for the future of labor in Higher Ed.

While my opinion of this book is overall positive, there is one element that bothers me. Within multiple conversations on organizing, the authors explicitly advocate for the Inside/Outside Strategy. This strategy requires activists to infiltrate a larger organization in order to achieve the ends of their sect. The infiltration of the Modern Language Association (MLA) is one example given. In this instance, the MLA was used by a group of radical members to springboard organizations that would advocate for more politically radical objectives (page 138). I am not denying that this type of internal organizing may be used to achieve powerful ends. However, it is also incredibly risky for the larger organization. It is one thing for a union salt to organize a hotel

from the inside out, it is another thing to infiltrate a scholarly, democratic organization to achieve political ends of which significant portions of that organization may not approve. Furthermore, basic sociological theory of organizations reminds us that once cliques become established, they tend to undermine the stability and effectiveness of the larger group. It is true that the Inside/Outside Strategy has a long history among Marxist/Trotskyist organizations, and it certainly can be powerful in moments of truly revolutionary struggle. However, if we care about the organization we are organizing within, we must be careful to not undermine the long-term stability of that group.

In closing, this book is a little library including legal advice (p.198), emotional support for organizers (p. 220), and a handbook for organizing (p. 89). Despite the diversity of content, the overarching message to contingent faculty is 'you are not alone.' As stated on the opening page, 'We are now the majority, between two-thirds and three-fourths of all faculty.' Contingent faculty are the ignored proletariat majority that props up the bottom of the Ivory Tower. Once we build class consciousness among contingent faculty, we may be able to extend our vision to include all workers in the university system, thus bringing workplace democracy to higher education.

Reviewer Bio

Jeremy E. Baker is a sociologist and contingent faculty at Otterbein University, University of South Carolina, and The Ohio State University. He is also a veteran union activist and proud member of AAUP.