



Review of *Power Despite Precarity: Strategies for the Contingent Faculty Movement in Higher Education*

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Berry, Joe, and Helena Worthen. *Power Despite Precarity: Strategies for the Contingent Faculty Movement in Higher Education*. Pluto Press, 2021.

In *Power Despite Precarity: Strategies for the Contingent Faculty Movement in Higher Education*, Joe Berry and Helena Worthen present a holistic view of the contingent faculty movement. The authors zoom in and out, moving from the particulars of organizing faculty to general reflections and theoretical thinking about society and education. They also move side to side along a continuum, offering insight and advice to audiences who labor with no real strategy for change, as well as addressing faculty well-versed in structured organizing and unionization. This active flow in the writing enables readers to visualize the whole of the contingent faculty movement and allows different types of academic laborers to locate important commonalities between their experiences.

The first major section of the book describes a movement led by the California Faculty Association (CFA), a group of contingent faculty (“Lecturers”) in the California State University (CSU) system who fought hard for change, and in many ways, succeeded. It is here that we are introduced to the authors’ friend John Hess, a key figure in the book. In fact, the book emerged from recorded conversations between Berry and Hess after the two friends retired and Hess was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. Hess passed in 2015. This section ends in cliffhanger-style with the contingent Hess and the “Lecturers” of the CFA just beginning to show organizational strength and strike potential.

Next, during a thorough history of higher education, Berry and Worthen define the “casualization” of faculty positions as “a solution to a

four-part problem confronted by lower-level higher education managers: budget cuts, the uncertainty of enrollments as the student demographic changed, the threat of unionization, and the entry into the faculty labor pool of more and more women and people of color” (5). In this passage, we have an example of ethos, one of the book’s major strengths. Not only is the writing itself direct and uncompromising, but Berry’s history as a national contingent faculty leader with the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor and New Faculty Majority, as well as his authorship of perhaps the most-read book on the subject, *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower: Organizing Adjuncts to Change Higher Education*, give us reason to deeply consider the definitions, strategies, and proposals we find in these pages. Co-author Helena Worthen is also an award-winning author and activist, lending further credibility to the book.

The authors then present their Blue Sky vision “for what a union can mean for faculty” (3). The goals of this vision are “freedom of association and speech, a living wage, appropriate benefits, and the opportunity to choose to do this work on a full- or part-time basis for all who are qualified and ready to do it as long as the need for the work (not necessarily the economic demand) exists” (89). While no institution has ever fully implemented this vision, it allows activists to gauge positions along the path to equity. To that end, Berry and Worthen next illustrate how “the Blue Sky Vision fairs in a capitalist society where it goes through the fundamentally adversarial negotiations with a third-party – the employer” (114). This is the point in the book when we return to the CSU system saga, which, despite legislative victories and hard-fought triumphs on the ground, was not able to fully implement a Blue Sky vision, but did secure “the best contract and the best working conditions for contingent faculty in the United States” (3). The authors close the book with several compelling chapters of strategic questions, connections to other historical social justice movements, and reflections of the type that only lifelong academic labor activists can provide.

While such insight makes up the bulk of the important information and advice that readers can take away and use at their own institutions, this book succeeds because of its characters. In addition to the book’s inspiration, John Hess, there are other individuals who give this book life, such as the visionary Susan Meisenhelder, the faculty leader who had a progressive vision of the CFA that included tenure-line and contingent faculty, as well as the humorous Elizabeth Hoffman, CSU Lecturer who was able to secure parking passes for contingent faculty. When told by administration that passes for Lecturers were not possible because there was no official list of Lecturers, Hoffman responded, “You have to give them paychecks, don’t you?” (104).

Including interview material from these key figures speaks to the fact that academic labor advocacy is human-centered work. Whether we are adjunct or tenure-track, it is in seeing our commonalities through laboring at the community college or the university that we may continue

building solidarity as academic workers. *Power Over Precarity: Strategies for the Contingent Faculty Movement in Higher Education*, would therefore make for highly useful discussion-fodder for, say, a reading group of varied types of faculty, as well as non-academic laborers for whom contingency is a vital issue.

