

A Manual for Action

Reclaiming the Ivory Tower: Organizing Adjuncts to Change Higher Education

by Joe Berry

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REVIEWED BY: CRAIG FLANERY

While I was writing this review, a union friend told me, “The value of Joe Berry’s *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower: Organizing Adjuncts to Change Higher Education* is that it is about *organizing*.” This struck me initially as odd, and then as right on: he was implicitly referring to the growing volume of research about contingent faculty working conditions, but the woeful lack of writing on contingent faculty organizing. Into the breach has stepped Dr. Joe Berry, with publishing support from the North American Alliance for Fair Employment, a coalition of groups fighting contingency in various sectors of the economy. *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower*, according to Berry, “is meant to be a book of ideas for change, a manual for action” (xii). It is both a “how to” guide on grass roots organizing and a much needed contribution to the development of large scale strategy “to change the conditions of contingency and thereby change all of higher education” (17).

Dr. Berry, a labor historian and contingent instructor for over 20 years in California, Pennsylvania, and Illinois, has been a union staff organizer for the California Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the Illinois Education Association (NEA). He has also been a national leader in the Coalition of Contingent

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Academic Labor (COCAL) and the annual Campus Equity/Fair Employment Week activities. His writing emanates from this wide experience, as is evident in the interviews he obtains, the stories he relays, and his constant emphasis on the need for coherent strategies.

The book begins with a summary of how contingency disrupts faculty lives and creates working conditions in which management gains flexibility through “the exploitation of our commitment to our job and our students” (11). Berry elaborates on these conditions’ negative effects on teaching, the profession, and relations among all involved in higher education. The second chapter discusses organizing in different types of institutions and among different demographic groups, gradually moving into a critique of different models of union organizing. Here he starts to advocate for the “inside-outside strategy” of working within existing organizations (especially unions) while simultaneously building networks outside of them that can operate autonomously and push the existing organizations in directions they have resisted. This strategy is elaborated in later chapters as it is applied to contingent conditions in Chicago, and it is exemplified in a chapter that explains the author’s second major theme, the “Metro Organizing Strategy.”

Berry has done an immense service for the contingent movement in writing a book that articulates this inside-outside strategy in a way that is applicable both for activists and organizers working in unions as well as for those lacking union representation or support. His writing integrates advice for individual activists and local union chapters with detailed examples of the benefits and dynamics of working in small groups. He includes insightful organizing advice on numerous topics: mobilizing individual faculty, using committees, building chapters, affiliating with unions, developing solidarity with other campus groups, negotiating first contracts, and overcoming intimidation by administration. The “Organizer’s Toolbox” at the end of the book is especially practical and accessible for new activists and experienced organizers anywhere they are working.

The interviews with activists provide a rich expression of the fears, frustrations, and victories of contingent activists in all phases of organizing. Several interviews describe the empowerment contingent faculty feel when they stand up to administrative intimidation and realize they can resist and win. Many interviews included recognition of the importance of sharing the story of these victories with other activists near and far, realizing that local victories are also collective victories.

Especially interesting and controversial are the second half of chapter two, “Contingent Faculty Organizing,” and chapters three and four on “The Chicago Experience” and “A Metro Organizing Strategy.” In these chapters, a short historical review of faculty unions in Chicago emerges from the large number of participant interviews and Berry’s own experience, and these are used to critique the broad role of union institutions and the local role of union staff. Despite ample criticism of the national unions’ frequently neglectful and sometimes manipulative relations with contingent faculty, Berry’s critique is evenhanded in its recognition

of the resources, expertise, and solidarity these unions are capable of delivering. Compelling the unions to do so, while working cooperatively with contingent activists and respecting the value of their autonomy, is the main goal of the inside-outside strategy. At the end of chapter two, Dr. Berry lists seven key principles of a “Guide for National Strategy.” Most importantly, it “must focus primarily but not exclusively on movement-building, not solely organizational growth;” it “must understand that contingent faculty are part of a casualized workforce and must be organized as a whole workforce in the job and in the community;” it “must be democratic in form, content and activity, as participatory as possible, and with a leadership that reflects the base;” and such a strategy must recognize “the need for independent organization” (48).

It is in the context of this inside-outside national and local strategy that Dr. Berry presents the Metro Organizing Strategy. The central feature of this strategy is its concentration on organizing the entire contingent faculty workforce, across institutions and union jurisdictions, in a specific geographic area. He suggests creating a physical and a virtual center; that is, a meeting place and a communications network. This center would conduct research, orient new contingents, maintain an activist database, and serve as a resource center for archiving documents pertaining to bargaining rights, organizing protections, and collective bargaining agreements. The center could also create a job bank and maintain files on working conditions at local institutions. If the center drew enough members, it could provide group health benefits, which most contingent faculty lack. According to Berry, bringing activists together to collect, analyze, and discuss these materials and their own experiences will serve to get them better organized and build solidarity networks. These, in turn, can become valuable in organizing and contract campaigns, in protecting faculty rights, and in advocating for contingent faculty and higher education.

Berry recognizes that “a key problem in any effort to organize an entire geographic area...is the varying organizational interests in and around the labor movement that already exists” (110). This impedes funding for a center and strategy that in many ways circumvents the functions and control of existing faculty unions, associations, and labor councils—many of which already provide some of the services Berry mentions. It is also the case that in some places organizing by campus is much more feasible, while in other places organizing by institutional system (as the California Faculty Association has done successfully in the 23-campus California State University) can produce greater solidarity, efficiency, and collective power.

If state and national unions can be convinced that the fragmentation and disempowerment of the workforce is compounded by the fragmentation, antagonism and hoarding of resources by unions and other organizations, they may be willing to pool their resources and coordinate support for a Metro Organizing Strategy. As Berry notes, “The preferable sponsorship for the Metro Organizing Strategy

would be a coalition of unions” (111), including the state and national affiliates of the AFT, NEA, AAUP, and the AFL-CIO. He has laid the framework for such a strategy, and with this book calls on the national unions to set aside parochial interests and support broadbased social unionism.

For the past couple of decades, many union leaders, staff organizers, and contingent activists have considered contingent organizing too expensive, labor intensive, and organizationally complicated to be worth expending resources. This neglect forced contingent activists to organize themselves, largely through the inside-outside strategy Berry has described so articulately and concisely in *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower*. It is rewarding and motivating to read a book that exemplifies the strides the contingent organizing movement has taken in recent years, as these faculty members move beyond the much needed but elementary stage of complaining. Current discussions of strategy, movement building, and contingent empowerment are ideas that hardly made sense as recently as a decade ago. Joe Berry has elevated this discourse and clarified new ways of thinking about contingent organizing, both immediately on the ground and at the broadest national and organizational levels. If a pervasive, unified, and powerful national contingent organizing movement does ever take hold, *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower* will be a useful guide and probably will turn out to have made a seminal contribution. 