

“‘Persuasion, Precarity and the Professoriate’: Communication Challenges on Contract Faculty Campaigns”

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As awareness of the situation of adjunct and contract faculty on campuses in Canada and the USA has grown over the last 20-plus years, so have struggles for better pay and working conditions. While the growing literature about the predicament of the precarious professoriate rightly condemns their exploitation and calls for solidarity on the part of regular faculty, there are far fewer accounts dedicated to discussing the campaign strategies and tactics employed to improve their situation on campus. Yet, contract faculty face obstacles that can make engaging in workplace organizing and campaigns difficult. This article shares an analysis of the communication tactics employed on contract-faculty campaigns at one university to draw out some effective campaign communications that can overcome obstacles and some that did not. Ultimately, activist scholars need to provide accounts of those campaigns that they have been actively involved in to share their lessons with others so that in future activists on each campus need not re-invent the wheel each time they organize to improve their working conditions and students' learning conditions.

Keywords: Adjuncts; Contract Faculty; Faculty Unions; Leaflets; Social Media; Strikes; Union Communications

*It's a paradox that contract professors are amongst the lowest paid professionals, and yet they work for the very institution that promotes itself on the basis of increasing the earning power of its graduates.*¹

The massive growth in the “precarious professoriate” in postsecondary education in Canada and the US has led to a growing awareness of the vulnerability of middle-class professionals and the intensification of their exploitation. “Contract faculty”, “sessional instructor” and “adjunct professor” are three of the more common terms employed to describe those academic workers whose profession has been all but *proletarianized* (except in the public’s imagination). Persuading others of the precarious position of contract professors, therefore, remains an important obstacle to overcome in reaching out to the public. Nevertheless, growing awareness of the university as a site of an increasingly exploitative relationship of “precarious academic labour” (PAL), comparable to the exploitation of “temporary” workers by other neoliberal capitalist enterprises, was spurred on after the effects of the 2007-08 “global financial crisis” (GFC) began to be felt. This trend towards increasing PAL at universities, however, was already noticeable more than a decade earlier: indeed, its roots reach back at least to the early 1970s (Pimlott 2014a). Most significant has been the growing protests of adjunct faculty in the US, from the “National Adjunct Walkout Day” in 2015, to joining up with fast-food workers in their fight for 15 dollars an hour as increasing numbers of adjuncts recognize that they have been proletarianized. During negotiations for collective agreements, the potential for raising awareness of contract faculty’s situation on campus increases substantially, and this became especially so after the GFC raised fears for future employment over students, and made them a more receptive audience to such concerns (e.g. Brownlee 2015; Pimlott 2014a; Potter 2015).

While student numbers grew nationally in Canada by 56 percent between 1987 and 2006, there was only a 19 percent increase in full-time faculty; from 2000 to 2012, Ontario’s full-time faculty increase was exactly half that of the growth in student enrolment: 34 to 68 percent respectively (Pimlott 2014b). Despite the little empirical research that has been done on contract faculty in Canada (Birdsell Bauer 2018: 7), Deirdre Rose’s (2020) recent account of precarious academic labour updates their situation in its largest province, Ontario, which hosts 20 public universities and 24 public colleges. Rose focuses on the years 2011-2017, both nationally and for Ontario, to build upon Jamie Brownlee’s (2015) chapter-length study of contract faculty in Ontario between 2001 and 2010 (Rose 2020: 10). Brownlee showed that while part-time appointments increased 68.5% between academic years 2001-02 and 2009-10, tenure-track (TT) appointments increased by only 30.4% (Brownlee 2015: 57). In actual numbers, the comparison is as follows: 3,113 TT versus 2,476 part-time (PT), or 637 more TT appointments in 2001-02; 4,060 TT versus 4,173 PT appointments, or 113 more contract appointments in 2009-10 (Brownlee 2015: 57). Rose’s analysis demonstrates yet another major shift in the last eight years of twice as many contract to TT appointments: 9,780 versus 4,819 in Ontario in 2011-18 (Rose 2020: 11).

While most Canadian contract faculty had been organized into unions, either through the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), 1975-94, or via traditional faculty associations by the early 2000s, it is in the US, where contract faculty organizing has really taken off in the last decade or so (Birdsell Bauer 2018; Hoeller 2014; Kezar et al 2019; Rhoades 2017: 646-650). Other non-traditional organizing has also occurred across North America via the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor formed in 1996 and in the US with the New Faculty Majority from 2009. These

latter two examples of movement building agencies are an expression of contract faculty frustration with established faculty unions (Rhoades 2017: 650).

The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) is the leading national union of faculty associations and has recognised the importance of this issue. It “has also created a committee tasked with addressing issues specific to NTTF [non-TT faculty], and recently launched the first nationwide survey of NTTF in Canada,” while the largest provincial organization of faculty associations, the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA), has “launched a ‘Contract Faculty and Faculty Complement’ Committee to focus on the issues of NTTF and to raise awareness about the conditions of their employment” (Birdsell Bauer 2018: 26). There is greater recognition by these two prominent faculty union confederations for the situation of contract faculty on Canadian and Ontarian campuses as they “work actively to try to gain professional and public recognition of NTTF” (Birdsell Bauer 2018: 26). The CAUT has also encouraged local faculty associations to support the national “Fair Employment Week” every October to raise awareness around CTF working conditions.

Regardless of their numerical significance, contract workers remained largely external to discussions on higher education, among policy makers, governments and even faculty unions until the global financial crisis (GFC) became an “excuse” for senior administrators to further reduce tenure-track *and* contract faculty positions, despite ever increasing student enrolments (e.g. Brownlee 2015, 50-72; Potter 2015). For a long time, contract faculty were thought to be full-time professionals in the “real world,” who would teach a specialist course occasionally, and whose contributions to undergraduate education were most likely to occur in those departments with an applied or professional focus, such as accounting or journalism. However, such uses of contract faculty do *not* explain the expansion of PAL and its “temporary” use in non-professional and non-applied programs (e.g. humanities, and the social and abstract sciences).

The situation of contract faculty raises many obstacles for unions because of their “temporary” employment status, even as many of them work at these “temporary” jobs for years or decades, and across three or four different campuses or universities. Despite their longevity, their continued employment might well be at the whim of a capricious full-time faculty manager, since contract professors have to re-apply for the same courses every four months. These are some of the obstacles and vulnerabilities that CTF face that make their unionization and struggles over pay and working conditions difficult at the best of times, and especially when FTF see any gains for the former as potential constraints on their own situation (e.g. Schwartz 2014).

How do you include workers in a campaign, if they are vulnerable to retaliation from managers and employers? What media forms work best in reaching out to primary and secondary audiences which can inform or even mobilize them? And how does one communicate demands and criticisms to primary and secondary audiences when there is a need for anonymity or one’s involvement in such an institution is tied to the success of that institution (e.g. student recruitment)? This paper will identify communication strategies and tactics that use particular traits of print and social media to enable vulnerable workers to support such campaigns. The discussion of tactics includes considerations of the disadvantages and benefits of using social media and “disposable literature” (Pimlott 2011). This article begins by outlining my approach and the relevant literature before focusing on the university and the two contract faculty campaigns in which the author was closely involved.²

Alternative Media Literature

From a relative paucity of academic studies of alternative media in the late 1970s and early 1980s to a rapid proliferation by the early 2000s, it was no coincidence that this latter period coincided with both the growing ubiquity of computer-mediated communication *and* anti-corporate globalization movements (Atton 2015; della Porta and Pavan 2018; Downing 2001; Downing 2018; Meikle 2018). Outside of the focus on radical newspapers, magazines and (music, sports, fan) zines, print ephemera or “disposable literature” (diplit) as a form of alternative or activist media remains largely the focus of historical accounts of 16th and 17th century conflicts, when the pamphlet was the dominant medium of communication, and of more recent 20th century accounts of radical leaflets and pamphlets in the 1930s or in revolutionary Paris and Prague in 1968 (Pimlott 2011: 518-520).

The theory of diplit also identifies the lack of empirical studies of the tactical deployment of print ephemera (e.g. Pimlott 2011), except for those contemporary accounts which discuss it in terms of engaging in dissident political activism or mobilizing members in organizations (e.g. Del Gandio 2008; Clark 2009; McHale 2004; Slaughter 2005; Witt 2005). This is especially notable with unions, which despite their adaptation to Web 2.0, still make use of diplit as an important tool for reaching out to and mobilizing members. Despite union media representing a potentially important resource for distributing other social movement messages to potential engaged audiences and for help sustaining alternative media via advertising or (occasional) subsidies for public campaigns, they remain an overlooked form of alternative media (Pimlott 2014c: e.g., Atton 2015; Downing 2001, 2018; Maxwell 2019; Meikle 2018). Nevertheless, they play an important role in the workaday lives of their union members as well as in broader political and public campaigns around related social and economic issues, especially via community-labour coalitions.

The focus of most kinds of labour studies of unions are around strikes, organizing and building coalitions, rather than communications per se, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Brimeyer et al 2004; Dobbie and Robinson 2008; Gunster 2008; Vielhaber and Waltman 2008). There is a limited literature around faculty unions in general and faculty union communications in particular, with most focusing on organizing, management demands or striking. There remains little focus on faculty union communications generally, despite the massive growth in postsecondary education as a major employer and part of the economy since the 1980s. This article will contribute to addressing this gap with its focus on faculty union uses of diplit and social media (to a limited extent) in support of precarious professors.

Activist-Scholar, Autoethnography and Participatory-Advocacy Communication Research

Before engaging with this topic, it is necessary to provide a brief sketch of my background, involvement, and roles in both campaigns alongside an explanation of the process of “participatory-advocacy (communication) research” (PACR) (Rodino-Colocino 2012), with which I incorporated aspects of autoethnography.³ Despite campaigns over contract-faculty pay and working conditions, few articles exist that critically analyze communication strategy or tactics that could be used by activists in future struggles without “reinventing the wheel” every time. Activist-scholars could commit to self-reflexively and critically analyzing their experiences with workplace struggles to identify ideas, tactics and strategies to share and avoid, providing they have the time, space and commitment (e.g. Rodino-Colocino 2012, 2013; Swartz 2006).

The first-person PACR approach “is still not a dominant paradigm in the field of communication,” even though precarious labour “has become an organizing issue for new labor movements” (Rodino-Colocino 2012: 542, 541), especially because those contract faculty involved in labour struggles are far less likely to have the time to reflect, research and analyze (and expose themselves to potential retaliation from employers) than full-time faculty. Few full-time critical communication scholars have taken up precarious academic labour for study, despite the issue’s ubiquity. From speaking out in support of striking university staff in 2002 as an untenured TT professor, I quickly found myself catapulted into a position on campus as one of the more vocal critics of the administration. As an activist-scholar, I was also involved in labour struggles off campus, including workshops for unions, social-movement activists, and the poor. From my experience producing communication materials, brainstorming frames and messages, and working on media strategies with contract faculty activists, I am well placed to make this a “fruitful object of study” (Rodino-Colocino 2012: 541).

Following Rodino-Colocino’s lead of drawing from both “elements of reflective writing and autoethnographies of academic research,” my aim is to draw out analyses of the tactics and strategies used on two different contract-faculty negotiating campaigns with which I was closely involved as a facilitator, organizer and advocate (Rodino-Colocino 2012: 543). The autoethnographic approach is a challenge to the traditional ways of doing academic research in the humanities and social sciences because it “seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural [and political] experience (*ethno*)” (Ellis et al. 2011). This approach is one that “treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act” (Ellis et al. 2011). Autoethnography “is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research,” rather than pretending that these aspects do not play a role in other academics’ research (Ellis et al. 2011). Autoethnography importantly also permits those narratives that allow researchers to document and tell stories about issues, people and events that might not normally get told or “see the light of day” because they lacked the proper elements to make them a topic for traditional academic research. This might help to explain why so few studies exist relative to the level of faculty activism, because after a struggle is won or lost we go back to work without thinking that our activism is worthy of academic recognition.

Much of the information, that is drawn upon about both campaigns discussed within this article, is taken from my personal archive of notes of brainstorming and committee sessions, communication memos, general discussions with several union activists (all CTF with ten-years-plus teaching experience), and informal individual and group talks with contract and regular faculty. These materials arose out of my union roles as a media relations officer and campaign advisor, and communications committee chair (2007-08), and as the communications director and strategy committee co-chair (2013-14), all of which included a central role in the production and distribution of disposable literature (and later social media) during two contract-faculty negotiations campaigns, and in providing feedback to the different union committees and leadership. As part of a critical, self-reflexive process, I believe that my experiences can offer insights for future struggles.

Wilfrid Laurier University

Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU) was primarily an “undergraduate teaching university” from its official incorporation as a public institution under provincial legislation in 1973 until around 2009, when its concerted effort to become a “comprehensive university,” with a greater emphasis on research and graduate programs, began to gain recognition. It is probably in the “middle of the pack” of the 20 provincial public universities but it is ranked 8th out of 15 “comprehensive universities” nationally (Maclean’s 2020).⁴ WLU’s primary campus is in Waterloo, Ontario, about 100 kilometres southwest of Toronto, Canada’s largest city, and just a couple of kilometres from the larger and internationally renowned University of Waterloo. Despite offering a range of graduate programs to nearly 1,000 full-time students, during the 2013-14 negotiations campaign Laurier still retained a strong emphasis on undergraduate teaching with more than 15,300 full-time students.

Although the student population was overwhelmingly white and a majority female from rural and suburban Ontario in the early 2000s, an area akin to the US Midwest in demographic and occupational makeup, and in conservative outlook, it has changed substantially over the last several years as more minority religious and ethnically diverse students have been recruited from the Greater Toronto and Hamilton areas. Between WLU’s reputation as a “party school” and the considerable numbers of rural and suburban students, a small “c” conservative atmosphere continues to “rule the roost” in student politics and on campus (and amongst faculty).

Faculty Union Communications: Past Practices

WLUFA is composed of two bargaining units (BU): one for “Full-Time Faculty and Librarians” (FTF); one for “Contract Teaching Faculty” (CTF) and part-time professional librarians.⁵ WLUFA was formed in 1988 with a small majority of “full-time faculty”⁶ who voted in favor of organizing a union, and it took about 18 months to secure their first collective agreement in 1990 (WLUFA 2005). The second BU of “part-time faculty”⁷ or “Contract Academic Staff” (CAS = CTF) was formed around the turn of the millennium and they obtained their first contract in 2001. Both bargaining units negotiate separately one year apart for three-year contracts; union membership is voluntary (unlike the BUs). To maintain union membership well above 50 percent to avoid administration or right-wing faculty attempts at decertification, the WLUFA leadership tries to balance its appeal across both BUs and, therefore, tends to adopt small “c” conservative positions.

“Part-time faculty” was a common moniker for contract professors before the 2007-08 campaign, but it became increasingly important to recognize that many CTF are neither part-time nor temporary, since many have been teaching at WLU for 10 or more years, including a growing number in WLUFA’s recently organized “century club” (those who have taught 100-plus courses). The “part-time” moniker is also misleading for CTF who were expected to demonstrate the same (time, emotional, affective) commitments to the education of students and scholarship (up-to-date knowledge of disciplinary developments), even as the administration refused to pay for that commitment and yet implicitly expects it because there is no differentiation of CTF from FTF taught courses. It also ignores how those contract faculty, who want to be able to compete for full-time, tenure-track positions face an uphill struggle with teaching up to double the FTF workload just to secure a modest income (with far less time for maintaining a competitive research profile). Is this not a type of “competitive hobbling” by the very institutions that both cultivate *and* exploit

these workers' aspirations?⁸

Disposable Literature: The 2007-08 Negotiations Campaign and Strike

The 2007-08 CAS negotiations began after a new university president took over on 1 September 2007. Of four university strikes in 2008-09, three were at Ontario universities headed by new presidents, including WLU's: employer intransigence provoked the strike.⁹ Until the 2007-08 negotiations, there was considerably less awareness of and interest in contract faculty on campus.

Telephone trees and alternative websites were in the process of being organized in the run-up to a possible strike, since WLUFA's official webpage remained separate from strike communications, and there was a scramble to get CTF members to send in alternative email addresses since the union would not be able to use the official work emails once union members were on strike! Since the new CTF strike webpage was just one of tens of millions of websites, it was absolutely necessary to employ diplit to push students, staff, journalists, faculty and the public to it (Pimlott 2011).

Statement Poster: "CAS: Weapons of Mass Instruction"

The statement poster is the most straightforward and perhaps most common of disposable literature since it is self-contained and appeals directly to the public for whom it is produced. The poster's play on the false justification of "weapons of mass destruction" for the 2003 invasion of Iraq was well received: "CAS: Weapons of Mass Instruction." This "punning metaphor" resonated with many, particularly once the administration's own statistics demonstrated how little contract faculty earned while teaching such a significant percentage (42%) of undergraduates. The contract professor's wit had made the metaphor's humour irresistible as it acknowledges CTF's situation in a way that resonated with every contract professor at the time (bar one) with whom I spoke. The one complaint claimed that the phrase was a "violent, militaristic" metaphor. Yet, such a complaint misses the point about the humorous subversion of such "official-ese" (e.g. Reilly 2018). Its use to draw attention to CTF's indispensable role in a primarily undergraduate teaching university helped to re-configure the original phrase into a newly subversive meaning. Indeed, it became a verbal "meme" before the ubiquity of social media: the poster was widely distributed on bulletin boards and supportive faculty office doors across campus. It identifies no one besides the union as author.

Intertextual Poster (with Brochure): "Faculty X-ing"

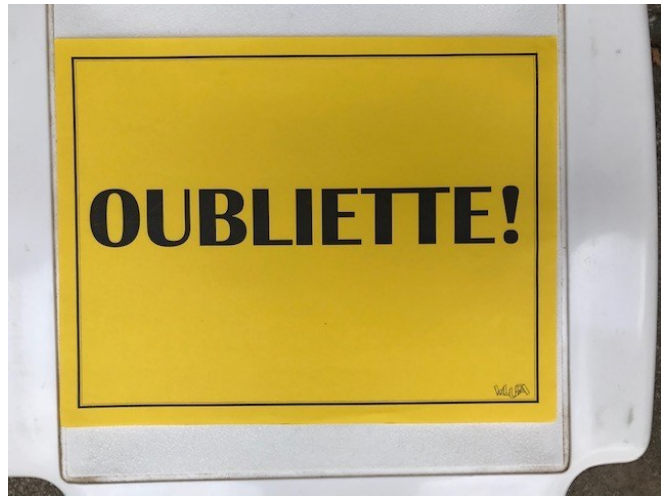
There were other notable messages used during the 2007-08 campaign, some of which employed humour, especially since it is frequently easy to juxtapose the obvious contradictions between a public university's *raison d'être* and mission statement with its operations as more akin to a bottom-line, "for-profit" corporation. The CTF member who agreed to have their silhouette used



on the “crossing sign” poster was well known and liked amongst arts students they taught. The image of the professor carrying a large backpack with a coffee mug in one hand, underneath the label “CAUTION” in large, black, upper-case letters, set within a diagonal black border on the yellow background, mimicked cautionary traffic signs. Below the image, the line read: “PART-TIME FACULTY (with office) CROSSING.” The poster’s sign was used on the cover of a brochure outlining CTF’s key issues, clearly linking that brochure to the posters around campus.

Interrogative Poster: “Oubliette!”

To attempt to connect with undergraduate students around topics of mutual interest, such as smaller class sizes and more course choices, meant demonstrating the link between their learning conditions and contract faculty working conditions, which was key to WLUFAs’ communication tactics. But, first you have to attract the attention, not only of students, but of staff and faculty, too. To do so, WLUFAs conducted a 10-day mini-campaign to publicize one aspect of CTF working conditions in the lead up to the December



examination period. Several new windowless offices were built in the renovated arts building with each hosting six small desks and many more lockers. Yet, CTF still had to book a separate smaller room to be able to meet with students during office hours, which meant CTF’s limited availability for students, since these same few meeting rooms had to be booked by scores of CTF. The name, “oubliette” (from the French “oublier”: “to forget”), was used to describe this new accommodation, which was a type of French debtors’ prison that existed for a few hundred years from the late 1300s; it was “a form of prison cell which was accessible only from a hatch or hole ... in a high ceiling” or in the ground.¹⁰ This historical analogy painted a concrete, albeit figurative, image of CTF conditions that attracted attention where usually there was none. “Oubliette,” thus, became more than a trope for limited office space: “forgotten” seemed apt for how CTF are treated more generally, and by full-time faculty as well, even though they were indispensable for at least 42 percent of undergraduates’ education in 2007 and 52 percent in 2013 (an increase of nearly 25 percent in six years).¹¹

From my alternative media course, I borrowed a strategy from the San Diego Artists’ Collective’s (SDAC) repertoire to make “oubliette” a household word on campus.¹² SDAC developed an art gallery show with an innovative publicity strategy to draw attention to their subjects, 45 missing and murdered women, who had largely been ignored by media and police, and whose cases had been ignored or closed without (a proper) investigation, and labelled with the acronym, “NHI”: “No Humans Involved.” The SDAC’s strategy used the image of one woman, Donna Gentile (who was found murdered a few days after talking on national television about police corruption), was used next to “NHI” in giant letters on two billboards to provoke the public into “nagging” local media to find out its meaning. Reporters tracked down SDAC and the resulting media attention on the “NHI Project” provoked a local outcry at the disregard police had for these women.

Mimicking the NHI campaign, we used “Oubliette!” on fly-posters posted around campus without explanation, even though they were clearly linked to WLUFA by its trademark canary yellow paper and black upper-case typeface (many posters included WLUFA’s logo). No-one beyond a few knew what this word meant or referred to, even amongst the union’s leadership. This strategy kept the likelihood of leaks remote during the 10-day time frame. After a week, there was considerable “buzz” around campus about an issue that had remained largely invisible. For CTF, who often feel vulnerable speaking out, it provided space for discussing their issues without the onus being put on them for initiating the conversation (with potential retaliation by FTF on hiring committees).

The meaning was revealed in time for the final issue of *The Cord*, the student newspaper, for 2007, which meant it was available around campus throughout the December examination period and into the second week of the new semester in January 2008. This would ensure that the issue would not be quickly forgotten since *The Cord* was a “distraction” for students, staff and faculty, after or in-between exams, or when waiting around for friends (before the ubiquity of smartphones and small-screen infotainment). Indeed, many faculty and staff read *The Cord* because of widespread cynicism about official communication channels. By doing the interview with *The Cord* in the last 36 hours before it went to print, meant that there was less possibility for the administration to interfere with our message.¹³ Right after it was published in *The Cord*, activists handed out diplit across campus to reinforce our message and make suggestions of how students, staff and FTF could support CTF in negotiations.

Leaflets: Strike

Contract faculty had to be prepared for circulating their message and countering administration claims from the early hours on the very first morning when “information picket lines”¹⁴ went up around campus. The first leaflet with strike information was handed out to students, staff and full-time faculty crossing onto campus from the early hours of the first day of the strike. Printed on one side of the leaflet was the administration’s claim that it was “waiting for our response to their last offer.” In a much larger typeface below it, on two separate lines, WLUFA stated: “We went on strike!!!!”; “Were we too subtle??!?” The sarcasm resonated with rank-and-file CTF and succeeded in communicating union frustration with administration intransigence.

The leaflet’s other side addressed students directly: “What kind of professors do you want?” It highlighted the contrast between what the administration claimed CTF did or were expected to do, and what they actually had to do to do their jobs well and meet the University’s own public claims for academic programs. For example, the CTF’s “duties and responsibilities” in the collective agreement stipulated that course content would “reflect the current state of knowledge and the course description in the University Calendar.”¹⁵

We asked questions, instead of making declarative statements, to avoid being seen as didactic. Interrogative approaches are often best because you are encouraging readers to think about the issue rather than trying to tell them what the answer should be (didacticism can be the weakness of educators). CTF reiterated that they were “on strike because we’re committed to a high-quality educational experience.” Although many faculty are critical of the dominant university bureaucratise, “educational experience” (versus “education” or “learning”), it was necessary for messaging with students because of their familiarity with the phrase vis-à-vis its ubiquity in public discourse. While the emphasis was on reaching out to students and, by extension, their parents and

the public, the point was to emphasize the contrast (hypocrisy) between administration claims in recruitment efforts and its expressions about CTF's worth during negotiations. The unspoken implication was that students would be motivated to pressure the administration into resolving negotiations in CTF's favor to avoid student dissatisfaction.

Disposable Literature: 2013-14 Contract Faculty Negotiations Campaign

Until 2012, WLUFAs communications were basic (emails, print newsletters) and enacted only when necessity dictated membership input, usually in the run-up to and during negotiations every three years. Media inquiries mostly occurred in response to administration claims during negotiations, which meant WLUFAs were seldom the one to frame issues. WLUFAs did not make use of electronic communications beyond official faculty email accounts prior to 2007-08, even though management retained control over faculty email.

The 2013-14 negotiations took place after several years of constant budget cuts and threats of budget cuts. In the aftermath of the CTF strike's defeat in April 2008, minimal gains in negotiations were made for the 2010-13 Collective Agreement, since the union did not feel it could mobilise its own members in that bargaining round. The defeat demoralized CTF including some of the most active members (some of whom left the university sector altogether). The union leadership made a serious mistake when dealing with the Administration over the "back-to-work" protocols, which were agreed to in a hurry to ensure that students would complete their Winter semester on time, but which cost CTF money.

Thus, a worsening work environment for faculty and staff that began in 2008 seemed to be part of administration's efforts to assert greater control over faculty and staff working conditions. The global financial crisis (GFC) became a regular talking point of the administration to try and justify cuts to jobs at Laurier after September 2008, in a constant refrain about "financial challenges," even though Canada was never as adversely affected as the USA and little of WLU's revenue was derived from investments or endowments (Brownless 2015: 57). Nevertheless, senior administrator numbers continued to grow at much greater rates than student enrolment and FTF positions (e.g. Brownlee 2015; Pimlott 2014a; Potter 2015).¹⁶

The administration sought to use the GFC as part of its rhetorical strategy to support ever more drastic cuts to WLU's primary mission: higher education. Thus, a new ambitious phase of cuts were made to the number of course stipends for CTF as class sizes were increased for all faculty: i.e. a reduction in the number of classes taught by both full-time and CTF,¹⁷ while budget cuts (and threats of cuts) were used to impose changes and redirect funds to various capital investment and asset purchase plans (Potter 2015).¹⁸ The administration also brought in external consultants to push for re-configuring Laurier along lines that were being foisted onto US universities (e.g. Pimlott 2014a; Potter 2015).

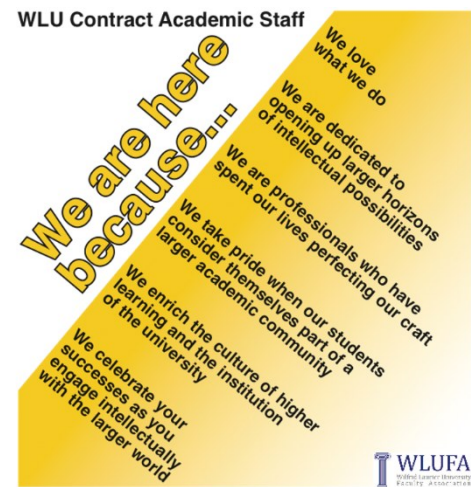
In 2012, WLUFAs established a Communications Committee outside of negotiations for the first time, two years after I submitted a proposal at the Executive's request. I had argued for years, that it is critical to establish regular communications with members outside of negotiations because it takes time to establish a union's credibility (decades of widespread anti-union media bias), not just with local and student media, but also with its own members, including for a faculty union. The administration wields considerable social, political, economic and cultural influence because it controls the university's public face, such that every time negotiations began, the faculty were

trying *yet* again to (re) establish our credibility with local and student media. The *WLUFA advocate* (print and electronic newsletter) was WLUFA's first regular means of communication that was not focused solely on negotiations and was published separately from negotiations bulletins. The Executive hired a contract professor on a part-time basis to handle the production side over the academic year, which included helping to edit and proof articles, do layout and so on.

In the 2013-14 negotiations campaign, reference was made to stories of the "New Faculty Majority" (borrowing the US adjunct faculty group's name), to emphasize that 52 percent of student "bums in seats" were taught by CTF for a mere 3.4 percent of Laurier's operations costs. WLUFA's research found that CTF taught 52 percent of all undergraduate students in labs, seminars, tutorials and classes. We made this clear in our communications that this was *not* the same as 52 percent of all courses or all students, since students will have several tutorials and labs taught by CTF as part of their first- and second-year courses, where CTF are primarily concentrated.¹⁹ (These numbers do not include tutorials, labs, seminars and courses taught by graduate students.) Between 2005 and 2013, student numbers grew by 36 percent compared to full-time faculty growth at 24 percent (which includes "temporary FTF"). Senior administration, however, grew at 114 percent, which is more than three times the growth in full-time student enrolment and nearly five times the growth in full-time faculty. CTF (and graduate students) increasingly take up the slack (see image no. 5 for 2007-2011 figures).

Statement Poster: "Teaching is Our Passion"

The opening campaign strategy was partly inspired by those who question why contract faculty persist at teaching when their pay and working conditions are poor.²⁰ "Teaching is our passion" was a summary of CTF's dominant response to such a question, which one expects with the kind of neoliberal commonplace or myth that anyone can find (good) work if they choose. It inspired the Strategy Committee to begin the campaign on a positive note. The poster was distributed across campus and posted on office doors (of supportive FTF) and department bulletin boards, addressed to students with the opening, "We're here because ..." and followed by a diagonal list starting with the first of six points, "we love what we do." The other points emphasized both CTF professionalism and opening students up to being part of an intellectual community. Although targeted at students, the secondary audience of regular faculty was also relevant and, while positive, it was also a pre-emptive message against the prejudice expressed by those FTF and senior administrators who believe that CTF do not merit equal consideration as faculty.



Teaching is our passion

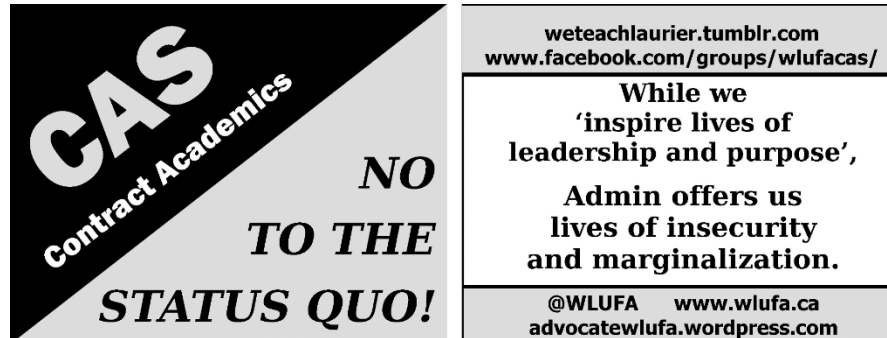
Contract Academics... because we care

Postcards: Three Series

Despite the growing ubiquity of social media, the CTF campaign for a new collective agreement in the academic year, 2013-14, again made good use of diplit, especially postcards, particularly when the initial social media campaign did not go too far (see below). By the end of our campaign,

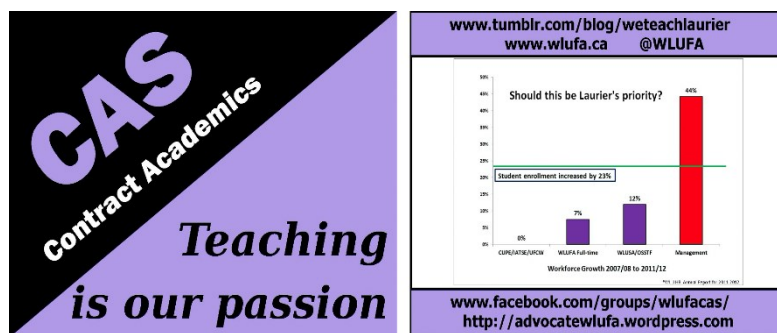
there were at least eight different postcards in three different series, each corresponding to a shift in the length and difficulty of negotiations.

These three series of postcards offer an understanding of the trajectory of negotiations and provide key frames related to contract faculty messaging during the campaign for the new collective agreement. It began with the positive statement of “teaching is our passion” to demonstrate CTF’s commitment to students in the classroom, despite low pay, lack of benefits, etc. Of course, the reactionary position assumes that there are other jobs out there that demand similar skills, talents and education, despite contrary empirical data (e.g. Livingstone 1998), when universities have clearly chosen to continue to produce PhDs without replacing, let alone expanding, permanent faculty to match ever increasing student numbers, including graduate students.



Each postcard included easily “digestible” nuggets of information and played with the University’s marketing terms to demonstrate the discrepancy between its claims about national standing in some areas, like student satisfaction, but ignoring others, like class sizes, that are much less flattering. This was standard practice in previous campaigns, since administration is constantly increasing undergraduate enrolment without a comparable increase in FTF. This is often the primary line of messaging during negotiations. For example, one of our lines played upon the then new branding slogan of “inspiring lives of leadership and purpose”: “While we ‘inspire lives of leadership and purpose’, the Admin offers us lives of insecurity and marginalization”

The first series, “Teaching is our passion,” was composed of four postcards. These were not published simultaneously, although the first two were distributed together while the third and fourth came out later at weekly intervals to keep the issue circulating on campus (image nos 4 and 5). The second series, “Merit Respect,” raised the fact that all the work, passion and dedication of CTF merits respect given the accomplishments of Laurier and successive student cohorts, since ever growing numbers of them are taught by CTF. It was the third series, where CTF’s growing frustration with the administration in bargaining led to the sense of taking the “gloves off” with the general exhortation of “No to the Status Quo”. This final series of postcards included comparing the president’s annual benefits of \$28,000 against CTF’s average income of \$17,500.²¹



The “Merit Respect” series’ title had been provoked in part by those FTF who believe that CTF’s precarious work situation is simply the result of their work’s lack of “merit” rather than the result of systemic exploitation (image no. 6). Many FTF have not faced the same uphill struggles that newly minted PhDs face or those who have failed to be in the “right place” at the “right time” or to have the “right connections.”²² Equally, FTF fail to recognize that their sabbaticals and preferences for teaching small senior undergraduate and graduate seminars would be impossible without (the exploitation of) CTF.

“No to the Status Quo” cards were developed during what turned out to be the final weeks of negotiations. There was also one postcard that we developed but which was cancelled by the union leadership that was titled: “Wage Theft”. This term is apt and would certainly have gained the students’ attention, if not others.²³ However, the union leadership saw it as too provocative and feared a backlash (from reactionary FTF members) for the phrase, no matter how accurate (after all, it is not rocket science to work out how much profit is extracted from CTF teaching classes of 100, 300 or 450 students).

CAS
Contract Academics

*Teaching
is our passion*

www.tumblr.com/blog/weteachlaurier

- Teach over half of the students at Laurier
- 50% have taught at WLU for 5+ years
- ↓ \$29,000 per year with NO health or dental benefits for teaching a full-time course load
- NO assurance of continued employment as course every 4 months hired per

FULL-TIME WORK PART-TIME PAY

www.facebook.com/groups/wlufacas/

CAS
Contract Academics

**MERIT
RESPECT**

weteachlaurier.tumblr.com
www.facebook.com/groups/wlufacas/

Who Gets Benefits at Laurier?

- All Administration
- All full-time Faculty
- All Students
- Contract Academic Staff

@WLUFA www.wlufa.ca
advocatewlufa.wordpress.com

Tactics and Production Values

It is equally important to think about the kinds of production values that will be considered integral to a campaign’s strategy and tactics. Working with a limited budget, one has to weigh up the

differences between adopting the cheapest technologies to produce as many leaflets and fly-posters as possible to blanket a campus or whether one should focus on a strategy of targeting student audiences with well designed, multi-colour text and images on higher quality paper or card on low print runs. It can be worthwhile to invest in high production values, particularly with so much competition for students' attention, from diplit to social media.

This understanding informed the decision making on the 2013 campaign materials in support of CTF negotiations. This was in contrast to the 2008 strike, where effective use of low production values was made with the quick turn-around and fast reproduction of diplit necessary for responding to shifting claims, rumours and updates for students, staff, FTF and the public. One committee worked in the strike office on writing and printing leaflets as events unfolded; different colours were used to differentiate updates and new information, since many people crossing the information picket lines would see leaflets of a different colour and seek them out rather than wait to be handed one.

Such characteristics as anonymity, which can be associated with the use of diplit are often necessary in union organizing campaigns to prevent retaliation by employers or the state (e.g. Pimlott 2011, Witt 2005). The anonymous nature of these cards meant that they could be left behind in classrooms for students to encounter them. They might not encounter the cards in every classroom but at some point during the week large numbers of students would have come across them or noticed new cards that complemented the earlier ones that students, staff and faculty had encountered. It appears that, for whatever reason, most students did not take them from the classrooms (observation when distributing new cards), and most custodians did not throw them out when cleaning classrooms (inter-union solidarity). Faculty, whether contract or regular, were asked by curious students to explain more about what these cards meant. Many regular professors were probably unlikely to respond, if they knew (or cared) little about the situation of contract faculty, even as they perhaps learned something new about their CTF colleagues.²⁴

Most importantly, though, these cards allowed CTF, who are much more vulnerable to retaliation by FTF or administrators for any kind of activism, to simply appear to be responding to questions raised by students' encounters with these postcards' statements. As the cards were distributed, they promoted the Tumblr blog, "We Teach Laurier", where each card was listed with fuller explanations and sources, for those who wanted to find out more.²⁵ Other activists wrote up the links on classroom whiteboards when distributing postcards. It was meant to "push" campus community members to the blog, where detailed information was provided for each postcard; several students linked their own blogs to ours.

Social Media Support

During the 2013-14 campaign, social media was used as part of our multi-pronged effort to reach everyone on campus, although it remained secondary since most CTF and FTF did not appear to make use of social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, which were already said to be more popular with students than Facebook. The latter, however, was popular with faculty for personal use.

Drawing upon my knowledge of Occupy Wall Street communication tactics and the persuasiveness of personal stories, the Strategy Committee recruited contract professors willing to share their stories with the public, linking the economic and social effects of low pay and high

stress with the intellectual and emotional labour that teaching requires. In the style of OWS's "we are the 99 percent" Tumblr blog, we asked for CTF to come forward and tell their stories via hand-made signs for our Tumblr blog, "We Teach Laurier", albeit with little take up beyond a handful of engaged CTF. Yet, one contract professor's "mugshot" with a sign, stating that although she "had taught at WLU for 14 years, [she] still could not afford to send her children to Laurier," got reproduced, reposted and circulated so frequently on adjunct-activist social media, that the message appeared to have gone "viral". That message points out the contradiction between administrations hypocritically boasting about the undergraduate degree's lifetime monetary advantages and paying peanuts to people with two and three degrees to teach those same undergraduates they recruited on that promise.

Impact and Influence

The Communications Committee believed that WLUFAs needed to do more with social media to broaden its messaging outreach beyond its standard electronic communication practice of email listservs and a strike website. Different platforms help to reach different audiences: Twitter, for example, is a platform favoured by journalists, activists and other media-savvy users to engage in communicating unfolding events and issues of importance. Journalists also use it as a source for stories and for finding sources for stories.

The campaign also got coverage from the *University Affairs* (UA) website, published by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada,²⁶ repeating errors from its source. Since unions are always working against the dominant ideology and establishment media biases to demonstrate their credibility, it was critical that, as WLUFAs's Communications Director, I was able to post an early clarification of the CTF's position on negotiations, since there had been misinformation in the original local news story (the primary source for the online UA account). There were further online comments from WLU and non-WLU faculty, as the administration's spokesperson sought to counter the evidence presented.

Social media's importance derives from the potential to develop, enhance and/or add to messages and campaigns developed via other media (plat)forms. As WLUFAs's Communications Director, I set up and ran the "We teach Laurier" Tumblr blog, which included writing and editing over 4300 words of description and analysis in 51 posts, and posting more than 23 postcards and photographs and 24 portable-document-files of CTF materials; a few relevant blogposts from elsewhere were re-posted. Although it ended up with only 75 followers, at least one blog post got reposted 122 times; many followers were students who re-blogged our materials, which enabled a greater outreach to students than WLUFAs and CTF might have obtained otherwise. Several activists adopted Twitter for the first time to share what was going on as well as the official WLUFAs Twitter account (although its tweets required approval from the Executive), but it takes time to establish links. My personal Twitter account had been operational for about five years and was already linked into numerous faculty social media accounts.

Conclusion

This article is the outcome of my activist-scholar role engaging in participatory-advocacy communication research and an autoethnographic analysis of two contract faculty campaigns. These campaigns succeeded in overcoming CTF's vulnerability via anonymity of disposable literature and, to a lesser extent, of social media (in 2013-14). Diplit ranged from posters that made

statements or intertextual connections to print and social media which provided evidence to support CTF's position in negotiations. Whether posted on walls or left behind in classrooms, diplit communicated "anonymously" nuggets of provocative information about CTF's pay and working conditions to students, and contract professors were not at "fault" if critical discussions arose in class about their situation at WLU if they were simply responding in class to questions.

Significantly, WLUFA's blog posts got coverage from US unions fighting over adjunct issues and promotion by CAUT, OCUFA and other Canadian faculty association websites, including CTF unions, such as the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Carleton's CUPE Local 4600 set up and ran a "We teach Carleton" website (which appeared more popular than WLUFA's) and OCUFA launched a "We Teach Ontario" website for CTF across the province. *The Cord* found our Tumblr blog and reached out to do interviews with the WLUFA president (regular professor) and the SC chair (contract professor) to elaborate on the issues.

One obvious failure is that we did not really develop clear aims for our communications campaign beyond raising the consciousness of students, staff and faculty about CTF's situation: i.e. we did not identify clear aims for the campaigns beyond petitions and letters. While we did succeed in generating a far greater awareness of some CTF's low pay and poor working conditions, this was offset by a recognition of the enormous contribution to the education of Laurier's graduates. The introduction identified that there is a growing concern and recognition of the plight of contract faculty that is certainly greater than anything before.

However, is "consciousness raising" enough? The assumption that "winning the argument" means "winning the negotiations" so that the side with the most persuasive case and compelling evidence wins, would mean that every administration should have conceded decades ago, but have not. Even within the ivory tower, labour struggles are about power, not persuasion; ultimately, it appears that only by withdrawing one's labour will contract faculty provide the most *compelling* argument to win substantial improvements in their working conditions, something demonstrated by the 2017 province-wide strike of college²⁷ faculty over CTF issues.

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¹ Author’s message posted on Twitter at start of the 2013-14 campaign.

² The ideas for this article were first presented at the 2015 Union for Democratic Communications conference in Toronto.

³ See Pimlott (2017) for an account of my background’s contribution to my pedagogy in the communication studies classroom.

⁴ A Canadian weekly magazine (and website), *Maclean’s* is influential with administrators and parents in ranking universities. The third category, “Medical Doctoral University,” is the largest type of university.

⁵ This phrase was only adopted in the latest collective agreement (2019-2022), although “Contract Academic Staff” (CAS) remains the legal term since its 2001 certification by the Ontario Labour Relations Board.

⁶ Besides tenure-track positions, FTF includes one-, two-, and three-year limited-term appointments (LTA): i.e. *temporary* FTF.

⁷ The adjective “part-time” was used for CTF from its first collective agreement. However, it is a misnomer for scores of CTF who teach more students and courses than most FTF.

⁸ See Coulter 2014 on “doing what you love” as an excuse for self-exploitation.

⁹ York University and University of Windsor presidents each had at least a second faculty strike during their tenures.

¹⁰ The word was suggested by then WLUFAs President, who was an historian of early modern Europe. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dungeon> (accessed 24 December 2018).

¹¹ For explication of these figures see weteachlaurier.tumblr.com for 2013; Pimlott 2014a; Potter 2015.

¹² I want to thank Dr. Margot Butler for bringing the SDAC to my attention decades ago.

¹³ In my experience of dealing with student media, student reporters usually defer to the administration, since the latter have the time to cultivate working relationships.

¹⁴ Under Ontario’s anti-union laws, striking workers cannot prevent other unionized workers from crossing picket lines.

¹⁵ Article 16.1.2 in WLUFAs CAS Collective Agreement, 2004-07.

¹⁶ WLUFAs [FTF BU] Bargaining Advisory No.3 (14 November 2008), p. 1.

¹⁷ While CTF are not supposed to teach more than 35 percent of all courses, numerous contractual exemptions increase that percentage substantially.

¹⁸ The administration’s approach to squeezing money out of the classroom to transfer to capital assets became well known on campus because of an informal group of faculty, including the author.

¹⁹ April 2013 *WLUFAs advocate* 1(4).

²⁰ Right-wingers like to excuse employers’ poor treatment of workers by telling the latter “to leave” if they do not “like” their jobs.

²¹ Numbers are based upon WLUFAs surveys of CTF earnings in 2012-13.

²² Author’s unpublished chapter: ““There, but for the grace of God, go I’: Reflections of an ‘Accidental Academic’ on Work, Values and Solidarity.”

²³ For a recent account of the term and its applicability to employers, see Bittle and Snider (2018).

²⁴ General observations and anecdotal evidence gathered from activists during the campaign. Three CTF activists had already established relationships with several janitors years earlier.

²⁵ At time of writing, it was still accessible at weteachlaurier.tumblr.com.

²⁶ Founded in 1911, it was rebranded as Universities Canada in 2015: although it is the voice of Canada's university presidents, it started publishing a column by a contract professor in 2013-14.

²⁷ Although colleges have been responsible for vocational and remedial education, increasingly they provide two or more years of university undergraduate education. The strike was sent to arbitration:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ontario_Public_Service_Employees_Union#2017 (accessed 08 June 2021).