

On February 25th, we witnessed adjuncts across the country walk out of their classrooms. The National Adjunct Walkout Day was part of a national movement that calls for fair wages and better working conditions for adjunct professors. Following up on last month's issue on Adjunct Unions by Jennifer Jodell, in this issue the Graduate Student Chronicle takes a closer look at the experience of adjuncts. We invited Dr. Dustin Iler, an adjunct instructor of English and Writing at Washington University in St. Louis, to share his experiences as an adjunct and his involvement with the unionization of adjuncts at that institution.

Graduate Caucus Chronicle (GCC): Can you explain your role as an adjunct at Washington University? Perhaps this is difficult to answer, but is your role similar to that of other adjuncts on campus?

Dustin Iler: Yes, my role as an adjunct here is similar to many of the other adjuncts here, especially the other 403 adjuncts in the bargaining unit in this union. As a part-time faculty member I teach typically around nine to eleven units; last semester I taught ten units. To be full-time you teach twelve units, so I'm hovering right under full-time. That is very typical of adjuncts here. Most people teach anywhere from two to four classes, although some people only teach one course.

As for my duties here, this semester I'm teaching three sections of College Writing I – I typically teach three sections of Writing I - and I'm also teaching a research course through the writing program. Some semesters I teach through University College [Washington University's school of continuing education] teaching literature courses. Basically, I pick up courses whenever I can from wherever I can. I'm also a Faculty Associate, along with several other adjuncts. This means that we are mentors in the dorms on campus. Faculty Associates are responsible for providing mentorship to an entire floor [of a dorm]. So there are also a lot of adjuncts who do service work like this, too.

GCC: About what percentage of teaching is facilitated by adjuncts at Washington University?

Dustin Iler: About forty percent [Editor's note: 37.0% of the teaching staff at Washington University are part-time non tenure-track faculty]. So it is a pretty high number. For example, the College Writing Program is staffed entirely by adjuncts. And then when you start to take into account other departments, adjuncts turn out to be a lot of the teaching labor here.

GCC: That is really surprising, especially since we have so many graduate students here who teach.

Dustin Iler: Yes. I know nationally the numbers ranging from 40 to 60 percent are adjuncts at this point [Editor's note: the national average is 48.1%]. At some institutions there are more adjuncts than tenured faculty. That's the trend we've been moving toward since the 1960s—of hiring more adjunct labor to cover courses and hiring fewer tenure-track professors.

GCC: What are the current hiring and working conditions for adjuncts on this campus, and what do you hope to achieve for contracts as a member of the SEIU (Service Employee's International Union)?

Dustin Iler: The current conditions, for most adjuncts, are semester-to-semester contracts. So, the way that the hiring conditions work as I understand it, at least in my experience in the College Writing Program, is that as long as you are there and teaching classes [in the CW program] each semester, and the Program does not have a problem with your teaching, there is normally at least one course available for you to teach each semester. They can kind of guarantee that. But, for example, I have a colleague who just finished his Ph.D. last August and got a teaching position in his home department for the fall semester, so he did not take any sections in the Writing Program. They offered him some sections and he declined. Towards the end of the semester he found out that his department was not going to offer him any teaching for the spring semester, so he was in a scramble. I don't think he knew if he had any teaching in the spring semester until the second or third week in December. That's very typical – not knowing if you have any prospects for employment for the following semester until very late. As you can imagine, that is incredibly nerve-wracking, not having job security.

So some of the things we have been talking about with our union is raising the wages per course, which is something that has been discussed for contracts at a lot of other institutions. Job security is also one of the big things we are working on, trying to get year-long contracts, or if you have been teaching a course for a certain number of semesters or years, say one or two years, then you will be guaranteed an opportunity to teach that course. One of the other things we are talking about is getting more accessible and better benefits packages for adjuncts. Those are the three big things we are discussing. They are things that other universities like Tufts have set a model for what can be done.

GCC: Why is it important for adjuncts at Washington University – and other adjuncts across the country – to unionize at this time?

Dustin Iler: Right now is a great time to make this move. There is a national movement for raising minimum wage for fast food workers and other similar movements that the SEIU, our labor union, has been working on. It is important because many adjuncts aren't making a living wage. There was the unfortunate case at Duquesne University of the adjunct who had worked there her entire career and died in poverty. And, it is also getting paid for the work that we do. You think about how much we get paid per course in comparison to the amount that students pay for tuition, and you realize that we are not getting compensated very much for having a very specialized career. It takes many, many years to earn a Ph.D. So in that regard it is very important for us to unionize to show that our labor is worth more than we are being paid for. It will also be better for the students and their parents, many of whom don't know that they (or their students) are being taught by a large percentage of adjunct faculty. It will make the university better of adjuncts are being compensated with at least a living wage, because if you have an adjunct who is worried about how they are going to pay rent, or what happens if their car breaks down, then they are not as focused on their teaching or on their classes. This is a great way to remedy those kinds of problems.

GCC: What kind of support – or lack thereof – have adjuncts received from campus administration for unionizing?

Dustin Iler: That is an interesting question. We signed a neutrality agreement with the administration during our campaign, so Washington University has been very supportive in that they did not run a negative campaign against us. That is happening at several campuses across Saint Louis, of administrations not remaining neutral and publically stating, “No, we don’t want this.” The Washington University administration is being supportive as they can be. We, of course, do not expect them to say “Yes! We want our adjuncts to unionize!” But they certainly did not do anything to hinder us in our unionization process. That is about as much support as one can expect an institution to give in this kind of situation. That’s been very nice.

GCC: Has there been vocal support from full-time/tenured faculty?

Dustin Iler: I’ve heard a lot of support from tenured and tenure-track colleagues, and I’ve received a lot emails saying things like, “This is good. We are behind this. If you need anything let us know.” So, not surprising, the tenured and tenure-track faculty have been very supportive of our efforts.

GCC: How can graduate students show their support for adjunct faculty, both professionally and in order to support unionizing?

Dustin Iler: One of the things that graduate students can do is spread awareness of the status of adjuncts in the profession and at their institutions at the moment, and to be aware that almost every graduate student will eventually adjunct somewhere. It is a reality of the profession for most of us. And to understand during your graduate education how much that training is worth when you enter the classroom. I know many colleagues who were shocked when they finished their Ph.D., took an adjunct position, and received a pay cut. It is not like you are demoted, but something weird happens monetarily—a graduate student finally earns the PhD they’ve spent years working for and then find themselves out of work, or at the very least, find out how much universities think their degree is worth. And it is troublesome to a lot of people. So it is important to follow these national adjunct campaigns, seeing how they are unionizing, and to be aware, when you take an adjunct position at an institution, if there have been unionization efforts there or if there are any in the process. That is one big way graduate students can show their support. Here at Washington University we are not participating in the National Walk-Out Day on February 25, because we are about to begin negotiating our contracts; but being aware of days like that and other similar actions and spreading awareness about such campaigns is a way of supporting adjuncts. Another thing that graduate students can do is help make undergraduate students aware of the state of adjuncts. Graduate students know what adjuncts are, but many undergraduates do not know if a part-time or tenured faculty member is teaching their course. They do not usually understand the difference. But once they do understand the difference, many students are in support of unionizing, in my experience. They understand that such economic disparity is unjust.

GCC: I know that I had that experience when I taught as a graduate student at the University of Missouri. Some of my students didn't know that I was a graduate student. Many of the students assumed that some of our "older" faculty in our department had tenure just because of their age, but they were actually adjuncts.

Dustin Iler: Exactly. That is what is happening here. If students and parents knew how much they were paying in tuition versus the compensation their adjuncts professors receive I think things might be different. I wonder if parents and students knew that when they hear that every faculty member has a Ph.D., that not every one of them is tenure-track or tenured, if they might have a few things to say about that.

GCC: Graduate students at Washington University are not part of a union, although graduate students at other institutions nationwide have unionized. Is there a right time for graduate student bodies to seek assistance from unions or create their own?

Dustin Iler: It is the right time when graduate students feel that they are not being heard as individuals. The purpose of unions is to be able to collectively bargain and have a voice as a group. If graduate students feel like they are not being heard, and I mean, I was a graduate student here [at Washington University], and we get so much support and have a great graduate senate and council, but if there are concerns about professionalization, unionizing is a great way to kind of take back some agency in your career and in an academic job market that is chaotic and in very bad shape. You can gain visibility and a voice as a group when you say these problems are common to all of us. If there are problems like that and graduate political entities, like a graduate council, cannot solve them, then I would say it is time to unionize. If there are institutions where there are no outlets for graduate students to have a voice, then that is a good enough situation for graduate students to start talking about unionizing.

GCC: What advice do you have for graduate student bodies and adjunct faculty as they consider unionizing? What kind of course of action should they consider taking?

Dustin Iler: If they were going to start unionizing, I would suggest that they contact the SEIU, since they are at the forefront of these kinds of campaigns. They run Adjunct Action, and they were the ones that helped us organize here. They have an amazing track record of these kinds of campaigns. I don't think a single one of their campaigns has lost. Every campus that they have worked on the adjuncts have organized and eventually formed a union. Graduate students don't even have to talk to SEIU. They can reach out to other unions to see if they would have them; that is happening at other institutions. I don't want to sound like I'm solely plugging SEIU. Certainly contacting different unions and talking with them is the first step. And following other national campaigns and seeing what has been done at institutions such as Tufts and Georgetown, and when we finish negotiations what happens here, and to really be aware that this is a movement that is happening nationally. There is hope for adjuncts. As for graduate students, who will more than likely end up adjuncting for a little while, hopefully before they end up in tenure-track positions or in whatever careers they want to pursue, there is more and more support as adjuncts continue to

unionize. So that is very positive. I know that I mentioned something to SEIU about graduate students organizing, and they said that if any graduate students want to pursue unionizing that they could contact them for support. With a lot of these unions, once they are on a campus they do not have a problem with other bargaining units joining them, too. For example, TT faculty at Tufts just voted to form their own union with SEIU. Of course there would have to be a vote. But if graduate students here, for example, decided to organize and vote to join a union, that would be in. That is about as easy as it is, actually. The hard part of the process is getting the signatures and running the campaign, but if people said they want to unionize, they could.

GCC: Is there anything else that you would like to comment on about being and adjunct?

Dustin Iler: Something that graduate students might not be aware of, but do realize once they become an adjunct, is once they are out of that graduate student community – we saw this when knocking on doors, meeting colleagues, and talking about voting – you really realize that at a university it is a lot more difficult to organize labor than at a factory, for example, where everyone works in a common space and they know each other. I have meet so many people during this process, and nearly all of them are in the same situation that I am in. As graduate students, we all hang out together and meet students from other departments. But as you begin to adjunct, you start to isolate yourself to your department, so it becomes very easy to think that you are the only one suffering this plight, but there are actually hundreds of people across campus having the same problems. If you do end up in a situation as an adjunct, you are not alone. Not only are there adjuncts in your department, but also on your campus, and others nationwide, but you just don't see those people. That's beginning to change: adjunct labor's becoming more and more visible, and we're all here to help each other and our universities.