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    National Movement to Organize Adjunct Labor Makes Gains in 2014 and 2015

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[National Adjuncts Walkout Day](https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2014/10/06/national-adjunct-walkout-day-planned), planned for Feb. 25, 2015, is rapidly approaching.  For those who haven't been paying attention, the news that adjuncts are walking out may come as a shock, in part perhaps because of their unenviable status as invisible employees at the margins, not often afforded the respect and voice given to other faculty and, in some situations, graduate students.  (Consider, for example, the adjunct who has no office, no professional development assistance, no guarantee of employment beyond one year, no travel funding, no health insurance, and no representative in a governing council).

            Behind the scenes, however, adjuncts have become critical to the smooth functioning of higher education, with some universities relying on adjunct labor to teach over half their courses.  By themselves, adjuncts may wield little power, but recent attempts to organize adjunct labor at the national level hint at the potential power of this growing labor class.  Such campaigns also confirm that a growing number of adjuncts will no longer tolerate being "invisible" to the university, nor will they continue to remain silent before students, faculty, alumni, the public, and the government.

            Given the National Labor Relations Board's ruling last December (see details below in this article) that faculty, including full-time faculty, are no longer automatically prohibited from unionizing due to the fact that, according to the NLRB, *power at universities is increasingly being transferred from faculty to administrators*, *such that faculty are no longer considered "managerial employees" by the NLRB*, it is difficult not to view adjuncts as canaries in the classroom, as previews of what is in store for all faculty a few decades in the future.  Accordingly, it may behoove us, graduate students and potential future faculty, to pay close attention to— if not actively support— the efforts of adjuncts to make their case for change.

            The most high-profile and perhaps most well-organized branch of this movement is affiliated with [AdjunctAction](http://adjunctaction.org/), a campaign assistance program sponsored by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) with on-going drives in Boston, St. Louis, Los Angeles, Vermont, San Francisco, New York, Connecticut, Washington State, and Minneapolis/St. Paul.  On January 5th of this year, [adjuncts at Washington University in St. Louis](http://adjunctaction.org/blog/category/news/) became the most recent members of SEIU.  With the addition of Washington University and last year's victory at [Hamline University](http://uofmacademicsunited.org/2014/09/hamline-university-adjuncts-form-a-union/) in St. Paul, MN, campaigns in the Midwest seem to be regaining momentum after [two unsuccessful attempts in Minnesota last year](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/07/23/adjunct-union-drive-hits-speedbumps-twin-cities).  In fact, efforts to organize have been much more successful on the coasts.  Boston University's part-time faculty [will vote](http://www.bu.edu/today/2014/part-time-faculty-will-vote-on-unionization-in-january/) on unionization in the next month; adjuncts in both [Boston](http://adjunctaction.org/blog/2013/09/26/tufts-adjunct-faculty-vote-yes-to-union/) and the [Maryland/D.C.](http://www.seiu500.org/category/divisions/higher-ed/) area chose to unionize last year; and The [L.A. Times](http://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-unions-colleges-20150104-story.html#page=1) reports that in recent weeks "a wave of union organizing" has swept nearly a dozen private universities in California.

            Last December's two-part ruling by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) may further energize the movement.  In December the NLRB responded to Pacific Lutheran University's (PLU's) claim that its faculty were prohibited from organizing due to an exemption for universities with a religious affiliation (as per the 1979 Supreme Court case, *[NLRB v Catholic Bishop](http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=440&invol=490)*), according to *[The New York Times](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/23/education/labor-ruling-could-allow-more-faculty-to-unionize.html?emc=edit_tnt_20141223&nlid=62786486&tntemail0=y&_r=2)*.  To the surprise of some, the NLRB modified the religious exemption and ruled that PLU faculty are eligible to join a union if their jobs do not require the performance of religious functions.  As part of the ruling, the NLRB established related eligibility tests that are expected to make it easier for such faculty to determine their eligibility for participating in collective bargaining.

            The second component of the ruling has much broader, if not bittersweet, connotations for all those in the academic labor force.  PLU had argued that its faculty were ineligible for union membership due to the fact that the NRLB has classified faculty as managerial employees since the *[NRLB v. Yeshiva](http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=444&invol=672)**[University](http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=444&invol=672)* Supreme Court decision of 1980.  The NLRB disagreed, explaining that in today's academic labor force both full-time and part-time faculty should no longer be considered managerial employees unless they meet a certain set of managerial criteria.  As detailed more fully in *[The New York Times](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/23/education/labor-ruling-could-allow-more-faculty-to-unionize.html?emc=edit_tnt_20141223&nlid=62786486&tntemail0=y&_r=2)*, the widespread corporatization of universities has led to a reduction of faculty influence such that even some tenured faculty no longer enjoy the level of power their junior colleagues once did.  Matters of university policy and practice are now often under the control of non-faculty administrators who make decisions regarding enrollment, finances, personnel, curricula, and other academic and administrative concerns.  Accordingly, the logic of the *Yeshiva* precedent--which held that faculty influence in such areas was deemed equivalent to managerial power--no longer holds true.

            While the recent NLRB ruling is likely to be appealed and is limited in the sense that  NLRB rulings have jurisdiction over faculty at private institutions only, labor organizations such as SEIU have characterized the ruling as a [victory](http://www.thestand.org/2014/12/in-major-win-nlrb-says-plu-contingent-faculty-can-unionize/) for all full-time and part-time faculty.  At the same time, such a victory is only possible because governing bodies such as the NLRB are now willing to recognize how much power faculty have lost over the last few decades and, perhaps, still stand to lose.

            Adjunct faculty, however, have been living with this unpleasant reality for some time.

            Adjuncts at Northeastern University (Boston), for example, attribute their desire to unionize to this increasingly obvious push by universities to deprofessionalize and marginalize faculty labor.  Despite criticism from anti-union administrations--who often claim that unions create discontent where none exists--the impetus to unionize at Northeastern appears firmly rooted in the long-standing discontent of the adjuncts themselves.  According to the [Northeastern Adjunct Faculty Union](http://www.nuadjuncts.org/), adjuncts at Northeastern were desperate to address issues such as poverty wages; unrealistic, sometimes grueling working conditions; and dismal professional and financial prospects.  Already loaded down by student debt, adjuncts juggle heavy teaching loads and "often work at multiple institutions to pay the bills," according to the [testimonials](http://www.nuadjuncts.org/#!speakers/cfvg) and mission statement on the union's website.  As a result, adjuncts at Northeastern organized to call for immediate improvements in compensation, job security, working conditions, and professional recognition and advancement.

            In a sign of solidarity that many adjuncts no doubt hope to see repeated across the nation, the protests of the adjuncts did not go unnoticed by the university community at Northeastern.  Over the past year, tenured faculty, alumni, and students at Northeastern voiced support for the adjuncts through open letters and actions, such as last April's ["surprise party" in the Deans' offices](http://www.nuadjuncts.org/#!action-article-surprise-party/c229p) thrown by undergraduate students.  The union claims that such support should not be surprising, as the administration's cost-cutting measures and marginalization of adjunct labor leads to situations such as the failure to provide offices for office hours, thus impeding the ability of faculty to meet with students.  The union argues that the hobbling of adjunct faculty through this and other means leads to a decrease in the quality of student education, particularly at a university in which adjuncts make up over 50% of a university's academic workforce, as is the case at Northeastern.

            Specific goals to improve the situation of adjuncts vary from union to union.  Union websites and public notices provide a glimpse of each union's unique priorities, which sometimes stretch beyond a core of bread-and-butter issues.  Northeastern's newly formed union, for example, now in contract negotiations, has released a [bargaining update](http://www.nuadjuncts.org/#!122-bargaining-update/c1aqj) (Dec. 2nd) that includes a demand for increased protection for academic freedom, in addition to more predictable provisions regarding course assignments, evaluations, and appointments.  A number of the mission statements for the new unions organized in the last two years express an intention to fight for social justice issues--such as diversity in education--and call for more active intervention in legislation regarding student debt, funding for education, and intellectual property rights for academics, as well as support for specific initiatives, such as [The Adjunct Faculty Loan Fairness Act](http://adjunctaction.org/blog/2014/07/31/big-news-sen-dick-durbin-introduces-adjunct-faculty-loan-fairness-act/).

            High-profile gains in financial compensation such as those recently gained by adjuncts at Tufts University last fall, however, will most likely draw the most attention to the movement.  Northeastern's bargaining update, for example, cites a desire to achieve the same three-year contracts secured at Tufts, which resulted in a dramatic pay increase for its members: over the next three years, most adjunct faculty at Tufts will receive a 22% pay increase, according to *[The Boston Globe](http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2014/10/27/part-time-professors-tufts-get-better-pay-job-security-through-first-union-contract/DqDik8plj87bStvIaXk3eN/story.html)*.  *The Globe* notes that the Tufts contract also includes health, retirement, tuition reimbursement, and other benefits for professors who teach at least three courses.  Adjunct professors "will also receive first notice and a guaranteed interview for full-time openings; they will be subject to a revamped performance evaluation process; and they can take advantage of a new $25,000-a-year fund that will pay adjunct faculty up to $500 a year to undergo professional development related to teaching."  Despite anti-union claims to the contrary, the significant improvement in financial compensation and other benefits for adjuncts at Tufts appears to bolster pro-union claims that collective bargaining has resulted in better pay for adjuncts (see "[Union Raises for Adjuncts](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/07/26/adjunct-union-contracts-ensure-real-gains-including-better-pay)," *Inside Higher Education*, July 26, 2013).

            It is unclear whether or not the recent move toward adjunct unionization will translate into a similar push to organize graduate student labor.  Graduate student unions – which  primarily exist at public rather than private universities, and are thus subject to state labor laws rather than the NLRB – do exist, with the [Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation](http://gtff3544.net/) at the University of Oregon-Eugene serving as one of the oldest examples.  [The Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Coalition-of-Graduate-Employee-Unions-CGEU/152542918132929), founded in 1992, currently consists of several dozen graduate student unions in the U.S. and Canada.   Many of these unions are affiliated with national labor organizations, such United Auto Workers (UAW) or the AFT (American Federation of Teachers).   [UAW Local 2865, the UC-Student-Workers Union](http://www.uaw2865.org/), for example, represents over 13,000 student-workers across the University of California system, including TAs, GSIs, Readers, and both undergraduate and graduate tutors.

            Graduate students on the fence regarding the risks and rewards of collective action are able to learn more by researching existing graduate student unions, of course.  For those seriously entertaining the thought of taking action, however, there may be richer, more hands-on learning opportunities at their doorsteps.  Our adjunct colleagues are in the midst of creating a nationwide movement, one that will no doubt face a plethora of logistical, political, and other challenges, from union-busting to member apathy to resistance from those loathe to see collective bargaining enter the halls of academia.  Future graduate student organizers would be wise to look to the efforts of their adjunct colleagues for a preview of what they, too, might face and how to overcome these obstacles.

            Alternatively, graduate students might consider lending their support to this movement by participating in rallies, signing letters of support, or simply publicizing the movement.  We, as graduate students, cannot deny that we are aware of the conditions in which our adjunct colleagues are struggling to live, work, and, well, simply *think*.  Many of us also know that in a few years, we--or our friends or spouses--may be members of this very group.  Can we really afford to stand on the sidelines during this fight?

            Even those who have reservations regarding collective bargaining must acknowledge that something must be done, either through labor unions or some other form of pressure on universities to address the concerns of their often mistreated adjunct employees.  If you don't believe collective bargaining is the solution, we'd like to hear your thoughts on other possible solutions.

*Add to the conversation on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/gradcaucus), [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/gradstudentcaucus), and the [MLA Commons](http://commons.mla.org/groups/graduate-student-caucus/)*.

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Call for Papers

The Graduate Student Caucus invites proposals for papers to be presented at the 2016 MLA annual convention (Austin, January 7-10, 2016). Please send abstracts of up to 250 words to Alexandrine Mailhé (Vice President of the GSC) at [gradcaucuschronicle@gmail.com](mailto:gradcaucuschronicle@gmail.com) by February 25.

  Subject(s) matter: genealogies of sympathy in texts.

The painful current events involving the deaths of a number of African American people shook the United States and triggered the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. This recognition of the other’s life as worthy has a history that manifested itself in particular through texts. Whether written, visual or oral, these texts represent and express the systemic power relations at play in the creation of selfhood and alterity. How is the subjectivity of the other represented, acknowledged and regulated by the textual support? What are the textual techniques that are used to create or produce empathy? Of special interest are texts that exemplify the identification between the reader and the fictive character’s hardship and suffering, through constructed barriers of gender, class, race and place. The presentations should not exceed 15 minutes.

We encourage graduate students from all literary traditions to submit an abstract.

Grad experiences: past, present, future.

We seek interventions for a roundtable on grad experiences. As the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) celebrated its centennial in January 2015, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published a piece on a very significant event in the history of liberal education titled “The Day the Purpose of College Changed.” It took a speech by the newly elected Republican governor Ronald Reagan questioning the usefulness of “intellectual curiosity” that he qualified as “luxury” to change the lives of students all over the US forever. “After February 28, 1967, the main reason to go was to get a job.” As for graduate students, their experiences and the way they apprehend college education today are drastically different from the way they did in the past. The challenges they face with the current state of the job market and budget cuts make the future even more uncertain. This panel will explore the future of graduate students in the job market and investigate the value of “intellectual curiosity”. From hope that reforms will help improve the market to considering alt-ac jobs, what are the best and the most realistic options for current graduate students?

Possible topics include Alt-Ac careers, being a graduate student after retirement, considerations on the job market, Unions and Adjuncts.

Got conferences, funding opportunities, or CFPs that you want to share with other grad students? Email the editor at gradcaucuschronicle@gmail.com and get them in *The Grad Caucus Chronicle.*