

Book Review

Joe Berry and Helena Worthen

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

London, UK: Pluto Press, 2021

Reviewed by Anthony Iacovino

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In August 1981, President Reagan fired over 11,000 air-traffic controllers, federal employees of the US government, who were on strike. After he replaced them, they could not go back to their jobs. (Hurd, 2006: 1). This harsh measure was the ominous salvo of the political and economic innovation known as neoliberalism which is still prevalent today. This innovation has brought deep changes in societies across the world. One of its controversial changes has been in education. What follows is a brief sketch of the historical context out of which *Power Despite Precarity* grew.

A fundamental pillar of a democratic society is its education system. John Dewey, in his seminal work *Democracy and Education*, describes it this way, “government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and who obey their governors are educated” (1916: 101).

Later, in “The Responsibility of Intellectuals,” Noam Chomsky (1967) expands upon the connection between democracy and education. In his somewhat cynical way, he states, “For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us. For Chomsky, democracy provides, at least for a privileged few, the opportunity and education for seeking the truth. Furthermore, implied in seeking the truth is the moral duty of the educated intellectual to defend and maintain democracy.

What has happened to education under neoliberalism, according to its fierce critic Henry A. Giroux (2019), is “Increasingly public schools — which could have such a radical potential to promote social equality and support democracy — are falling subject to the toxic forces of privatization and mindless standardized curricula, while teachers are subjected to intolerable labor conditions.” This is the context in which Joe Berry and Helena Worthen wrote *Power Despite Precarity*. These authors have long been involved in the academic labour movement of California with the result that their excellent scholarly book is also eminently practical.

The authors describe in painful detail the current state of the institutions of higher education in California. They describe the “declines in public funding, rises in tuition, privatization of institutional functions, vocationalization of programs, and above all, the casualization of faculty, which continually increased, until contingent workers are now the majority of all faculty” (Berry and Worthen, 2021: 5).

This brings us to the central idea of *Power Despite Precarity*. This idea is "our employment lacks the necessary rights and conditions to make the best education for students or to provide a decent life for ourselves" (Berry and Worthen, 2021: 1). Since the majority of professors are contingent faculty, they have little protection if they fall out of favour with their administrators. In this way, the narrow fiscal needs of college administrators are permitted to have priority over the rights and freedoms of contingent faculty, and alternative visions of education are suppressed. Also, new ideas for the benefit of society as a whole are suppressed. In sum, the ideals of education as set out by Dewey, Chomsky, and Giroux are largely in decline.

Either we submit to what Naomi Klein calls the “shock doctrine” and open the door to disaster capitalism, or we wield our power to make this social and political crisis deliver something positive for us.
-Berry and Worthen, 2021: 1

Before proceeding further, note that this book is largely about unions. For some who know the history of unions in the US, the mere mention of them brings about distrust. This distrust is not without cause. There have been instances of corruption and bad dealings in the union movement. Fletcher, Jr., (2012) in his book, “*They're Bankrupting Us,*” exposes with a flood-light clarity major wrongdoings in the union movement. But having disarmed the strongest critics, he goes on to show why unions are enormously beneficial and why they need to continue. Those who would dismiss *Power Despite Precarity* as just another book about discredited unions would do well to read Fletcher's critique.

The most important part of *Power Despite Precarity* addresses the question of what is to be done. The authors set a clear procedure. They assert that a White Paper is needed to confirm the role of the union and the future of colleges and universities. Moreover, the vision expressed in the White paper must be an alternative to that of the administrators (Berry and Worthen, 2021: 58). To address the particulars of the vision in the White Paper, the authors put forward the "Blue Sky Goals" a strategy that consists of eliminating contingency and arranging for job security along with academic freedom (2021: 89).

This includes, for all workers, freedom of association and speech, a living wage, appropriate benefits, and the opportunity to choose to do this work on a full- or part-time basis...
-Berry and Worthen, 2021: 89

As a complement to the "Blue Sky Goals," the authors suggest the "Inside/Outside" strategy. For this strategy, contingent faculty who find themselves as part of a larger union should organize themselves as a group within the union and ask for representation (Berry and Worthen, 2021: 244). This strategy avoids bad feelings if there are conflicts of interest.

Contingent faculty may work in different institutions. The "Metro" strategy provides a regional approach that makes organizing the faculty easier to achieve (Berry and Worthen, 2021: 246). These are all strong and well thought out strategies for precarious workers in educational other public institutions, and private workplaces.

The shortcomings of Berry and Worthen's scholarly work are few. However, on the rare occasion, they fail to provide sufficient documentation for their statements. The authors refer to "an economy where there is between 15 and 30 percent actual unemployment" (Berry and Worthen, 2021: 3). This estimate far exceeds that of the government, so the authors should have shown their source.

The authors do not always fully expose the consequences implicit in their facts. For example, they point out that some contingent faculty do not get paid for their work in dollars. They are asked to work "at the richest, most elite universities, sometimes even for free simply for the prestige of the association with the institution" (Berry and Worthen, 2021: 93). This statement represents a new low in the behaviour of administrators. Contingent faculty are asked to take part in primitive bartering in which they provide specific and concrete services in return for the vague and insubstantial benefit of being associated with a university. To even suggest such an arrangement shows how far removed from the daily needs of contingent faculty the administrators have gotten.

While the authors do not want to appear strident, they perhaps rely too much on the facts to speak for themselves. Facts require interpretation, and the implications of the facts should be revealed. Administrators have shown a lack of imagination, of moral sense, and of responsibility in their continued imposition of unacceptable working conditions. Such behaviour should be explicitly identified and denounced.

For a view of the Canadian side of this issue, see *In Search of Professor Precarious*, an award-winning documentary film by director-producer Gerry Potter (2020). He provides many testimonies of Canadian contract faculty who face the same or similar difficulties in their colleges and universities.

The scholar, Herb Childress (2019), in *The Adjunct Underclass*, stands in stark contrast to Berry and Worthen. In his view, contingency cannot be eliminated through the use of unions, increased funding, or greater government oversight. These types of attempts have failed. For Childress, a college should respect its people and their personal relationships, allow faculty to steer its culture, it should be a place of continual learning, and it should ask for continued demonstration of this learning. These are the principles that will restore colleges and make them into places fit to study in.

In sum, Berry and Worthen recognize the many problems contingent faculty face and try to deal with them through the use of a White Paper, Blue Sky Goals, and the Metro and In/Out strategies. But the situations depicted in *Power Despite Precarity* cry out for a curtailment of the extremes of neoliberalism. This social and political experiment, while providing a wonderland of technological improvements, has laid a path of destruction over the rights and freedoms of employees both in the public and private sectors.

This book is meant for the contingent faculty who want to help themselves get out of their dire employment situation through union activism. However, its precepts extend far beyond this limited scope to precarious employees across the public and private sectors. Senior administrators and managers in both the public and private sectors can benefit by observing the dire effects of their fiscal policies. This perhaps can suggest to them how to improve these policies. Executives in technology corporations can learn to plan more broadly for the just and appropriate implementation of their innovations. The proponents of neoliberalism can learn to temper the extremes of their ideology.

And there is hope these changes can come about in the persons and places where they are most needed. Mark Carney has been an investment banker at Goldman Sachs and the Governor of two national banks. In his book *Value(s)* Carney (2021) says, “When I worked at the Bank of England, I would remind myself each morning of Marcus Aurelius’ phrase ‘arise to do the work of humankind.’”

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Anthony Iacovino, M.A., has had a career in both the public and private sectors. For some 20 years, he has served on the faculties of Concordia University and later at Seneca College. While at Seneca, he also presented papers at the conference of the College Association for Language and Literacy. In the private sector, he did editorial work for CCH, a legal publishing firm. Later, as a private consultant, he was regional managing editor for the *Business Report* and worked with large companies

He was a member of the Canadian Editors’ Association (EAC) and the Society for Technical Communication (STC). As a member of the STC, he received the President's Bouquet Award for management of their speakers' program. Upon retiring from Seneca College, he received an award for his service to OPSEU, Local 560. He can be reached at tonyi@mailbox.org.

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