



Federation of  
Post-Secondary Educators  
of BC

**Cindy Oliver**

President

Address to the

**Coalition of Contingent Academic Labour (COCAL) VII Conference**

August 12, 2006

Simon Fraser University Harbour Centre, Vancouver, BC, Canada

I want to begin by congratulating the organizers for pulling together such an interesting conference agenda. My union, the Federation of Post-Secondary Educators, is co-sponsoring this conference and I'm glad to see that we have been able to bring together a diverse cross-section of post-secondary educators to discuss some of the critical issues facing our sector.

Like other unions in post-secondary education, FPSE has struggled for all of its history with the issue of contingent academic labour. In many respects, it was one of the critical motivations within our membership when they decided to form our union over thirty-five years ago.

I want to use my time this morning to talk about how we have organized our union structure, our collective bargaining priorities and our political action efforts to support our organizing efforts of contingent academic labour.

All three areas have contributed to our success over the last three decades in securing better employment conditions for our members. We still have a long way to go and we still face employers and governments who are actively trying to undermine or completely erase the gains we have made, but our commitment as a union to protecting the rights of our members has always remained strong.

Let me first of all describe one important difference in the structure of both our union and our bargaining units which has made an enormous difference for how we deal with the issue of contingent academic labour. Our union has organized itself and its bargaining units in a way that includes all post-secondary educators. Essentially, we have adopted an industrial union model of organizing. Every member is covered by our collective agreement and is represented at the bargaining table when we are negotiating with our employers.

The scope of our bargaining units at this time does not include those involved in continuing education programs at our institutions. Although these program areas are relatively small, FPSE has been working to expand our current scope to ensure that continuing education instructors are covered by our collective agreements.

Our bargaining structure is an important starting point for organizing because it ensures that we are using the collective strength of full and part-time instructors to secure gains for everyone. It sounds simple enough, but it has taken a long time to get to this point.

During the 1990s, when a far more progressive provincial government was in power, we were able to mobilize at both the local and provincial levels to ensure that our inclusive bargaining structure was able to deliver tangible benefits to our members. The most important benefit,

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in terms of dealing with the issue of contingent academic labour, was our contract language that established a very transparent and accessible standard for something we call regularization.

That standard laid out the basic requirements for becoming a “regular employee”. It specified the number of courses and semesters that would lead to regularization. In concrete terms, the threshold says that if an instructor teaches 50% or more of a full course load for two years and there is available work in the third year, they are regularized.

It took our union most of the 1990s to achieve that common standard and it made an enormous difference in dealing with the issue of contingent academic labour. It hasn't eliminated it, but it has helped tip the balance towards more secure employment for our members.

We also succeeded in negotiating other benefits that enhance the protections available to non-regular faculty. For example, we have a system-wide registry of laid-off faculty with rights to move from one institution to another. We have a standard mechanism for dealing with harassment complaints. We also achieved pro-rated employer-paid health and welfare benefits including short and long term disability. And finally, we were able to negotiate maternity and parental leave provisions as well as pension buy-back provisions for those who have long gaps in their teaching careers.

In many respects, our language on regularization is similar to what those in a university setting would call tenure albeit with some important exceptions but our objective is employment security that is based on **measurable standards** like course hours and teaching, and to have that security apply to every instructor in our bargaining unit.

**Any other system** gives senior administrators more power to pick favourites and undermine legitimate employment security

Our regularization language is far from perfect. We still have major battles with employers who are always trying to de-rail an instructor's progression towards regularization. We are also dealing with a provincial government that wants to greatly undermine our regularization provisions.

We will be at the bargaining table in the next couple of months and will push to strengthen our current regularization provisions. However, in terms of an organizing tool to address the issue of contingent academic labour, our regularization language has proved invaluable in our fight to both protect the interests of **all** our members and strengthen solidarity within our membership.

Beyond the bargaining table, we have also changed our union structure to ensure that non-regular instructors have an active voice within our union. For example, we have a designated **Federation of Post-Secondary Educators of BC** [www.fpse.ca](http://www.fpse.ca)

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position on our Provincial Bargaining Committee for non-regular faculty. We have made that change to not only ensure that the non-regular faculty voice is heard within our bargaining strategy, but also for that voice to be heard across the table by the employer.

That designation sends a strong signal to the employer that we are serious about employment security for all members. As well, it is a reminder within our union that collective strength requires collective action and collective action means addressing the needs of all our members.

We have also ensured that our union policy-making mechanisms—union committees, delegated meetings and conventions—incorporate the needs and views of non-regular faculty. Every FPSE Standing Committee is constitutionally required to have a non-regular faculty representative on the Committee. One of our mandated Committees deals specifically with non-regular faculty issues. And we also encourage our locals to have similar representation for non-regular faculty within their committee structure and decision making processes.

We have made these changes in our union structure and collective bargaining strategies because we believe that all post-secondary educators have equal value. It is a critical starting point for any substantial discussion about how we address the issue of contingent academic labour because our employers, of course, want to cherry-pick their way through post-secondary faculty. The employer wants to create arbitrary measures of who is important and who is not. They want to skew the compensation debate to enable their arbitrary choices. But most of all, the employer wants to pit educators against one another and use the disunity to create a post-secondary education environment that reflects their values and priorities.

Our fight on the contingent academic labour issue is about more than basic employment security. It's also about the kind of post-secondary education environment we want to see for our members and our students.

And that larger question brings me to my last point which is political action. Like many in the labour movement, FPSE understands very clearly that our struggle for better contracts and better protections for our members is closely tied to ballot box choices made at election time.

Because most of the funding of our public post-secondary system comes from the provincial government, the outcome of provincial elections is critical to the future of the post-secondary education system.

As many of you know, for the last five years the BC Liberals have formed government. Their party name is deceiving because they are anything but liberal. In fact, our Premier, Gordon Campbell, has far more in common with George W Bush than any so-called liberal you might meet.



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What that has meant to post-secondary educators in BC is that we, like thousands of other unionized workers in the province, have been fighting an uphill battle to basically protect some of the important gains that we were able to secure at both the bargaining table and through government policy during the 1990s and up until 2001.

Policy and funding changes made over the last five years have radically altered access and affordability for students in our post-secondary education system. BC Liberals “de-regulated” tuition fees for example, a move that led to skyrocketing increases—as much as 300% in some institutions—and staggering levels of student debt. The BC Liberals also undermined per-student funding within post-secondary education. During their first term they let real funding per-student decline, effectively robbing the public system of at least \$200 million in proper funding.

The provincial government also dismantled another important aspect of post-secondary education: our system of trades and technical training. In its place, the government has tried to open the door to private, for-profit trainers and given employers virtual veto over curriculum development and funding choices.

The cumulative effect of these radical changes has proven to be a disaster for BC. At a time when our province is facing a looming skills shortage in every trade and occupation—white collar or blue—the government’s post-secondary education policies and funding choices have made it more and more difficult for students to access or complete the post-secondary education they need.

The government’s legislative action in post-secondary hasn’t been limited to funding and enrolment issues either. In 2002, the BC Liberals passed legislation that effectively ripped up parts of our collective agreement that covered the issue of class size in the post-secondary system. At the time, even normally conservative voices found the legislation over-the-top. The Globe and Mail newspaper—owned by Thompson Corporation and hardly sympathetic to the labour movement—called the legislation “legislative vandalism”. The newspaper saw very clearly that if governments were able to legislatively rip-up signed contracts, what does that say about the security of any signed legal contract?

When you face that kind of legislative assault, it’s no surprise that members are willing to become active and mobilized for political action. FPSE members, like the rest of the labour movement in BC, understand the connection between their workplace and the ballot box. They understand that right-wing governments can do a lot of damage to not only their collective agreements, but also to the post-secondary education system.

In the 2005 provincial election we did not succeed in defeating the BC Liberals, but their vastly reduced majority sent a strong message that ordinary British Columbians wanted to see an end to Campbell’s confrontational style of governing.

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But the labour movement and FPSE also understand that political action isn't just about elections. It's also about mobilizing public support for your issues between elections and holding governments accountable for their decisions.

That's one of the reasons why FPSE is launching a major campaign this Fall to press the provincial government to fix the mess it has created in post-secondary education. Our public system is chronically under-funded. Our students are facing enormous access barriers and all of this at a time when even those in the business community agree that we need to open the door for more people to get post-secondary education and training.

Our campaign will start in the first week of the Fall semester and carry through until December with a variety of community and institution-based actions to pressure the provincial government to make better policy and funding choices. It is a campaign designed to improve conditions at every public post-secondary institution, both for our members, part time and full time, and our students. It is a campaign that will engage our members at the local level and remind them that if we are serious about seeing our vision for accessible and affordable post-secondary education survive in our province, we have to be at the forefront of that public debate, articulating our solutions and building public support for those solutions.

It's an ambitious undertaking but one that will test again our internal commitment to solidarity. And ultimately that commitment will provide another tool in our on-going struggle to deal with both the issue of contingent academic labour and our vision for a more progressive post-secondary education work environment.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Cindy Oliver', written over a horizontal line.

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