

Columbia College faculty union convenes secret tribunal to discipline members

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On December 10, the *Chicago Reader* reported on a bitter fight that has erupted in the Columbia Faculty Union (CFAC) at Columbia College Chicago over the union steering committee's decision to convene a "Membership Integrity Committee" to threaten and discipline members raising questions over the union's handling of contract negotiations and preparations for a strike. The private school, located in the South Loop district, was founded in 1890 and specializes in the arts and communications.

A resolution of the union's steering committee states that the function of the new committee is to "receive and hear charges filed by any member against any other member whose conduct is alleged to cause harm to the objects and aims of the Union, including its bargaining and organizational objectives, or harm to any member of the Union."

The extremely broad mandate given to this new union body, whose members are not named, includes the power to try the accused and determine guilt or innocence, and to levy fines, suspend or even expel union members. Part-time faculty have rightly raised the concern that the union is leading a witch-hunt against those who would dare question its leadership, with Jennie Fauls writing in the *Columbia Chronicle*, "The Integrity Committee might as well have posted their decree in the Salem, Massachusetts, town square in the late 17th century."

Among the first of at least five union members to be hauled before the union tribunal was Gita Kapila, a film instructor, for alleging that the union was broke, and thus not in a position to be calling for a "permanent" strike during this fall semester. Kapila was also fired from her union post as a part-time administrative employee of the union after insisting that the union president, Diana Vallera, produce invoices in relation to

a Department of Labor audit that found inadequate records were kept by union officers claiming reimbursement for expenses.

Another, Michele Hoffman, a marine biology instructor, was charged with "trying to undermine the union and its officers" by an anonymous accuser, after she handed out statements at a union press conference asking questions about officer salaries and expenses, and about why members had not been informed about an administration proposal for a 10 percent pay increase.

Carey Friedman, another part-time faculty member, was accused of using "improperly attained membership information to attack the union and make false personal attacks on the union President," for circulating a list of questions to the membership via email. According to the *Reader* report, the questions were: "Is there a strike fund? How many members signed strike cards? Why hadn't the union formally responded to the administration's contract proposal? Why is the union rejecting a federal moderator? And, have we explored all options before striking?"

The Membership Integrity Committee itself has been clouded in secrecy. So far, none of the charging statements have been signed, or any of the accusers made known, and the committee membership has been kept secret. Those accused were also told not to bring legal counsel with them to the proceedings, which several of them refused to attend.

This assault on democratic rights clearly tramples on any notion of due process. The union's use of anonymous accusers to charge members has, of course, more recent precedents than Salem. The #MeToo hysteria, promoted incessantly at colleges throughout the US, has unapologetically upheld the notion that "women must be believed," given credence to

anonymous allegations and scuttled due process protections for the accused.

For their part, both Hoffman and Friedman stated their personal support for unions, with Hoffman also saying, “I want a union that is democratic,” and Friedman insisting that “This isn’t union busting. It’s union informing, so we can make proper decisions.”

It appears that the CFAC leadership under Vallera is retaliating against these union members for raising questions about its handling of the negotiations. It was widely expected that part-time faculty would go on strike this fall, with the union website stating, “The fall strike action will be a full blown, permanent open-ended strike that involves part-time faculty.” This strike, which did not materialize, was apparently rescheduled to the third or fourth week of the upcoming spring semester.

This policy of prohibiting questions is undoubtedly designed to intimidate the rank-and-file and derail a genuine struggle. The faculty certainly have cause to be in an uproar. With instructors having worked without a contract since August of last year, the college administration is trying to use the drop in student enrollment, from around 12,500 in 2008 to around 7,300 in 2017, as a cudgel to extract concessions by claiming a need to reorganize departments and update programs. A portion of this drop can even be laid at the feet of the college administration itself, which decided to change Columbia’s historic policy of open enrollment to one of being moderately selective, that is, rejecting some students who do apply, a policy change that has also angered many faculty.

One of the main issues in the contract negotiations has been over the role of seniority in determining course assignments. The college administration is seeking to create a pool of assignments available to those whom it chooses, under the cover of wanting to hire “highly skilled faculty with a record of success in their professional fields outside of Columbia and with very current knowledge and professional networks.”

The conflicts at Columbia College Chicago reflect the escalating crisis of higher education funding nationally. Among the terrible effects of the decades-long defunding of higher education by state and federal administration has been dramatic growth of the “adjunct industry”. The conditions facing these workers are appalling. Holding advanced degrees, for

which they have often gone into serious debt in the course of earning, adjuncts usually receive no health insurance or other substantial benefits.

Presently less than 17 percent of college instructors are tenure-track, leaving the vast majority as contingent labor usually having to reapply each year or semester. According to a 2014 congressional report, about 89 percent of adjuncts work at more than one institution, with 13 percent working at four or more. The median pay per course is a measly \$2,700, with 25 percent of adjuncts receiving public assistance like Medicaid or food stamps. Meanwhile the salaries of college presidents have skyrocketed.

Growing numbers of adjuncts have signed onto unions, with the American Federation of Teachers, the United Auto Workers, UNITE-HERE and the Service Employees International Union all making a major campaign to recruit new dues-paying members. However, these faculty unions function as little more than cheap labor contractors. The living standards of adjuncts continue to be savaged. The actions of the CFAC may appear startling in their broad contempt for the members, but they simply encapsulate the ongoing role of unions throughout the US.



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