



What It Is Like Being An Adjunct Professor

By David Johnson

I am an adjunct college professor, or at least I was; I quit about 9 months ago. It is a little murky because I am still teaching one online class, but after this semester is over I will wrap that one up and probably be done for good. I feel pretty sad about it because there were a lot of things that I really liked about teaching. I enjoyed discussing philosophy and other topics, such as current events, and I liked getting to know the students and interacting with them. I also felt like it allowed me to work on my creative projects because there was a lot of time off and time during the day between classes. It was also nice to have some free time during the day in case I had a dental appointment, or something like that. It is good for creative people because it is a much freer schedule than working 8 a.m. - 5 p.m. in a cubicle, or even worse, doing hard manual labor. I didn't hate it. That is significant because I usually do really hate having a job. I don't think it is because I am lazy, because I work really hard on projects that I care about, but I hate working for others doing monotonous boring tasks because it takes up so much of my time and takes me away from the things that I really want to work on. I have definitely felt the 'alienation of labor'

that Karl Marx describes when I have had to work manual labor jobs. I hate being exploited and taken advantage of, and I knew that was happening in some of the jobs that I had while a student.

But teaching felt different, at least at first. I loved being a student; that was my favorite time of life, during my last couple of years of college and grad school when I could just focus on being a student and not having to work. Teaching was not as good as that, but it was close.

My feelings about it started to change a few years ago though. I was asked by a union representative to be on the adjunct faculty bargaining committee as we negotiated a new three year contract, and I decided to do it, not realizing how much time and effort it would require. Being on the bargaining committee really changed my perspective. I was already aware of some of the downsides of the job, of course, such as not having any benefits, but I started to see more and more just how much we were being exploited.

I think what got to me the most is that they did not even attempt to argue that it was fair, in fact they acknowledged on several occasions that it was very unfair what adjuncts were paid in general, but it didn't matter, they would not do anything to fix it. I may have been upset if someone didn't agree with me about whether something was fair or unfair, but I think I could have accepted that more easily than having someone just acknowledge that they knew it was blatantly unfair but they were doing it anyway. I guess I am an idealist: I would like to think that with most people, if you can convince them of the justness of your cause that they will actually do something about it and change their behavior, but unfortunately moral arguments about justice and fairness don't work at the negotiating table. Everybody is an egoist during a negotiation. The only thing that matters is how much leverage you have.

It reminds me of something that my brother said about insurance companies. (He is a lawyer who deals with them a lot. I actually worked for him for a year as a paralegal.) He told us that insurance companies only respond to risk. If you are hoping that they will do the right thing just because it is the right thing, keep dreaming. It could be very clear that the client had the proper insurance coverage and there are very well-documented injuries with lots of medical records to prove it, but the insurance company would still fight it or at least draw it out as long as possible, hoping to just wear the person down so that they would take less. Unfortunately sometimes that worked. In my experience it seems like they fight the claim whenever their insured customer disputes that it was his or her fault. If their customer admits fault then the insurance company will go ahead and settle the claim because they know what that person would say in court, and they don't think it is worth it to fight in those cases. But if their insured will not admit fault, no matter how ridiculous that person's version of events is, the insurance company will fight to the bitter end even if it is clear and obvious to any rational person that they owe the damn money. I know that there are people who exploit and try to defraud insurance companies as well, but so often they refuse to pay when they absolutely should be paying. Why? Because they are morally bad people. That is the only conclusion I can reach. They are dishonest and selfish, they don't care about the welfare of others, they only care about money. That is a description of a morally bad person. The only time an insurance company would look to settle was when they were

worried that if the case went to trial they could lose a lot more. Hence, why my brother said that they only responded to risk.

I hate negotiations because to me it seems like both sides are trying to take advantage of the other, and how good the deal is judged to be is based upon how much you were able to get one over on the other guy. How is that just? By definition the deal is not fair, even to you, if you feel like you 'got the better of him'. So you are celebrating being unjust. Good for you, asshole. What a great guy. It might be one thing if the two parties disagreed about what was fair, but no, you know that you are being unfair and you are doing it anyway because you are a selfish unjust piece of shit.

I don't want to do business with or really have any dealings at all with someone who is trying to take advantage of me. But you cannot really avoid them if it is your employer, and they won't have it any other way. So then you have to be selfish too, and try to negotiate with them to keep them from exploiting you too much. It's awful.

Part of the problem for adjuncts is that the full-time faculty do not really support us. While we were negotiating I asked the full-time faculty and their union to support us, because the NEA is a much stronger union than the one that we had, but they would not do it. The NEA claims to support health care access for everyone, so one would think that they would be supportive of adjunct faculty asking for some kind of affordable health care coverage, similar to what the full-time faculty have, or a health care stipend, or something, but they wouldn't support us at all on anything. In fact, they were actually trying to undercut us. They didn't see it as 'We are all faculty, we are in this together' it was every man for himself. I guess they figured it was a zero sum game in which the administration will only give out so much in pay and benefits, so they wanted to fight with us to have an even larger slice of the pie than they already had. I don't think that is really the case, I think we all would have gotten more if we would have had greater numbers and stuck together, but that was the approach their union took.

I have been without health insurance now for five or six years because as an adjunct I am considered to be only a part-time employee. Maybe it wouldn't actually do me any good to have it because it is an insurance company after all, with an inherent conflict of interest, so often they won't pay the damn claim anyway, but health care prices are so exorbitant it does cause me a lot of worry and stress. I have been lucky so far, no major injuries or illnesses, but who knows how long that will continue. They call it an 'accident' for a reason; you often cannot predict when something will happen.

Here is what does not make sense about that: there are many jobs out there that offer benefits to part-time workers. Starbucks, Costco, REI, Trader Joe's, Aerotek, Home Depot, Lowe's, Staples, Chico's FAS, Nike, Land's End, Uhaul, JP Morgan Chase (most bank teller jobs have benefits even it is only part-time) and even some jobs in education, such as a Teacher's Aide, which requires no more than a high school diploma. Theoretically, an 18 or 19 year old college student

in one of my classes who does not even have an associate's degree yet could get one of these part-time jobs and in many ways be better off than me in my 'part-time' job.

If all of these companies can afford to offer benefits to their part-time workers why can't colleges and universities? Obviously they can, they just don't want to. They have the money, they would just rather spend it on student recruitment efforts, or new buildings and brand new technology. I realize that those things are important for the long-term success of the college because that is part of what will attract new students, but it ought to be balanced out with making an investment in their employees as well, and being fair. Administrators certainly have plenty of great benefits and job perks for themselves. They are happy to spend money on that.

As an adjunct I taught a ton of classes each semester. No one really wants to do that, but I felt like I needed to because I didn't want to turn any down when they came along if it was possible to fit them into my schedule because you don't know what the future holds and how many you will have the next semester or beyond, so you kind of have to take them when you can get them. That also keeps you in the good graces of the department chairs. If you turn down too many class assignments, especially without having a good reason, it won't be great for getting classes in the future. One semester I taught 9 classes at 5 different campuses. Teaching at so many different colleges is challenging because they all have different deadlines and policies regarding things that you have to do outside of teaching. I had to do training for FERPA and avoiding sexual harassment, etc., for each one of them, even though it is exactly the same training that I had already done that very same semester at another school. And then of course there is all the driving. During that semester it was 2-3 hours of driving per day. I felt overwhelmed and from then on I realized that I had to scale back, but 7 or 8 classes in a semester was not unusual for me.

When you teach that many classes there are just so many papers to grade, and other assignments, that you don't have time to give very much personalized feedback. I got to where I could grade a paper in 8-10 minutes. It was the only way I could survive. But I wish that I could have given more feedback and more individual help.

It is just not possible to do as good of a job when you are teaching 7-8 classes a semester, often at 3 or 4 different campuses, as you could if you only taught 3-4 classes. You get to know the students better because it is not as many new names to remember, and you just have more time in general to devote to each class, which really helps. During the summer when I only taught 1 or 2 classes, or on the few occasions where I only taught 6 during a regular semester, it seemed much easier. I think I may have burned out on teaching earlier because of trying to teach so many classes at once.

If adjuncts made more money and had benefits then we would not have to teach so many classes in order to survive, and we could do a better job with the classes that we do have. No one can do a great job when they are extremely busy and feel overwhelmed. I think that paying adjunct professors more and just making it a better job in general would be at least as big of a factor in

determining how good the experience is for the students as having the class held in a brand new building. I do think that a minimum has to be met in terms of the facilities, i. e. the computer and projector has to work, the desks need to be comfortable, the room temperature cannot be too hot or too cold, and so on, but as long as the basics are met it really doesn't matter all that much beyond that.

Administrators (and corporate leaders in general) have some misplaced priorities. They will cut the job of a secretary who makes \$20,000 a year, and who actually does a lot of work to keep the department running smoothly, but they will never cut administrative positions. Many of those jobs pay over \$200,000 per year, or maybe even \$400,000 per year, and they do very little actual work. It is a bloated top-heavy bureaucracy that has many roles that are not even needed. Apparently efficiency is only important at the lower end of the hierarchy.

I guess it is just like other areas of life where people at the top get the lion's share of the benefits while also doing the least amount of work. It is actually a lot like how things are in a pride of lions - the lionesses do all the work, then the male lion comes in and eats first, taking twice as much as what everybody else gets, even though he didn't do a damn thing to actually catch the prey. That is how it is with administrators and bosses of all types, really. Others do most of the actual work, but the boss gets most of the credit and the financial benefits.

Most employers do not think of employees as human beings, they only think of them as labor costs. I believe that many of them violate Kant's categorical imperative because they think of and treat employees as a mere means only.

As an adjunct, it is not only the low pay and the lack of benefits that is hard to swallow, it is also the lack of respect. Most full-time faculty treat us like equals, but for the college as a whole it is another story. At one place where I taught they wouldn't even tell me the code so that I could use the copy machine. Their policy was that I had to take it to the print shop so that they could approve what I was copying. I have seen full-time faculty print off hundreds of pages, literally book-length manuscripts, but I am not allowed to use the copier? They are already paying me like crap, now they have to nickel and dime me even more in order to save \$10 or \$20 per year on paper? It is just ridiculous. On this particular occasion I didn't have time to take it to the print shop before class started (the print shop never would have been able to finish it in time) because I didn't know about the policy, so I had to just put the quiz up on the projector and have students write their answers down on a sheet of their own notebook paper. I guess I was able to make it work, but what I wanted to print was related to the class and it would have made things much easier if I could have just printed the damn quizzes. Little things like that can really get to you after awhile.

Another problem is not having any office space. In this regard community colleges were actually better than universities in my experience. Perhaps it is just because community colleges had a higher number of adjuncts, so they would at least have an office that all of the adjuncts in that department shared, and there was also a conference room or somewhere to meet with students if

the office was busy. At two different smaller universities where I taught they didn't have any kind of office for me to use at all. No access to a computer, unless I went to the library and just used one along with the students. One time I had to go to the library with a student so that he could take a make-up test and I just had to sit next to him at a desk in the library to proctor it. I don't know what he thought about it, but it was embarrassing to me. It seemed very unprofessional. At that college I had nowhere to meet with students for office hours, or for any other reason, because there was a class that came into the room right after ours finished up, so we couldn't just stay in the classroom, and there was nowhere else to go except the library.

I know that I have been complaining a lot here, and it feels kind of whiny when I read it. I do recognize that there is a spectrum of exploitation. Despite all of the problems and the low pay, things are not nearly as bad for adjunct professors as they are for fast food workers, and even fast food workers here in the U.S. are way better off than 'guest workers' in several countries in the Middle East, or sweatshop workers in other places around the world. Those workers are not much better off than slaves. In some ways I almost feel a little bit guilty for complaining about my life when things are so much better for me than it has been and continues to be for so many people around the world. But it is still unjust, even if the injustice is not as extreme. Okay, so we have established that college and university presidents are not as bad morally as slave owners. Congratulations. It is not exactly a high bar, though, so exceeding it is not really much of an accomplishment. And really, the only thing that holds some of them back from paying even less is the law. You know that some of them would be even more exploitive if they could get away with it. It is certainly not ethical concerns that hold them back.

I guess because of the level of education that is required to get the job, adjunct faculty feel like they should be paid something that is more equivalent to others with a similar level of education. Professors in general do not make very much in comparison to people in professional fields with similar levels of education, such as doctors or lawyers. I have three siblings who are all lawyers and who each make a ton of money. My sister gets \$325 per billable hour, and one of my brothers made \$495 per billable hour. My other brother does not bill by the hour, but he makes something fairly equivalent.

My parents were very disappointed that I did not go to law school or medical school, which is probably how most parents would feel. It is hard to explain to someone who is not interested in philosophy and the arts why I would want to devote myself to those things and only make \$30 to \$35 thousand per year with no benefits when I could just go to law school. I have my reasons, which I will not get into here, but it is frustrating for them, and it is frustrating for me that they don't understand and I can't make them understand. It is a difficult path to try to be a man of letters; the arts are feast or famine, either you are famous and celebrated, and along with that a millionaire, or you are a broke nobody. To make matters worse, even if you do eventually become famous, it could be well after you are dead. So why pursue it then? I guess it is just because I love it. Not many people love law so much that they would do it in their spare time even if they did not get paid to do it, but that is the case for nearly all artists of any type. Most of

us do not get paid for it, or at least not very much, but we do it anyway. If we want money it is usually just so that we can be financially independent and then have time to do more art.

I don't really expect to be paid like a lawyer, or a doctor, I know that is not realistic. Some of this is just supply and demand, and those professions are much more in demand. I just wish I could be paid something that is equivalent to what full-time professors make, since I do basically the same job that they do. To me it does not seem like that is being unreasonable.

I do not know what the future holds. I quit out of anger and frustration without having a good plan for what I will do instead, and I have been paying the price for making such an emotional decision. As much as one is exploited as an adjunct professor, it is just as bad or worse with many manual labor jobs. I guess we just expect that being a professor would be a better job than slinging hamburgers at a fast food restaurant or working as a laborer in a warehouse. Maybe we shouldn't, but we do. We do almost exactly the same job as the full-time faculty, and in many cases adjuncts have the same level of education, publications, etc., so it seems like we should be treated the same, and we definitely are not.

I hope that one day I can find something better. I wish everyone could.