

Professors on Picket Lines: Faculty Unions Confront New Job Pressures

by Gregory DeFreitas

The last good job in America” is how one recent book describes the college teaching profession. Long vacations, flexible hours, job security and autonomy, and above-average pay and benefits make university faculty appear uniquely privileged and insulated from the problems that most working people face today.¹ Professors represented by faculty unions would seem to be even more sheltered from labor market risks.

Why, then, would hundreds of tenured and tenure-track professors risk their jobs in a lengthy strike? In September 2003, full-time faculty at Long Island University’s C.W. Post campus traded the classroom for the picket line for nearly three weeks at the start of the fall term. The campus, with some 12,000 undergrad and graduate students on the elegant North Shore estate of the Post Cereal heirs, is the largest of three distinct campuses (along with Brooklyn and Southampton) of L.I.U. Full-time faculty at each campus are represented by separate union locals, though all are affiliates of New York State United Teachers (NYSUT). At Post,

The Post faculty strike was notable not only for its length, but also for the fact that it was the sixth strike at the campus in the past 30 years, and it spotlighted a number of difficult issues confronting professors at more and more universities across the country, including: the time pressures in meeting required teaching workloads as well as advising students, doing college committee work, conducting research, and publication; weak salary growth; rising health insurance cost burdens pushed onto faculty; the shift of most teaching from full-time faculty to low-paid, part-time adjunct teachers with little or no fringe benefits and no hope of tenure protections; and university and government efforts to challenge faculty union rights. Last June, Gregory DeFreitas interviewed two leaders of the C.W. Post faculty union: Dr. RALPH Knopf, President of the union, and his math department colleague Dr. Anne Burns, a member of the union’s executive board and negotiating team.

Q: Could you both first tell us a little bit about your own backgrounds in academia and with the faculty union?

RALPH K.: I’ve been at Post for 43 years teaching mathematics. I got involved with the union after the strike of 1977 when I felt that after picketing for several weeks, I could make a contribution. Subsequently, I became secretary of the union and ultimately president of the union, a position I’ve held for approximately 20 years.

Q: And you’re periodically up for reelection?

RALPH K.: Yes, we have an election every two years.

Q: And, Anne, what about you?

ANNE B.: I’m also a professor of mathematics. I’ve been at C.W. Post for 29 years. I was on the negotiating team and I do a lot of the statistical analysis for the union.

Q: How many strikes have there been since then, not counting last fall?

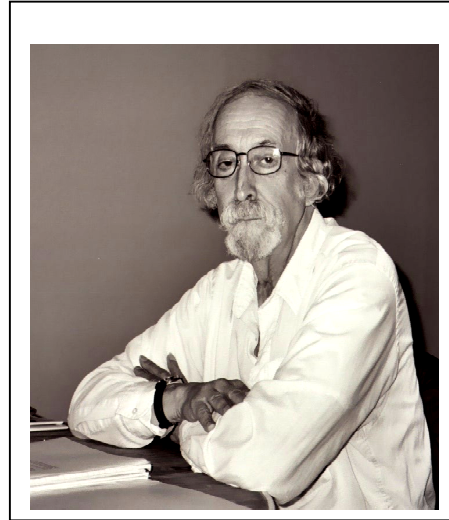
RALPH K.: Well, there was a strike in 1977, there was a strike shortly after I became president in 1985, and we ended up with one in 1991, ‘94 and ‘97.

Q: So you’ve had six strikes?!

RALPH K.: I’m afraid so. It’s been a rough situation. I should say something about the general picture. I think we have something different at CW Post than most places, hopefully, have. We’re part of Long Island University, which is a private university with three residential campuses and several satellite campuses whose courses are taught by faculty from the residential campuses. This gives our administration tremendous power to split people against each other and it’s also very useful to the board of trustees, which tends to be a businessman’s club for their own interests. With that background, we have been in this eternal struggle.

Q: Have the issues in those previous years in which there were strikes differed? Or do you think there’s a commonality in terms of friction that’s long lasting between faculty and administrators?

RALPH K.: One thing that has aggravated things at CW Post since 1991 is the big issue of workload. We've had on our agenda the nine-credit workload: we've been working twelve credits a semester. And that really was the issue of the 1991 strike. And it has appeared over and over again. One of the problems here is that we're rather isolated. Here we are in a three-campus university and it's our issue, but it has not been the issue of the other two campuses.



Q: Why is that, do you think?

RALPH K.: Well, for the Southampton campus, they're kept permanently in a state where they're worried about their future existence. They are told that they are accumulating deficits of \$5 million a year and that unless they shape up, they're going to be closed down. And so there's a problem sitting right over there. And so whatever their issues might have been, when they go to negotiate, all they want to negotiate is a "me-too" with C.W. Post which always involves an agreement not to strike. That means that we have a built-in situation where by the time we get down to real negotiations for a contract that will cover the two campuses, Southampton has already agreed not to go out on strike.

Brooklyn has a different culture, and I wouldn't say that it's the same at all as Southampton. They have a different culture and the nine-credit issue just has not matured there. I can't say exactly why. I think it has something to do with the internal relations inside the place, and that's as much as I want to say. There are interest groups, and because there are interest groups, a certain issue doesn't surface.

Q: Do they have different issues at Brooklyn?

RALPH K.: That brings us to the point I'm making: the three-campus situation leads to a situation in which the administration plays us all against each other by having us sign "me-toos" with the other campuses. We didn't do it this time, but we have done it. So we're not entirely without blame for this situation. But it's a situation where one of the campuses -- if it agrees to a particular contract -- always has a "me-too" in it with an agreement not to strike. That is literally a drag on any other campus that is trying to push things forward.

Q: So, in terms of the structure of the negotiations each time, you don't get together ahead of time as president of the CW Post faculty union with the Brooklyn and the Southampton presidents and put together a common set of demands, et cetera?

RALPH K.: We have tried to do that, and we had close contacts, actually, with the Brooklyn union in this particular situation. Several members of their executive board came to meet with us and our executive board prior to the negotiations. And the president of their union did come to a meeting of our membership, to which he was invited.

ANNE B.: And the Brooklyn campus went on strike this past fall, for one week.

RALPH K.: Yes, for the first time in history, both campuses on strike at the same time, although that again ended up with their signing a contract after a week -- a week and day -- which we could not accept, and once again, with a me-too.

Q: Does the provost of each campus basically negotiate only with its own faculty union and not get involved with what the others are doing?

RALPH K.: Well, the fact is we have always met to some extent.

ANNE B.: We have a provost who has very little say. Most decisions are made by the University Administration.

RALPH K.: I used to meet with him every month, prior to the last strike, and we did discuss extensively what we were likely to ask for. But, that all ended with the [2001] strike.

Q: So why did you not meet?

RALPH K.: I had the impression that he did not wish to continue these meetings after the strike three years ago. We did talk pretty extensively before that.

ANNE B.: He was new at the time and we were all optimistic that things would change for the better.

RALPH K.: He's a very personable man, and I did enjoy talking to him. But, I think that it became politically impossible to continue.

Q: But when it came to actually negotiate, the negotiations of your union and the unions at Brooklyn and Southampton, it's with representatives of the LIU president's office only?

ANNE B.: Right.

Q: So do they have an office of labor relations or just a bunch of lawyers who come down?

RALPH K.: Well, they have a lawyer -- the university counsel -- who's the chief negotiator. The provost from C.W. Post will sit at the table, but obviously, is not supposed to say anything. And the academic vice president of Long Island University has in the past attended most negotiations, although not this time. This time he only attended one session.

ANNE B.: The big difference between these negotiations and past negotiations is that in past negotiations the academic vice president was sort of the leader of the negotiations.

Q: Have you or other union members viewed that as negative?

ANNE B.: Absolutely. Very negative. In past negotiations we could raise questions and discuss things with the academic vice president and the provost. But now when we try to bring something up, the lawyer says he doesn't have the authority to deal with that particular issue. There's really no discussion going on.

Q: The union has no means to really directly interact with the academic leadership?

RALPH K.: That's correct.

ANNE B.: This last time we did not.

Q: So the last strike was in 2000?

RALPH K.: We did not strike at the beginning of the year, so it really went into 2001. We actually went to work without a contract for a while, and finally had to strike somewhere around February.

Q: Did that strike lead them to feel they needed to change and play more hardball, because you were talking at least to the provost before that? Up to that point you were able to talk to the academic vice president too?

ANNE B.: The provost was present at the table, especially towards the end, but he really didn't have much control over things. This last negotiation was completely different.

Q: That gets us into the next area that I wanted to talk about, which was the prelude to the fall 2003 strike. At what point did you present the union demands?

RALPH K.: The summer recess, in June.

Q: And you presented your demands before they had said to you what they were offering?

RALPH K.: They never presented any demands. They gave them verbally. They did not write down demands. We wrote down demands. They did not.

Q: And what were the initial union demands in June?

RALPH K.: Well, once again, we wanted to square away the nine-credit workload. We had made progress toward it. We had, in the 1997 negotiations, gotten a system which we call the "nine-credit option." This is a system where a person would apply to a committee and show some kind of research and so on and be given the nine-credit workload as a permanent status until such time as they were

challenged. In short, it was a semi-permanent position. Also, the option to do so was given to all new faculty. So, it's rather peculiar for a union to agree to something like that. But, after all the struggle we had gone through over the issue, I felt it was a step forward.

ANNE B.: It was what we called the "faculty research option," and there were limits. There were quotas on the number of people who could get it.

Q: So it was competitive, but the faculty mainly decided who got it and who didn't get it?

RALPH K.: That's correct.

Q: And about how many faculty members would get it at that point.

ANNE B.: Just before these negotiations about half the faculty, I think, had it.

Q: Was this available on the other two campuses, too?

RALPH K.: Well, it became available because it was a "me-too." It was, again, a strange fit, because I don't think it necessarily fit the culture there, especially at the Brooklyn campus. There were ripples there that were different from ours. It was very much appreciated on our campus, and our committee was a very stern committee, let me tell you. It did not simply accept people. It really put them through something in order to get the status.

Q: And what were the main criteria? Ongoing research?

RALPH K.: Sure. Ongoing research projects and so on. And of course, they were challengeable, but we had all kinds of limits on the number of challenges by administration, and so on. We, as a union, no matter how anybody else viewed it, viewed it as a step towards the nine-credit workload.

Q: That's a huge win. What happened to let you get it?

RALPH K.: We had a new academic vice president, and I authorized two individuals who were very academically inclined to meet with him and negotiate it with him as something that would encourage research at C.W. Post. And of course, at that point, we didn't say we would necessarily accept it, but it would then appear at the table as an administration proposal, and we as a negotiating team (these two individuals were not members of our negotiating team nor people particularly close to the leadership of the union) -- we would then consider it as an administration proposal and ask for such changes as we saw fit.

And after having, as I say, conducted a strike over the issue and so on, apparently people were ready for this step. So we did come up with it. The administration agreed to it and we finally had a negotiation that didn't have a strike.

Q: And there were wage increases and so on in that contract?

RALPH K.: Yes.

ANNE B.: We were very happy with it.

Q: Now presumably the *quid pro quo* was that they increased adjunct hours to make up for the full-time professors who were teaching less?

ANNE B.: It was actually phased in. It wasn't half the faculty at first. It was a small number and then the number was increased each year.

Q: But didn't they have to make up for that with more adjuncts?

RALPH K.: I don't know.

Q: And the adjuncts have never been in your union?

RALPH K.: That's correct. We had tried to organize them way back, before I became the president of the union. Our union was unsuccessful, and they became organized separately, first in an NEA [National Education Association] union and then, finally, in the Communication Workers of America [CWA]. But once again, their salaries and conditions of work tend to be governed by "me-toos," just like everything else we do at Long Island University. The overload rates that we get they end up getting as their salaries. Plus the fact -- an interesting fact -- that at Brooklyn, the adjuncts are members of the same union as the full-timers, and so their salaries are also negotiated over there.

Q: I see. But at Post, do the adjunct contracts come up at the same time as the full-time faculty's?

RALPH K.: No, actually not.

Q: They don't overlap? Have you and the adjuncts' union president tried to have any sort of communication and coordination?

RALPH K.: We have. However, to no avail. As I say, their condition tends to be fixed by what's happening to adjuncts elsewhere, at Brooklyn, for instance.

Q: Does Brooklyn have a larger adjunct population?

RALPH K.: No. It's just simply that early on, their union ended up with adjuncts and full-timers. Whereas, early on, our union had a split. I remember at one point we were told that a unit determination had been made that they had to be in a different union. I don't know. This was before my time as president. All I can say is I was so told. And we have never been able to bring the adjuncts into the union since that time. It would be difficult to do so anyway because they're organized in a different union. Up until this negotiation, we always were at least in verbal communications with the person who represents them, who is not on the campus. They have a union in which the negotiation is done by somebody that works for CWA in the city. We were in contact with him, but in this negotiation, we were unable to establish any contact.

Q: So in your negotiations with LIU, do they explicitly bring up adjunct issues at all in terms of saying, "Well, if you do this, we'll hire more adjuncts and cut down the number of full-timer slots," or is that always sort of scrupulously kept off the table?

RALPH K.: It's never discussed. I have never heard it discussed at the table, because I guess we're encroaching on another union. But it just hasn't been raised.

Q: And about what percentage of the teaching hours are taught by adjuncts?

RALPH K.: Too many. Well over a half, I am sure. Well, a good measure of it would be what happened in our strike, because we had a strike that was essentially solid throughout the School of Education, the School of Arts and Sciences, and had good participation elsewhere. But it was weak in the business school -- very weak in the business school.

Q: Right. In a December letter on your website from the University to the New York State Education Department, they say that from 65 to 79% of all courses were taught without interruption during the strike. Do you agree with that or do you think that's an exaggeration?

ANNE B.: I think it's an exaggeration. That is what they were claiming.

RALPH K.: It's an exaggeration, but the fact is that there are an enormous number of adjuncts at C.W. Post. As a matter of fact, in the School of Education, the number must be 70% to 80%. And of course, they had a problem with that, because the new state regulations are requiring that 50% of the credits be taught by full-timers. So they're bringing in full-timers. But again, we have a peculiar type of full-timer being brought in -- that is to say, visiting professors who are "visiting" from retirement very often.

So it is probable that their claim is an exaggeration, but it does get close to the truth, and given the high number of adjuncts they could, if they want to, run a school without full-timers at C.W. Post - except that the accrediting agency and the State Board of Education, hopefully, would not accept that..

Q: Have the adjuncts, to your knowledge, ever been on strike in the past?

RALPH K.: No.

Q: So getting back to last year at this time, you presented the union demands at Post in June. You said workload was a major issue. Progress had been made in '97 with the "nine-credit option." What then was the demand last summer that you were making with regard to workload?

RALPH K.: Well, we wanted to finally convert our nine-credit option into a nine-credit workload, and we had made great progress toward that. As a matter of fact, the last strike (which had been only three years before) was, among other things, over the question that administration wished to go back on a promise that they had made in the previous contract. This was that the nine-credit option would finally (they gave a number of years) become without quotas, meaning not that everybody would have it, but it would not be governed by a quota anymore.

Q: They had made that promise in the '97 contract?

RALPH K.: Yes, specifically in the contract. So in 2000, they were looking at the situation and realized that they were, in fact, moving toward a nine-credit workload, which, of course, was our full intention. So they therefore decided they wanted to put a quota on. And their reneging, in short, on their promise was one of the serious issues that caused us to go on strike in February and March of that year. And we did prevail. The quota was not there. Although, they did put something like, "under a financial exigency" so great as to god knows what (which of course, is not going to happen) that they would put a quota on or not permit any new people to go on.

ANNE B.: It might be interesting to note that one thing that happened after the strike three years ago after we got the nine-credit workload, was that the new academic vice-president, immediately after the negotiations, expressed a desire to go back to teaching.

RALPH K.: That really was significant, because it was clear that the administration had determined that they did not want to move in that direction, and that's what set up the present situation. Because, in the present situation, their proposal was initially to simply eliminate the nine-credit option. Of course, they softened that by finally offering to eliminate it, but to substitute for it a nine-credit one-semester load/twelve credits the next semester, for all faculty at CW Post.

This was one of those things, whether they knew it or not that led to the strike. -- They argued that this would benefit "most faculty." But it really enraged our faculty. All these new faculty members who had been brought in -- and we really searched for these new research-type faculty members, who are automatically given the nine-credit option under the provisions of the contract -- were horrified at what they heard. And of course, so were we all. And people were absolutely not going to accept it.

Q: You mean they were horrified at the threat to totally eliminate the nine-credit load?

RALPH K.: Exactly.

Q: Was it only during the strike when they said, "Well, we won't eliminate it, but we'll give people a nine-credit one semester and twelve credits the next"?

RALPH K.: No, it was still in the negotiation phase the weekend before. And we responded by calling a demonstration against this -- a very visible one in the rain in which I lost my voice for a while. And the faculty was solid at C.W. Post. They were not going to accept that.

Q: Now, just to be clear on this. At this point half the full-timers have nine credits all year long, right?

RALPH K.: At least. It may be a little bit more.

Q: So they were saying, "We're going to get rid of that system, and instead we're going to give everybody nine credits one semester but keep them at twelve credits the next"?

RALPH K.: That's correct. Brooklyn was dissatisfied with what was on the table. By this time, I should say, the 0% increase initially proposed by Administration while claiming to the public that it was a 2% increase, had turned into a 2% for real, and now they called the 2% a 4% increase, you understand. So now Brooklyn had on the table (we did, too) 2%-4%-4% in wages and the 12-9 split workload. And there was an additional issue that had now been injected which was very serious --

Q: So initially they basically proposed a 0% pay raise, claiming it was a 2% increase. Then they ultimately changed it to a real 2%?

RALPH K.: Claiming it was 4%. That's right. In the first year. And 4% the second and third.

ANNE B.: That proposal also was made only the weekend before school was to start.

RALPH K.: Brooklyn was dissatisfied with this. The Brooklyn union president at the time wanted to get more money. He felt that the people needed more money. But there was really another issue which we have not mentioned. We were also being asked to make a contribution toward the health plan which was not in our previous contracts. That was something they were demanding of us. And they wanted to charge all new faculty members 50% of the cost of their health plan.

Q: In dollars, roughly what would that be, do you think?

ANNE B.: It would be different for different plans. We have an indemnity plan, which they claim was costing them something like \$21,000 per faculty member.

RALPH K.: Neither we nor Brooklyn were anxious to accept this package.

Q: In previous years, was the faculty making no contribution, to the health plan?

RALPH K.: Except for the family plan on the indemnity plan, where we made a contribution, and that was a small percentage.

Q: So was this, in your recollection, the first time in all the years you were union president that they had made such a demand?

RALPH K.: Oh, absolutely. But that was an obviously serious matter. So we were working together at that time (the Brooklyn president and myself) and we both agreed that we were not going to accept what was on the table, and that's that. And so they began their strike on Thursday, the first day of their classes..

Q: So the administration's demand ... as well as the 2%-4%-4% wage increase -- was that all made the week before school started? Or did you have time to think about this health plan change?

RALPH K.: The health thing I think they told us about earlier. But not too much earlier.

Q: Did the union make a counter-offer or just reject any increase?

RALPH K.: We rejected it, and we did also ask for a lot of information, trying to figure out what the alternative plans were and a whole bunch of other things. I should say the thing is even more complex because they had in the previous year essentially taken away from us the indemnity plan that we had had from the very beginning. They did this by the maneuver of changing, two years before, the carrier. And then the carrier said they didn't want to carry it any more and the Post administration said, "Therefore, we have not violated the contract because it was not us who did it but the carrier." And we had had a big demonstration, by the way, about that. So, that was also hovering in the background.

Q: Your pension is a standard sort of 401K thing?

RALPH K.: It's the TIAA-Cref, and we didn't have any desire to touch that.

Q: What about retirees? This is becoming an issue in negotiations now around the country.

RALPH K.: That certainly was not a strike issue. Honestly the strike issues were what we just said -- the workload, the salary, the health-care contribution.

Q: So we're at the point when the contract expired.

RALPH K.: It had already expired, obviously, by September 1, but school does not begin on September 1. Even though there are some people, such as the library faculty, who are going to go to work immediately, traditionally we do not think about calling a strike until classes begin. We wouldn't want to put that burden on the people that have to work, starting from the day after Labor Day or whatever.

Q: But the union had a strike vote?

RALPH K.: Yes, we had already had a strike vote. One hundred percent of the people voted for a strike (with one abstention). That was in July. It was a huge meeting, as such meetings always are, and people said: "If that's what's going to be on the table, and the negotiating team does not report a significant improvement, we are ready to strike." That doesn't mean that we did not have further votes, because we did. The Brooklyn union already proposed a strike starting Thursday, when their classes were scheduled to begin. We sent a little note to the administration telling them we're going on strike on Monday (the first day of our classes), in conformity with the law.

But then significant changes took place that weekend. We're talking about the weekend before we were scheduled to go on strike and join with Brooklyn. The Administration's demands suddenly changed on Friday and then again on Saturday!

ANNE B.: Friday we had a meeting and the workload issue started to look like it was going to be solved. We probably wouldn't have gone on strike if they had given us even just some decent release time. We have release time in our contract for various faculty positions (for example, Chair of the Faculty Council). We tried to discuss this Friday night, and it looked as if they were going to allow some of this to continue; on Saturday they agreed to nine-credits across the board, but they also said that if we have that, it means the elimination of all other release time. Not for chairs or anyone.

RALPH K.: So that was part of what was muddying up the works. But there seemed to be some give at that moment, on Friday night. And we thought we had a contract.

ANNE B.: We were elated. We all went out to dinner. We were going to meet with them again Saturday. But when we came back, everything was off.

RALPH K.: Saturday, suddenly gloom settled in.

ANNE B.: No compromise.

RALPH K.: On Saturday, the idea of saving some of the release time disappeared. And suddenly popped back on the table something that we hadn't heard in a while, and that was an unlimited raise in the class size. We've had a tradition of limits on class quotas (as we call them) that really were established historically, and sometimes have been tampered with by both negotiations of the union or by negotiations of departments. But it's always been in some kind of reasonable process. And now, suddenly, we were hearing that all limits would be taken off.

Q: What are the limits, say, in mathematics?

RALPH K.: It was 33 by that time. It's been moving up due to a great many different reasons, and now, of course, they're saying it can be any amount -- whatever. And we didn't think that was acceptable. So all of a sudden on Saturday, we have a new problem. First of all, we can't even go back to our chairs and tell them they're going to lose all their release time. And of course, the bad salaries are still there, but we maybe had to eat that if we got something else. So all of a sudden we got a nine-credit workload, but with problems that are very difficult, that we can't live with.

Q: But also, at any time did they drop the demand on health insurance?

RALPH K.: No. So that was sitting there too.

Q: Are you thinking that the faculty would have agreed, if you'd got a nine-credit across-the-board load?

RALPH K.: We were going to negotiate that, too. First of all, we didn't think that the whole burden should be put on new faculty coming in. That's just a lousy situation and we weren't going to go for that. So we wanted to sort of distribute it out to everybody, and we ultimately prevailed on that. It is not 50% anymore, but it is a lesser amount for everybody except people on HMOs. For everybody but the HMOs, there would be some contribution. It just doesn't come to 50%. It comes to 5% in the second year and an additional 2% in the next. Which, of course, is going to be a problem. But that was still on the table.

Q: So they initially seemed to be relaxing on the nine-credit load and then they introduced these new issues?

RALPH K.: The class-size issue, and they hardened up on the release time. We had no other choice but to go ahead with our plans.

ANNE B.: One of the things I might mention about the release time was that a number of these new younger people that I'd mentioned were department chairs and on current nine credit teaching loads each semester. They were receiving six credits of released time to run their departments and three credits of released time for research, so were actually teaching three credits a semester. So this proposal would have them teaching more hours. These are people who were very interested in doing their research as well as doing a good job running a department.

RALPH K.: At this point, the administration essentially took the point of view (though they didn't say it): "We think Brooklyn will accept this." So we did not hear from them at all in the first week of the strike.

Q: So the strike begins --

RALPH K.: On Monday, after Labor Day. Brooklyn is out and we're out and they're negotiating at Brooklyn. We had not negotiated at all that week. In fact, I went to a big rally there and gave a speech. As a matter of fact, after I made my speech about how we were not going to accept what was on the table, the president of their union announced that he thought that he had a Contract.

Q: What were the key elements of the Brooklyn contract?

RALPH K.: They accepted the health care business, in the form that they said they may not want it distributed the way it was proposed. Maybe everybody should make a contribution, maybe they shouldn't just throw it all on new people, and so they said that they would leave that to their members to decide. But it would still be the same amount of money. It was some kind of two-options type of proposal on the table.

And the 2%-4%-4% (the wage raises) ended up called "4-4-4." And the total loss of release time, so that everybody works nine credits. All this they bought. However, they did improve the class size situation to no more than a 15% rise in class size for classes that were not "core courses." A ten percent rise for core courses and none for labs. So there were at least some kinds of limits.

Q: So in the next union meeting, when people looked at the Brooklyn contract, what was the main sticking point where the members said, "We just can't accept this"?

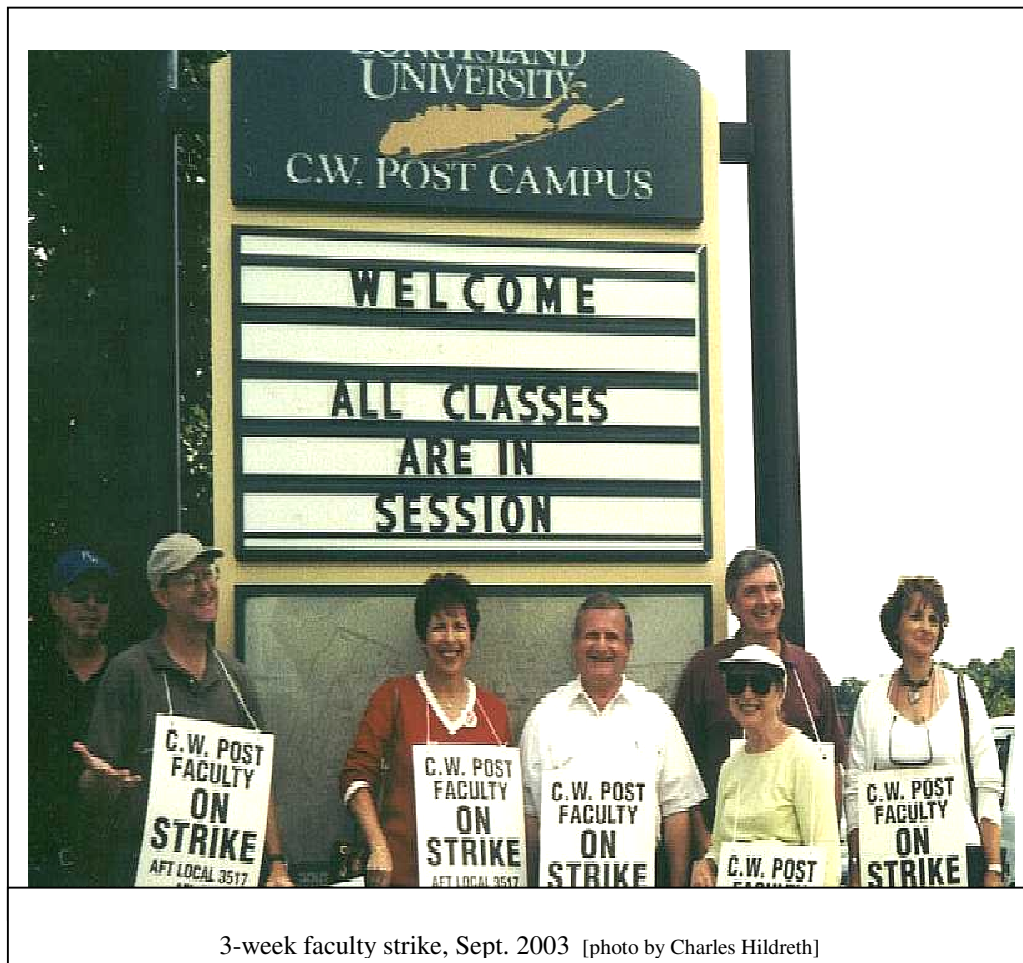
RALPH K.: The release time was a serious question. We've got 32 people on the campus who are heads of departments, a significant group of people. They have a job to do, and it means that faculty governance was being totally gutted, and we didn't like that. Released time for the President of the Faculty Council and other faculty governance positions had also disappeared. And the health insurance issue was still sitting there, and the inadequate wage increase was still sitting there, as was the very significant rise in class-size..

Q: Health insurance cuts for employees are, of course, a national issue now. I assume the administration said, "Well, it's not our fault. Health insurance premiums are going through the roof." What did the union respond to that?

RALPH K.: We made some investigations of other health plans. We tried to get information on alternatives.

Q: Did you conclude that they could have saved money with other carriers?

RALPH K.: We made the argument, but I don't know if we were able to substantiate it. They said they were "looking into it." Another issue had, of course, emerged in the process: now that we'd been out for a week, they were docking our pay for all the time we were out. So there was also a little question as to what we should do about that. Our faculty People was very firm at that moment that we were not going to accept the idea that we're going to be docked for our strike. Our position was that we wanted to make up the work, and be paid for the make-up.



3-week faculty strike, Sept. 2003 [photo by Charles Hildreth]

Q: So from the first day of the strike, they let you know that nobody was getting paid for those days.

RALPH K.: Right, and they were using the formula developed in an arbitration. Significant quantities of money were becoming involved at that point. So that was also hovering about.

Q: You went into the second week of the strike. That must have been a real blow. The Brooklyn faculty has settled, and your administration is saying, "What's the matter with you guys? Why don't you sign?"

ANNE B.: We had a mediator after two weeks. Actually we cleaned up almost everything except the docking issue. The docking was a huge issue. We were already talking about \$4,000 a person. And the mediator was not able to convince them to drop the docking.

Q: Was there some sort of communication with the students in the course of this?

RALPH K.: Yes, there was actually. And we even had a big march in which students participated.

Q: And what about other unions -- adjuncts, plant workers or clerical? Are they in unions at Post?

RALPH K.: Yes. But they're all covered by contracts with no-strike clauses in them.

Q: So they all had to go to work as usual?

RALPH K.: Yes.

Q: And the adjuncts were crossing the picket line as well?

RALPH K.: Not all adjuncts did cross, by the way.

Q: Do you know what the administration did to adjuncts who didn't cross? Was their pay docked?

RALPH K.: No action was taken against the adjuncts.

Q: What about teaching courses off campus?

RALPH K.: Yes, people did try to do that. They [the administration] said they would not honor this. And especially when people tried to meet students on the picket line, they were told they were to stop.

Q: Really? So they said that if you teach a class off campus, we won't recognize it as class time?

RALPH K.: Right. And that had been settled already in the previous arbitration. The arbitrator concluded that the Administration was right in its argument that we were employees, and that the only work that should be considered is work that was done when and where our employer indicated.

Q: What about NYSUT or other faculty unions? Were they helpful at all?

RALPH K.: I don't want to say anything against them. They did all they could do. I mean, what could they do? They came up with a leaflet to help us at one point. They were trying their best to help.

RALPH K.: We did have participation of faculty at other universities. There were some days when some NYSUT people did show up, and of course, they offered their strike loans without interest -- not that it had any impact, because we're not paid by the week. We're paid by the month, so if you're not going to be out for several months, that isn't going to help much. An important benefit is that NYSUT pays for all the strike expenses of the Union.

In the past some people from Brooklyn [L.I.U.] have, on occasion, come over to help us. This did not materialize this time. One reason why, I think is that they were having a big dispute themselves. They were in total disarray over there. As soon as they realized what they had bought, all hell broke loose. The union president had to resign.

Q: Briefly, what was the main anger there once they saw the contract?

RALPH K.: For instance, when I looked at their web page, when they were telling the people to come to a meeting to ratify this contract, they didn't even mention the raise in class size. That seemed to be a serious matter. People are concerned about that. We are teachers. The failure to mention it when it was, in fact, one of the big issues that was sitting in front of us... That's one of the reasons why we retained our strike.

Q: During the strike, did they ever threaten you with Yeshiva?¹

RALPH K.: Well, they didn't do that. But what they did was this. As we came into the third week, we were ready to settle the strike except for one issue: we just didn't want the docking. We wanted to make up the classes instead. But they were firm on that and, in the course of the week, they announced that all classes of faculty on strike would be canceled for the term.

Q: They didn't say they would fire all of you, right?

ANNE B.: Just for the rest of the term.

RALPH K.: All their classes would be canceled.

Q: And they'd be docked for the entire semester?

RALPH K.: Well, they wouldn't be paid, obviously, for the semester. They'd have half their pay gone, instead of a fifth.

ANNE B.: We had had a very large meeting on Monday, and people were very firm. Then a University letter came to everybody saying we had to sign a form by 10 pm Thursday promising to return to teaching the next Monday or else our classes would be canceled for the rest of the semester; after that we had a meeting on Wednesday (at a church) and many people expressed their concern.

Q: Did the union think that was realistic threat?

RALPH K.: No, we did not. It would be incredible. I think they'd lose their accreditation. At the union meeting at the church, I said that if they carry out this thing, two thirds of the faculty are out on strike today, and if we remain firm, they're going to be running a school with only adjuncts, except the business school. They can't do that. It's impossible. They're going to run against the state authorities, everybody else is going to look at them, and this cannot be done. I thought at that point if we remain firm, we'd have a contract by the end of the week.

But the people started to weaken at that point. I think some of the commentary is worthy of being known, that the world should know somehow that people got up there -- and these are some of the older faculty members -- and said: "I know the kind of people that are now in the administration of LIU. I know the kind of people who are on the board of trustees, and they don't care what they do. Only we care whether our school survives." I mean, this kind of a theme. They actually felt that the board of trustees had absolutely gone mad! We just wanted to get rid of this stupid docking. We were willing to accept this horrible health care package, this inadequate wage raise. But, they've got to punish us for being on strike?!

People clearly were turning at that moment. It was a bad day at the meeting. We didn't have any vote at the meeting, but the pressure became unbearable in the picket line after that, with people saying: "We've got to go back. We've got to go back." This kind of thing. And so we told the administration we were ready to meet. We had our meeting, and we agreed to the contract we now have.

Q: What did the union suggest to people about that document, given that you knew you were going to settle? Did you say it's a personal matter or did you suggest they not sign it?

ANNE B.: Yes, we told them not to sign when they called our union headquarters. At the meeting Thursday with the administration it was clear early in the afternoon that we were going to agree to the contract. But they kept us there until 11 pm just to see how many faculty would sign the form stating they would return to teaching on Monday; the deadline for that was 10 pm on Thursday. They kept us there by typing up the document and repeatedly making typos. It was really amazing.

RALPH K.: It's always hard. The press is never a friend of the union. I was surprised that we were able to have any serious effect at all from them. *Newsday*, for instance, at least they covered us. On the other hand, to give you an example of a bad situation: after the strike was over, there was a desire on the part of many of our faculty to try and say something to the world to explain our positions in human terms and not in union terms. A document was written up and faculty tried to put it in as an ad in *Newsday*. But, in something like an hour or two hour's time, the price of this ad got multiplied by so many times that it was just out of the world. It was an obvious case of discrimination against us. We tried to do something about it. We tried to get some help from the lawyers, but they could not manage to find a way to deal with it.

That was pretty unfortunate because the people do care and are interested in educating their students. But the administration was permitted to put an ad in *Newsday*, and we know it didn't cost what they told us this thing cost. It slandered the faculty. They put this ad in on that last day that we were in negotiations. It wasn't even negotiations anymore. We said, "Okay, we're ready to come back. Let's settle" They knew that we were about to sign a contract. We came in there at 11 in the morning? Anne, what time did we get out?

ANNE B.: 11:00 at night.

RALPH K.: They kept us there. Now they have that 10:00 at night deadline for people to sign a document stating that they will be back at work on Monday..

ANNE B.: They were told to go to their dean and sign it saying they'd go back to work.

RALPH K.: It's a "yellow dog" document.

ANNE B.: And we all knew by 3:00 in the afternoon that it was over.

RALPH K.: Yes. Everything was settled.

ANNE B.: They kept us waiting there for another eight hours, just to see how many faculty would actually go to their dean! They even put stuff on their web site. Even after we were there and everything was settled, they e-mailed people saying you've got to go tell your dean you're signing to return to work.

RALPH K.: And they got an advertisement to say their last words about the faculty

Q: Since this union ad for *Newsday* couldn't run because of the high price, what did the faculty want to say, especially to people who felt "Well, isn't your strike hurting the students at Post?" How did you want to respond to that?

RALPH K.: Our ad, which was devised by a committee of our faculty, stressed that our purpose was to make our campus a place in which students would earn a quality degree that commands respect from the community. In that context it pointed out the need for the nine credit workload to give our faculty the opportunity to do the research so necessary for our profession and for the reputation of the institution. It also pointed out the lack of candor in the Administration's public statements; and it criticized the administration's zig-zag tactics in negotiations, and noted that the latter were designed to break the union. Among the examples of lack of candor, of course, are

the attempt to make it seem that the raise was higher than it was. Another was the repeated claims that large percentages of the faculty were not honoring the strike, while failing to mention that the "faculty" in question were not the full-time faculty but adjuncts who were covered by a different contract. We also pointed out that the Administration had repeatedly refused our proposal to make up the teaching time lost by our strike, choosing to punish the faculty for striking by docking the money rather than giving the students the education that they deserved.

For my part I would add that our faculty does need to have adequate salaries. I would add my own personal view. I think it is good for our students to see the example of their faculty standing up for their rights. It is very much part of their education to see people fighting for a better world to replace the present system of world-wide injustice.

Q: Could you describe the main features of the final contract?

RALPH K.: A 3%-4%-4% in raises, plus 4/10 of a percent in equity pay in the second and third years. Plus an extra insignificant amount – which now turns out to be \$10,000 -- which will go into the equity funds.

Q: So does that mean that the lowest-paid faculty could get in the second year, say, a 4.4% raise: the standard 4% plus this additional 0.4%?

ANNE B.: It's doubtful that anyone will get that much.

RALPH K.: Some people might make 1% out of that, other people 0% -- depending on where they stand in relation to others -- because it goes into an equity formula.

Q: What about workload?

ANNE B.: The workload is nine credits across the board. And release time – We got back all non-academic released time that had been in the previous contract – chair people, the chair of the Faculty Council, etc.

Q: What about the medical plan?

ANNE B.: As of September, we'll start to pay 5% of the premium cost of the plan, for those not choosing an HMO.

Q: Around the country, especially given this new Supreme Court ruling, which seems to open up the possibility for employers of discriminating against retirees with their benefits packages ... there's lots of now charges of pension theft and the like going on as corporations ... back on benefits to retirees ... something which came up at all in the negotiations?

RALPH K.: They have the major medical and a \$50,000 plan as secondary to Medicare.

Q: That's throughout their lifetime -- \$50,000?

RALPH K.: Well, it gets replenished, but at a stupidly low rate. We said we wanted to increase the \$50,000. At one point or other that's going to become absurd. And, of course, the serious question here is what it does to the drugs because they're not covered by Medicare. We keep saying we should raise the amount so it would cover these drugs, but I haven't heard a complaint yet from our retirees; and I would hear it (let me tell you) if there was a complaint.

Q: How did you and other faculty feel when you settled with the administration?

ANNE B.: We, on the negotiating team, were all sick afterwards.

RALPH K.: I tell you, I was sick. Through the whole thing, I could hardly talk. However, there was a great spirit of solidarity at our ratification meeting.

Q: What was it like going back in the classroom with just seeing the students after three weeks and all?

RALPH K.: It was quite friendly.

ANNE B.: I didn't have a problem at all. My students were very friendly.

Q: I understand that the university says that 80% or more of the classes were made up -- that the lost class time was made up. Is that true?

ANNE B.: No, that's not true.

RALPH K.: Their claim has no validity. Naturally, there was a subsequent struggle going on over the question of docking. Many of our faculty members felt that we could get some help from the State regarding the makeup of classes since, after all, we had lost a fifth of our pay, but we lost also a fifth of teaching.

ANNE B.: In the previous strikes, such as 1985, they didn't dock pay but they lengthened the class schedule.

RALPH K.: That's what we, of course, had asked to happen: some sort of alteration in the schedule so we could do our job and earn our money. At the same time, we're in the strange situation where the administration feels that having a full-time faculty, or two-thirds of it, miss a fifth of their courses is not a problem. Many of our people felt that the state could be of some help in this regard. And of course, other faculty members and I wrote letters to the appropriate state officials asking them to put pressure on the University to make up the time. The administration did provide some kind of document. They said we could voluntarily teach.

ANNE B.: The day before Thanksgiving and the day after. But there was no schedule.

RALPH K.: There was no schedule at all. There was no way you could even corral students at that time. So there really was no serious makeup time. They [the University] did provide for an interim semester where the students could take a course free-of-charge. Of course, it turned out that you had to apply for it in suitable time and there were additional problems with it..

ANNE B.: And it was not in any discipline that any of us knew.

RALPH K.: It had nothing whatever to do with the classes that were missed. These were totally independent courses. It wasn't going to do anything about missing my abstract algebra course for three weeks or anything of that kind. There was no math in it. There was no economics in it. It had only some peripheral subjects. There was almost no participation from the real core of the university.

Q: So that, in effect, the semester was just three weeks shorter?

RALPH K.: That's right. And that's what happened.

Q: And in terms of pay docking, there was no improvement for faculty after mediation?

RALPH K.: Well, they did agree not to charge us our last two, three days or something like that.

ANNE B.: They limited it to \$3,600.

RALPH K.: Actually, I bothered to figure out what percentage it turned out to be. It turned out that it was 11.4% of the semester that you were docked. They also agreed to cap the amount at \$3,600, which had the effect that anybody earning more than \$63,000 would be paying a less percentage, but anyone earning less than \$63,000 would be paying the full 11.4% of the semester's pay -- a regressive scheme which does hurt some of our really low-paid faculty members.

“We were put through some pretty rough negotiations and we fought some very destructive proposals, and we did make gains. Following the strike, there was a tremendous spirit among our faculty in terms of solidarity.”

Q: A very common approach in academia and in all sorts of work place around the country is employers trying to offer “two-tier” deals to workers, with senior people getting a better deal and the young new hires getting lower pay or getting less benefits. Now in your case, your union stood firm against that.

RALPH K.: Yes we did, but Brooklyn did not. They finally had the vote on the question, and they chose the 50% for new faculty option.

ANNE B.: Obviously after a few years, the young people are now old people, and they're going to have a majority of newer people, so they will not be able to maintain their privileged status.

RALPH K.: Anything you grandfather is ultimately lost, not only because grandfathers finally leave us but long before that -- because they become a minority.

Q: So what would you say by those who are tempted by these sorts of two-tier agreements and concessions to employers? What would it mean to the future of a union if senior members of the union agreed to such deals?

RALPH K.: One thing it would mean for sure is that the senior people couldn't enjoy the special privileges for long. They'd become a minority, and they would not only lose it, but they would lose the unity of the union in the process. And this took place, by the way, at Brooklyn. They've had a horrible struggle over there. They've been changing presidents each negotiation..

We, at Post, actually used to have a special privilege where people who had obtained full professor before 1974 had the privilege that, if they taught a graduate course, they only had to teach nine credits. Everybody else had to teach twelve credits. We had a contract salary reopener in 1983. Like all salary re-openers, it was not a salary re-opener. The administration came in with many demands, and one of them was they wanted to get rid of this faculty privilege, and of course, by that time, there were many young full professors around sitting on the negotiating team, and that was the end of the special privilege. It disappeared that year. The situation wasn't good because the older people were pretty angry and the dissension lasted quite a while.

Q: And what about with adjuncts? Again, they're in a different union. How important do you think that was? If you had the adjuncts in your union, do you think you would have been able to win a better contract?

RALPH K.: One of the problems here is that the adjuncts' interests are different, particularly if you look at the key issue which has been motivating us: work load. Obviously, that's of no use to them. That full-timers should have a nine-credit workload is of no use to adjuncts who have a limit of nine credits. In fact, if you look at the Brooklyn situation, one of the reasons why they were going back to work after a week was the fact that they have the adjuncts in the union

Now perhaps something can be done if we accept that this nine-credit issue is a finished story -- which I'm not ready to accept, because we don't know what the administration is going to do next. They can almost be counted on to try to damage it in some way or another. Maybe something can be done. I should, first of all, try to contact the person who at present does the negotiating for the adjuncts. I was in contact with his predecessor.

Also, as the recent strike shows, the issue of trying to limit the number of adjuncts is very much to our interest. Indeed, it is also a problem from an educational and human point of view. If you think that somebody's capable of teaching nine credits of your courses and you don't think that they're capable of being a full-timer, there's something a little odd, in my opinion, about that. I never could quite understand that.

Q: Is that something that the union has any ability to try to negotiate?

RALPH K.: No. We tried to negotiate it already; and it's in our contract at least to the extent that we have limited the number of hours that an adjunct can teach. But, of course, that has nothing to do with the quantity of adjuncts. Limiting such hires would be a sensible demand, but it's an educational demand, really, that we can't have a school that's principally run by part-timers.

If we put in the contract some kind of limitation of the number of adjuncts, it would be worth something, but that would require a very serious struggle. Administration would not accept it on purely educational grounds.

Q: One approach that some university faculty have used, especially when adjuncts are in the union with them, is to push for higher pay increases for the adjuncts. This then, of course, lowers their competitiveness with full-timers. That is, it's more costly for the university so they can't hire as many new adjuncts. So potentially it serves the twin goals of greater solidarity between the full-timers and the current adjuncts and encouraging the university to offer more full-time rather than adjunct jobs.

RALPH K.: That's a good idea, except we're not in a union with them. But if they did have a difficulty, I assure you that we would support them, and we would have anyway, just out of decency in the first place. But no such situation has arisen.

Q: What about approaching the adjuncts' union local?

RALPH K.: I think that's something that should be done. That's an end that we should definitely try to fix up.

Q: Without giving away any future plans or tactics, if there was another strike in three years, and the administration comes back the first week and say, "You must all sign this document," what then?

ANNE B.: They [the administration] probably would, too.

RALPH K.: I will limit myself to saying that I think that would be a great mistake. Moreover, after the recent bloodletting neither side is anxious to see a similar strike.

Q: By "bloodletting" -- could you elaborate a little bit?

RALPH K.: Well, I mean the campus has taken a black eye in the press and elsewhere.. I don't think that they could contemplate having another one ... not that we want one either.

ANNE B.: I think next time we're going to see a much bigger turnout of involved faculty.

RALPH K.: That, too, because so many people are now involved in the leadership of the union.

Q: Looking back on this dramatic series of events, what would you say you and your colleagues who went through this strike have concluded about this? That is, first of all, was it worth it? Secondly, how do you think it could have been done more effectively for the union?

RALPH K.: I shouldn't make it sound like too much gloom. We were put through some pretty rough negotiations and we fought some very destructive proposals, and we did make gains. Following the strike there was a tremendous spirit among our faculty in terms of solidarity and so on, so it really should not be cast in any other way.

ANNE B.: We have seen a big increase in union participation.

RALPH K.: Before the strike, when I called a meeting (I remember in the spring), virtually no one came. I said, "Come to this meeting. We need your input on negotiations." Almost nobody came. After the strike, the meetings were full. We've added to our executive board a great many members and they tend to be our new faculty members. We're getting a lot of participation.

Q: What do you attribute that to?

ANNE B.: Actually, we got to know people on the strike. Our faculty is very divided into schools; we have 5 schools and the Library and we don't have generally large faculty meetings where all the people meet each other, so the picket line was an opportunity for people to meet each other, and I think the faculty from the various schools met the new people from Arts and Sciences and the other schools. I got to know practically every faculty member on campus.

RALPH K.: I remember back to the 1977 strike, which activated me as a relatively new faculty member. That was bitter and in terms of contract was a hell of a lot worse than what we got this time. We got almost zero raises, even though they did fix up the schedule so that we could make up classes. By the time we were finished we were all sick.

But three years later, we got some respect, and we got a good contract in 1980. Of course, it was after double-digit inflation. We weren't going to accept anything less than a double-digit raise. And there was a lot of dissension, too, by the way, and I'm sure we're going to get it now, too. Because when you activate people, they have dissension. But at the same time, the spirits were high three years later, and I think we did a good job of saying, "You just can't push us around this way."

On the other hand, there's work to be done. I imagine we have to develop new tactics in the next negotiations. Of course, I'm not saying we haven't already: the whole idea of us going on strike the beginning of the term was already a new tactic for us. We haven't done that since 1985. So we did something new this time.

What else? Obviously, some efforts are needed to bring all the unions together. After all, we're suffering under the same contract. That's one of the bridges that has to be built. If there's some way we could get an agreement with the people on the other campuses. More than an agreement, because agreements can always be broken, but a kind of real feeling that we're in the same boat and we've got to all live with whatever comes out of this.

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NOTES

¹ Stanley Aronowitz. *The Last Good Job in America*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001. Aronowitz writes (p. 40): "Academic labor, like most labor, is rapidly being decomposed and recomposed. The full professor, like the spotted owl, is becoming an endangered species in private as well as public universities. When professors retire or die, their positions are frequently eliminated. Many universities, as we have recently learned in the Ivy Leagues, convert a portion of the full professorship to adjunct-driven teaching – whether occupied by part-timers or by graduate teaching assistants. At the top, the last good job in America is reserved for a relatively small elite. Fewer assistant and associate positions leading to professorships are being made available for newly minted Ph.D.s As the recently organized Yale University graduate teaching assistants discovered,

they are no longer – if they ever were – teachers-in-training. Much of the undergraduate curriculum in public and private research universities is taught by graduate students who, in effect, have joined the swelling ranks of part-timers , most of whom are Ph.D.s. Together, they form an emerging academic proletariat.”

² In *NLRB v. Yeshiva University* (1980), the U.S. Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision, ruled that private university faculty were “managerial employees,” and thus could be denied collective bargaining rights under the National Labor Relations Act.

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