

COCAL X Conference in Mexico City August 2012

The tenth conference of the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL) - a coalition of non-tenure track faculty from Canada, Quebec, the U.S., and Mexico - was historic for at least two reasons. Not only was it the largest since its inception in 1996, with 250 registered attendees, but also this was the first time the conference had been held in Mexico.

This well-organized three-day conference was held at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in Mexico City, from August 9 through August 12, 2010, largely thanks to the efforts of two members of the local Mexican organizing committee, Maria Teresa Lechuga and Arturo Ramos, who orchestrated the invaluable support of the two largest unions at UNAM: AAPA-UNAM and STUNAM. Equally historic was that this was the first time these two unions worked together in over 30 years. The local organizing committee was assisted in planning by the COCAL International Advisory Committee, composed of contingent leaders from the US, Mexico, and Canada, including staff representatives from major unions.

A central point that emerged from the five plenaries and the nine breakout workshops was that despite the cultural differences between Quebec, English-speaking Canada, the U.S., and Mexico, the challenges faced by the increasing number of public and private college and university professors who lack structural job security - known in different institutions as adjuncts, lecturers, sessionals, irregular faculty, or - in Mexico - as precarious faculty - are essentially the same: substandard exploitative wages, lack of benefits, marginalization within their institutions, and a lack of dignity.

A recurring theme of the conference was that these ills can be attributed to a globalized neoliberal economy that has led to the corporatization of public higher education and the monetization or "tariffication" of education, which also explains the rising debt load of students - currently \$1 trillion in the U.S. alone.

Instead of recognizing that state-supported higher education enhances the public good, transnationally we are witnessing the rise of a countervailing practice that situates students as private "consumers" and faculty as interchangeable "information providers," while the corporate intrusion into public universities leverages public investment into research for private gain.

Finally, there emerged a general consensus that to protect the historic role of public higher education and create more inclusive and equitable working conditions for those who comprise 70% of the faculty, there needs to be alliances between teachers, students, and the other elements of the labor movement. To paraphrase the late labor leader Joe Hill: "Don't complain; organize!"

The conference planners had anticipated this need for alliance and arranged for scholarships to bring graduate student activists from Quebec, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the United States to open the conference; the young people reported on student protest movements from the Printemps Erable ("Maple Spring") movement, the Yo Soy 132 ("I am the 132nd") movement in Mexico, the Occupy Wall Street movement, and the student movement that has been fighting tuition increases in Puerto Rico. They were received to great acclaim since many of the COCAL organizers have long realized the need for the involvement of a new generation.

COCAL X also cut new ground by going beyond North America for the first time. A grant from the Berger-Marks Foundation enabled them to invite a plenary speaker from South Korea, Kyung-Ae Oh, who reported that difficult conditions for faculty in South Korea – job insecurity, harsh working conditions, very low pay, disrespect, and little hope – prevail. The Korean company, Samsung, has a plan for its English-language school, at Sungkyunkwan University, to eliminate tenured faculty altogether in its undergraduate program by 2020, a trend that is not unheard of in North America.

Soon after the conference, the participants received some sad news, the passing of Steve Street, a colleague who had taught writing and literature at numerous colleges since 1980, including the State University of New York at Buffalo, and who had been scheduled to attend COCAL X. He was a vital force in the contingent academic labor movement and an inspiration to many. He will be deeply missed.