

Quality Jobs, Quality Education, Better Futures:

REPORT

What We Heard About Precarious Work In the Post-Secondary Sector

June 2017

The Canadian Union of Public Employees is Canada's largest union, with 643,000 members. CUPE workers take great pride in delivering quality public services in communities across Canada through their work in municipalities, health care, social services, schools, universities, colleges, and many other sectors.

Nearly 68,000 CUPE members work in the post-secondary education sector. We represent instructors, researchers, teaching assistants, and support staff working in grounds and building maintenance, libraries, food services, caretaking, information technology, clerical support and administration.

Quality Jobs, Quality Education, Better Futures

Precarious work is on the rise on university and college campuses across the country. A growing number of the people employed in the post-secondary sector – those who teach our students, serve them food, clean and maintain university and college campuses, and deliver clerical and other support services – are now in part-time, casual, temporary, or contract positions, with low pay, few to no benefits, and no job stability.

This rising precarity impacts the quality of education our students receive. And it is hard on workers, personally and professionally. Academic workers and support workers are passionately committed to high quality education and services for students. But they need fair and decent working conditions to make that happen.

That's why CUPE is fighting back against the growing trend of precarious work. Our campaign **Quality Jobs, Quality Education, Better Futures** is raising awareness across the country about the impact that precarious work is having on post-secondary education and helping to build a powerful counterforce to the prevailing winds of precarious work.

As part of this campaign, CUPE held a series of townhalls across the country. These townhalls gave members the opportunity to share their stories of precarious work and resistance, helped to educate campuses and the general public about precarity, and generated many important ideas about how workers and their allies can fight precarious work in Canada.

The townhalls and their panelists were as follows:

- Guelph, Ontario, March 1, 2017
 - Laura Maclure, University of Guelph, CUPE Local 1334
 - Louise Birdsell Bauer, University of Toronto, CUPE Local 3902
 - Graham Cox, CUPE National

- Vancouver, British Columbia, March 16, 2017
 - David Chokroun, Simon Fraser University, CUPE Local 3338
 - Leann Dawson, University of Victoria, CUPE Local 4163
 - Ed Kroc, University of British Columbia
 - Michelle Waite, North Island College, CUPE Local 3479

- Sackville, New Brunswick, March 18, 2017
 - Karen Foster, Dalhousie University
 - Carol Ferguson, CUPE National
 - Geordie Miller, Dalhousie University and Mount Allison University, CUPE Local 3912
 - Claire Kelly, Mount Allison University, CUPE Local 3443

This report summarizes what we heard and what we learned from these townhall events. More information about precarious work in the post-secondary sector can be found by checking out our downloadable booklet at cupe.ca/quality-jobs-quality-education.

What precarious work looks like on campuses

Our panelists and participants shared many stories about what it's like to be a precarious worker or how precarious work has affected them as a worker or a student. These stories are an important reminder that precarious work is never just a statistic: people's lives, families, and communities are deeply impacted when employers choose to make workers precarious. The stories also highlighted the reality that precarity manifests itself differently in different situations. Nevertheless, there were some common trends and issues of concern:

- **It is very difficult to get useful data on work and working conditions:**
Until 2011, Statistics Canada used to collect information on faculty but did not bother to include part-time or temporary faculty in their survey. Precarious workers literally *did not count*. Many employers are also very reluctant to release useful data, even where the collective agreement requires that they give regular information on employment to the Local. At Simon Fraser University, for instance, it is very difficult to tell which employees are permanent and which are temporary based on the monthly information given by the employer. Instead, Local 3338 has made it a point to monitor job postings as a way of keeping track of precarious work.
- **Precarious work is not just about filling temporary vacancies or short-term roles:**
At the University of Guelph, some custodians employed on short-term contracts that must be renewed every three months have been at the university for seven years, according to Laura Maclure of CUPE Local 1334 – long enough for some to have become supervisors. Similarly, a survey of contract faculty in Nova Scotia conducted by Karen Foster, a professor at Dalhousie University, found that 34 respondents held leadership or administrative positions in their department – including two department chairs – despite not being in permanent positions.
- **There are regional realities to precarious work:**
In Guelph, participants spoke about the “southern Ontario temporary academic labour market,” in which contract faculty are traveling from city to city to work at multiple institutions in order to cobble together something resembling full-time work. In the Maritimes, however, holding jobs at multiple schools can mean a one-way commute of several hours. As a result, many contract faculty end up holding other jobs outside of academia in order to make ends meet. For the BC participants, there was no doubt that the housing market in Victoria and the Lower Mainland played a huge role in the lives of precarious workers. As Leann Dawson, the business manager for CUPE Local 4163 at the University of Victoria, noted, for sessionals losing a course could mean the difference between being able to afford your rent or being evicted.
- **More schools are using students for labour without offering adequate wages or protection:**
Reliance on undergraduates to provide academic and support work is growing. At the University of British Columbia, there has been a significant growth in the number of undergraduate Teaching Assistants to the point where some undergrads are even assigned to fourth year classes. Even though they do the same work as graduate TAs, undergrad TAs were being paid only half as much. Thanks to some good data work described by Ed Kroc, a former member of the bargaining unit, CUPE Local 2278 was able to bargain a wage increase for undergrad TAs in their latest collective agreement.

At Mount Allison University, meanwhile, undergrad student workers frustrated by persistent issues such as low pay, unpaid training, and lack of job descriptions are mobilizing to organize student workers and form their own CUPE Local.

What precarious work means for workers

There is no doubt that precarious workers remain very committed to their jobs, even though they are in insecure, poorly compensated positions. They care about their students, they provide support that goes beyond academics or student services, and in many cases, they put in far more hours of work than they are paid for. These workers are proud of the work they do and proud of their relationships with students. But for these workers, being in a precarious situation has a serious impact on opportunities, health and well-being, and ultimately, for the community:

- **The biggest issue for precarious workers is lack of security:**
Foster's survey of contract faculty reveals that lack of security is the lens through which all other issues are experienced. Precarious workers report very high levels of stress, but it's not the work itself which they find stressful: it's the insecurity. Many workers are one missed paycheque away from not being able to pay their bills. They don't know whether they will be working the next semester. They feel limited in their life choices because they don't know where they will be in a year. They are putting in more time than they are paid for but fear losing their jobs if they complain. They are living in poverty and trying to make ends. This stress adds up. As Dawson observes, "There's not a week that goes by that I don't have somebody in tears, either on the phone or in my office, because of the lack of security."
- **Precarious workers have greater difficulty defending their rights:**
Again and again, participants noted how difficult it is for precarious workers to defend their rights. In some cases, this may be because they don't know their rights. David Chokroun of CUPE Local 3338 noted that not all temporary employees get a union orientation and that it can be difficult for the Local to communicate with temporary employees. In other cases, workers fighting precarity are less likely to want to rock the boat, since they are afraid their contracts will not be renewed if they complain. Louise Birdsell Bauer, a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto, described how difficult it can be for precarious workers to stand up for themselves in cases of discrimination. Precarious workers may also have greater difficulty getting accommodation for disabilities or for family needs. For instance, Dawson shared a story about one contract academic at the University of Victoria who gave up a course to deal with a child's medical condition, and was rejected by the Department when she tried to get it back again the following semester.
- **Precarious work deeply impacts people's life choices:**
Claire Kelly, the International Affairs Coordinator at Mount Allison University, described what it is like to be a young person with a fragmented career made up of precarious position after precarious position. In Kelly's case, it has involved literally moving across the country or around the world to take job opportunities, while constantly trying to upgrade her skills in hopes of finally landing a permanent position. The limited timeframe these temporary positions are based on, as well as the limited budget, have meant limited life choices. She can't invest in something permanent like a house or a car, because she doesn't know where she will be in a year. In fact, it can even mean

challenges for renting, when a lease doesn't coincide with a contract. Similarly, Foster's survey revealed that people feel they need to wait to start a family or that they can't afford to put down roots in a community because they don't know where they will be living or how much they will be earning in the future.

- **Precarity makes it harder to be good at your job:**

As Kelly noted, it's difficult to be amazing in your current job and be looking for your next job at the same time. Constantly learning new jobs or adjusting to new surroundings is exhausting – plus moving from short-term contract to short-term contract means that right around the time you have the job mastered, it's time to move on.

- **Precarity makes it harder for other workers to do their jobs:**

The fact that some workers are only given short contracts or a few hours has an impact on the work load and expectations of other workers. For instance, Michelle Waite of CUPE Local 3479 at North Island College observed that contract faculty only being on campus for limited hours means that other workers, such as lab technicians, are being called on to fill in gaps for students needing support. Kelly also pointed out that repeatedly relying on short-term contracts at Mount Allison University means that senior staff are spending a lot of time searching for, interviewing, hiring, and training new employees.

- **Precarious work impacts people's access to government programs and policies:**

Many participants noted how the definitions of work used in government programs and policies are structured around traditional understandings of work, which ends up excluding precarious workers. Trish Everett, the organizer of the UBC townhall, shared that she was unable to apply for permanent residence as a skilled worker and needed to be sponsored by her partner because her work as a sessional did not meet the government's threshold for continuous employment. Dawson noted that instructors paid by the course have difficulty qualifying for Employment Insurance, which bases eligibility on the number of paid hours worked. She also pointed out that many precarious workers are living in poverty, but they make too much money to qualify for social assistance or other income security programs, so they are left on their own to try and make ends meet.

- **Precarious work weakens the social fabric:**

Precarious work makes it much harder for people to participate in their communities and workplaces. In some cases, it is the difficulty of putting down roots in a place where you don't know how long you'll be staying. In other cases, it's the challenge of a random schedule that isn't known in advance and makes community participation – such as volunteering to coach your child's soccer team – impossible. Sometimes, it's being left out of service awards and other forms of recognition that only go to permanent employees. And sometimes, it's the awkwardness of being a temporary employee, a colleague, and a part-time service worker all at the same time. Geordie Miller, a sessional instructor at Dalhousie University and Mount Allison who also works as a bartender, remarked on how uncomfortable it was when one of his faculty colleagues tipped him for a drink – and then commented on the fact that he was tipping him.

The context for precarious work

Precarious work is not happening in a vacuum. There are broader trends within colleges and universities, within our economies, and within provincial and federal governments which are contributing to the rise in precarious work. Here are just a few of the bigger trends that we heard about:

- **Inequality within postsecondary institutions is growing:**
While jobs are being contracted out and support workers and contract faculty are earning poverty wages, the number of positions at the top have been rising, along with administrative compensation. Graham Cox, a Senior Research Officer with CUPE National, pointed out that at the University of Toronto, the President receives a salary of \$495,361, which breaks down to about \$264 an hour, while unionized cleaners are making only \$20 an hour, yet the university is pushing hard to contract out cleaning to save money. (Contracted out cleaners make only \$12 an hour.) Meanwhile, the University of Toronto also employs an asset manager who makes \$1,046,000 a year, nearly five times as much as the premier of Ontario. “Why not start the search for savings at the top?” asked Cox.
- **Precarious work is linked to the decline of state funding and the corporatization of higher education:**
Precarious work is closely linked to government austerity policies, observed Carol Ferguson, a Senior Research Officer with CUPE National. In 1982, 83% of the revenue of universities came from governments. In 2012, only 55% came from governments. This has driven universities to embrace cost saving measures, including the use of temporary and contract labour in place of permanent positions. But funding cuts alone aren’t to blame: colleges and universities have also embraced the mindset of corporations and have adopted business practices from the private sector that put corporate values front and centre, rather than the well-being of students, staff, and faculty. One participant noted that as a result, institutions have adopted a commodities approach to labour, treating people as just another input (or output) in the process of producing skilled workers, rather than as human beings with basic needs and basic human rights.
- **Precarious work is growing in other sectors:**
While some of the trends participants discussed were unique to the postsecondary sector, many noted that precarious work is growing in other sectors too, and that we need to understand the factors contributing to this growth, as well as building networks of solidarity across sectors to create change.

Fighting back against precarious work

Our townhalls didn’t just hear about the negative effects of precarious work. We also heard many inspiring stories about what workers, unions, and communities are doing to resist the rise of precarious work. Based on these stories, and other ideas generated by participants, here are the many ways that CUPE National, CUPE locals, CUPE members, and our allies can fight back against precarious work:

- Coalition building:**
 Many participants identified the need to work together – students and staff, unionized and non-unionized, post-secondary workers and workers in other sectors. As employers across the economy are increasingly making positions precarious, workers need to band together to achieve change.
- Organizing:**
 Some of the most precarious workers are not unionized, Ferguson noted. Organizing these workers – as with the drive to unionize student academic workers at Mount Allison University or the University of Victoria’s recent successful organization of residence life workers – can bring important protections and greater security.
- Collective bargaining:**
 Many important protections for workers can be achieved at the bargaining table. Dawson called on locals to work on making progressive gains in each round of bargaining, even if they are small steps in the right direction. Don’t just focus on wages, Foster urged; think about ways to improve job security and expand access to benefits. Chokroun recommended language in collective agreements that ensure that all union members get access to union orientation, and making sure that the orientation provided is more than a simple rundown of wages and benefits. Participants also called for ways to ensure that part-time workers are equal members of the community, such as bargaining for better benefits and finding ways to incorporate part-time workers into the activities of the local.
- Collecting and using data:**
 It’s much harder to protect workers when you’re not sure what’s going on. Kroc recommended that locals collect data constantly, and regularly take time to analyze trends in employment status and wages at the departmental and university level. Chokroun pointed out that at the University of Victoria, the Local was able to successfully challenge the university’s categorization of certain jobs as temporary by tracking postings and proving that they did not adhere to the collective agreement. Information is a crucial support for bargaining and for defending workers’ rights.
- Campaigns:**
 Creating change requires putting pressure on employers, educating workers, and spreading awareness among Canadians. We need to demand that schools be good employers – both to their own employees and to contracted-out workers. We also need to join with other workers to build campaigns at the regional and national level. Foster recommended developing campaigns with concrete goals and clear strategies that go beyond social media activism.
- Get involved in politics:**
 One of the reasons why precarious work is expanding is because politicians have washed their hands of it, claiming there is nothing we can do except get ready for the rise of precarity. But nothing could be farther from the truth. As citizens, we need to demand action from our governments. We need to speak regularly with our local politicians and call on them to support employment standards. We need to write the federal Finance Minister, Bill Morneau, and tell him we disagree with his stance on precarious work and call on him to do better. We need to get involved in provincial politics, whether it’s the BC election or the Changing Workplaces Review in Ontario. And

we need to demand that the federal government and provincial governments adequately fund post-secondary education.

- **Call for legislation:**

The erosion of employment standards – and a lack of enforcement of existing standards – play a crucial role in enabling the growth of precarious work. Strengthening employment standards would help to protect workers and reverse the trend of employers relying on an increasingly precarious workforce. We should demand a legal requirement that employers provide equal pay for equal work and call for legislation to make it easier to organize workers and bargain collectively. Participants also called for other significant changes to support workers, including a \$15 minimum wage, investments in affordable housing, and the creation of a national child care program.

Conclusion

Precarious work is not inevitable. It is a choice being made by employers within a context of declining government funding for public services such as higher education as well as eroding employment standards. Working together, we can resist precarious work, protect workers, and defend the quality of education. CUPE will continue to make fighting precarious work a priority and to call on universities and colleges to make every post-secondary job a respectable job.

:kd/cope 491