By now, Tiffany Kraft imagined she would be fully immersed in academia, putting her Ph.D. and passion for British literature to use on an annotated version of Irish novelist George Moore's Mike Fletcher.

But her path to academia has not been as straightforward as she had hoped. She got her master’s when President George W. Bush was finishing his first term; her doctorate during Barack Obama’s first presidential campaign. Yet still, she finds herself in the purgatory of academia in which she’s been stuck since 2004: adjunct instruction.

“Adjuncting wasn’t great but there were no tenure-track jobs available,” Kraft says. “So I just thought I’d ride it out till the kids got through high school and I could move. Then after a period of time you’re sort of branded an adjunct if you don’t matriculate immediately—people wonder what’s wrong with you.” As an instructor of English and writing composition in Portland, Oregon, she’s cobbled together employment at four different higher education institutions in the metro area.

In a typical fall term, Kraft can secure up to six five-credit courses between three different campuses, ranging anywhere from $2,700 to $3,500 per course. In winter and spring terms, she usually can pull in three courses. For a single mother of two, these are not ideal circumstances. “I’m on fumes this term; it’s tight,” she said during the winter term.
She used to be able to find courses to teach in the summer as well. But now she says she’s seeing fewer summer opportunities at the colleges she works for, especially since many full-time faculty—who get hiring preference—are picking up extra courses.

“I just got a letter from my director and she said there is no summer employment for adjuncts. There were four slots, and they got filled,” she says.

Summer now holds a special anxiety for Kraft. She’s been forced to file for unemployment through the summer months. “Last summer was the first time I had to do that, and it scared me to death. I managed to get by but it wasn’t easy.”

The Affordable Care Act hasn’t made things any easier for her. University human resources departments are now hypersensitive to making sure that part-time instructors don’t work enough hours to require the universities to provide them with health insurance. Kraft’s previously stable course load at Portland State University was cut because of that. “HR red-flagged everyone that was above hours,” she explains. “That was a huge slam.”

Kraft’s tenuous situation is far from unique; in fact, it’s pretty much par for course.

Part-time. Contingent. Non–tenure track. Casual. Adjunct. Non–standard. Peripheral. External. Ad hoc. Limited contract. New model. Occasional. Sessional. Call them what you will, but these professors have now become the majority of college and university faculty. Their jobs are defined by low pay, limited instructional resources, tenuous employment security, and a complete lack of institutional support for their own research and writing. Contingent faculty has become a subset of the new working poor—the subset with Ph.D.s.

Kraft is just one of more than one million contingent instructors in the United States. Today, part-time and adjunct instructors comprise more than half of all faculty (not including those at for-profit institutions); another 20 percent are full-time without tenure. Just 30 percent are traditional tenured or tenure-track appointments. And the future is not looking better as tenure-track hiring continues to plummet, currently around one in four.

Since she began teaching in 2002, Kraft has been trying to better the lot of contingent faculty, reaching out to fellow adjuncts and her department chairs. Her efforts, however, amounted to just “banging my head against the wall,” she says. Her colleagues and bosses weren’t ready to have a conversation in which the problems of adjuncts, and solutions for those problems, were seen as collective. In 2012, she wrote an article airing her grievances, and in 2014, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) invited her to speak at a town hall event at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.
She was joined by now-retired California Representative George Miller, then the ranking Democrat on the House Education Committee, whose staff had recently released a report on the “just-in-time” nature of higher education faculty. The town hall was a platform for the SEIU to announce a highly ambitious long-term plan to organize one million adjunct faculty members nationwide. Adjunct Action Network, as it was dubbed, was launched in direct response to an increasingly vibrant grassroots movement of precarious faculty demanding change.

These organizing efforts, of which SEIU’s is just one, are a response to the collective failure of administrations—from community colleges all the way to the Ivy League—to fully integrate their main source of instructional labor into their full-time, permanent faculty system. As tuition continues to rise, the budgetary share that goes to instructional costs, including faculty salaries, has either flat-lined or decreased. The starkest shift has come at community colleges, where the instructional budget share fell by 3 percentage points between 1987 and 2009, according to the Delta Cost Project. Administrations have effectively entrenched a two-tiered system of faculty in higher education—one that has the support and security of the academy, and one that is utterly detached and disenfranchised.

“The evil genius of the multitier system was that it enticed the tenured faculty with short-term benefits and lured contingent faculty with what seemed a reasonable expectation—that they would gain valuable experience in a highly competitive job market,” writes Richard Moser in Equality for Contingent Faculty: Overcoming the Two-Tier System. Contingents are realizing this is a false hope, and the movement is finally finding a voice through both grassroots and netroots organizing. If they get their way, higher education will change for the better.

With the mobilization of a grassroots movement of adjuncts has come a windfall of resources from national labor unions—both those that have traditionally focused on higher education faculty, such as the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and those that are new to the sector, such as SEIU. In a labor market where union organizing in most sectors has been rendered all but impossible, these unions have found a new front full of long-exploited faculty members who are eager to band together.

**HIGHER EDUCATION FACULTY** in the years after World War II was still largely made up of upper-middle-class white men. Tenure was the expectation, and most got it—in 1969, only about 3.3 percent of faculty appointments were off the tenure track. Back then, part-time adjunct faculty were mostly a novelty, with outside professionals teaching a course or two each year.

Throughout the 1970s, a number of factors contributed to a massive shift in the academic workforce. As the economy sank into a stagflation crisis, states started cutting funding to higher education. Endowments tanked. These economic reverses coincided with a rapidly changing higher education
landscape—increasing demand for college education was coming from a more diverse cohort than before. “It was no longer just the majority of 18-year-olds straight out of high school going full-time,” says Joe Berry, a contingent faculty member, activist, and labor historian by trade. Older women and men coming back into the workforce, veterans, and immigrants were making up a larger portion of the student body. These people had busy lives and wanted to attend part-time. The number of students “became much harder to predict,” Berry says. “You couldn’t just look at your area high schools and predict how many 18-year-olds were coming out” and count on those numbers to determine how many course sections would be needed.

Administrations turned to the more flexible—and cheaper—labor of contingent faculty, even as the era’s protests for racial and gender equality helped create a more diverse pool of faculty candidates. “Politically, it was much easier to casualize and degrade the job of college teaching now that it wasn’t just a white man’s job,” Berry says. At the time, however, “nobody among us realized the depth of that strategic change that was taking place. Initially, the administrations weren’t consciously setting out to change the faculty makeup. They got addicted to the cheap, flexible labor to solve all their problems.” But in time, he continues, “it came to be strategic, not tactical answers to their problem.”

In a sense, the traditional tenured-faculty bubble was bursting. Requirements for tenure were heightened at the same time that tenure-track hiring screeched to a halt. What was previously the next career step was now an inaccessible dream to many pursuing a career in academia.

Higher education scholar Gary Rhoades says these trends point toward what he calls “academic capitalism”: increased managerial control of the work and the employees. “It’s easier to control employees who have less job security and whose working conditions are such that you can easily non-renew them,” Rhoades says. “You don’t have to worry about layoffs when you have large numbers of contingent faculty.”

This “casualization” of faculty first began emerging in community colleges and state universities—the non-elite institutions. It was there that contingent faculty unionization campaigns began. The California Part-Time Faculty Association was likely the first explicitly contingent faculty association in the United States. By the mid-1970s, contingents in the California State University (CSU) system had formed lecturers’ committees in the statewide unions of both the United Professors of California—an American Federation of Teachers local affiliate—and the California Teachers Association.
SEIU

Adjunct instructor Tiffany Kraft speaks in New York City on the national Fight for 15 Day of Action, April 15, 2015.

The 1970s were a time of disconnected and decentralized efforts to unionize. Coming out of the ferment of the 1960s, the new academics were disproportionately left-leaning, and a surge in faculty unionization soon followed. In 1967 and 1968, state labor boards started granting collective bargaining rights to faculty at public universities and colleges. The State University of New York and City University of New York systems were among the first public faculty groups to gain certified union representation.

The National Labor Relations Board had no jurisdiction over private institutions until 1970. Prior to that, private-school faculty’s only hope to unionize was through an administration’s voluntary recognition. By 1976, there were 38 private colleges and 180 public colleges under union contracts in 29 states, the
District of Columbia, and Guam. Berry argues that the administrations’ creation of a two-tiered structure—tenure-track and the rest—soon became an effort to frustrate the burgeoning unionization movements on many campuses.

Then a Supreme Court decision curtailed the scope of faculty organizing.

IN 1980, THE SUPREME COURT ruled in NLRB v. Yeshiva University that full-time, tenure-track faculty in private colleges and universities were “managerial,” and thus ineligible to organize under the National Labor Relations Act. The decision had no impact on contingents’ ability to organize, and it didn’t pertain to faculty at public colleges and universities, who, like all public employees, aren’t covered by the National Labor Relations Act, and whose right to bargain collectively is left to the discretion of the states.

Traditional higher education unions like the AFT, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), and the National Education Association had been organizing contingent faculty for decades—mostly, however, through comprehensive faculty unionization efforts, not by specifically targeting contingents. AFT’s higher education strategy had mainly consisted of building joint “wall-to-wall” bargaining units in which all faculty—from tenured professors to adjunct instructors—are represented.

Yeshiva scrambled those unions’ strategies. The AFT continued to focus on organizing broad units that included both tenure-track and non–tenure track faculty, but at public colleges and universities only. By contrast, nontraditional education unions like SEIU, which have come onto the scene in recent years, have largely organized contingent-only units at private schools where wall-to-wall units are forbidden.

“Some of the best contracts in terms of working conditions for adjunct faculty are in those joint units; some of the worst contracts are as well,” says Rhoades, who was formerly the general secretary of AAUP. If there’s a strong sense of solidarity between the two tiers, the ability of joint units to win strong contracts could mean big gains for contingent working conditions. However, joint units could just as easily mean captivity for contingents if their concerns fail to register in contract negotiations.

Some see this insistence on maintaining a wall-to-wall strategy as a failure to adapt organizing strategies to the rapidly expanding legions of contingent faculty who are struggling to improve their working conditions. AFT President Randi Weingarten contends, however, that her union’s wall-to-wall strategy was the best response to the Yeshiva decision. “The Supreme Court basically pulled the rug out from university organizing,” says Weingarten. “The organizing strategy we deployed was one that tried to lift all boats, and not let the boss of a university pit tenured faculty against non-tenure faculty or adjuncts.” In the post-Yeshiva world, she says, that strategy “has made us the largest higher education union in the country.”
The AFT represents about 215,000 members in higher education—about 100,000 are full-time, tenure-track; 90,000 are contingent, including full-time, non–tenure track as well as part-timers, graduate employees, and postdocs. “We help facilitate bargaining committees [with representatives from both groups] and have it done from the bottom up,” Weingarten says. “That’s part of the beauty of organizing everyone. You deal with each other’s needs. From a bargaining position, we’re aligned.”

With many university administrations openly antagonistic to organizing efforts among contingents, the AFT’s wall-to-wall approach has served to enlist a powerful group—tenured faculty—in the contingents’ cause. But contingents are an uncommonly unionizable workforce even without tenured allies, which is a lure for unions with a range of organizing strategies. “There are [unions] who even though they are not in the education space see contingent workers—exploited workers—and want to get into that space,” Weingarten says. “Frankly, there’s enough work for everyone in this space because there’s lots of exploited adjuncts.”

SEIU President Mary Kay Henry agrees. “It’s incumbent upon all of us to do whatever it takes to make sure that working people have a chance to come together and bargain,” Henry says. As the most prominent face in the crowd of nontraditional higher education unions, SEIU has employed a distinctly different strategy than AFT’s. It’s a highly publicized and aggressive campaign with aspirational goals of organizing one million adjuncts and establishing a base pay of $15,000 per course. While the union’s national campaign is in its infancy, it has roots in Washington, D.C., that go back nearly a decade.

**KIP LORNELL HAS BEEN** teaching since the early 1990s, mostly at George Washington University in D.C. His field is American music and ethnomusicology, on which he’s published 14 books, and he even won a Grammy in 1997 for his work on a folk music anthology project. As a music academic, he’s about as experienced as they come. But to the GW administration, he’s merely an Adjunct Professor of Music. Given his expertise, GW offered him a regular part-time position in 1999, which offers slightly more job security, benefits, and a higher salary. Lornell inquired what higher salary GW had in mind and was told $15,000 a year. “They said, ‘We pay all regular part-timers [in the college of arts and sciences] that,’” he recalls. “I didn’t believe that for a second.”

He asked around among other part-time faculty in the college, and as it turned out, he was right. “There were people getting paid two and a half times more than that. The folks who were offering me [the position] were either badly misinformed or absolutely lying.”
Faculty Forward Chicago

Faculty Forward Chicago march in downtown Chicago on Fight for 15's National Day of Action, April 15, 2015.

The experience radicalized Lornell. After he got in contact with other part-timers, they started having regular meetings and eventually decided that they wanted to form a union. They had heard about the work the United Auto Workers (UAW) was doing at New York University and the New School, and by 2001 the group had grown enough to reach out to the union and make a pitch. The UAW sent down some organizers, but after more than a year with little results to show for their efforts, it became clear that the partnership wasn’t working. “They were stretched too thin,” Lornell says. They mutually decided to part ways and find a local union. Lornell then reached out to AFT, but GW is a private university and didn’t seem to mesh well with the union’s organizing strategy.

Finally, the GW part-timers met with SEIU Local 500, which covers the D.C. and Maryland area. The local took up the cause. Within six months, the group completed a card drive and presented it to the NLRB. “That’s when the fun began,” Lornell says. “The university was not very happy, and they became
even less happy when we won a very closely contested election.”

For the next year and a half, GW tried to contest the election results at various levels of the NLRB. Eventually the school brought their case to the district appeals court, which very quickly issued a clear message to GW: You’ve lost this, now sit down and bargain. It took a year to negotiate the first contract, but when it was done, the faculty had made real strides. Minimum compensation for a course went up from $2,700 to around $3,400. The contract also restricted the university’s ability to deny reappointment, a boon for job security. Ultimately, the first GW contract became a beacon of encouragement for part-timers at other campuses and a template for their efforts. (The GW administration confined its comments on this history to noting that it “was the first university in the District of Columbia to agree to terms with a union to represent part-time faculty” and that it has since “maintained good relations” with the union.)

“GW unquestionably paved the way for adjunct organizing in D.C.,” Lornell says. One by one, faculty at other campuses in the Washington area, both public and private, joined Local 500. First came Montgomery College in Maryland. Then American University. Then Georgetown. Then Howard University. Then the University of D.C. Then Trinity Washington University.

SEIU Local 500 Executive Director David Rodich explains the thinking behind the local’s organizing strategy: “The secret to making this work is to understand that the movement is bigger than any one individual school. No one school is broken; the system as a whole is broken.”

Rodich estimates that the union has organized 3,000 faculty members—about 80 percent union density in the metropolitan D.C. adjunct market. Local 500 hopes its adjuncts will be able to achieve such high membership that they could transcend campus-level contracts and collectively bargain at a metro-area level. This “metro organizing strategy,” as the union terms it, would give contingent faculty unprecedented leverage. The union could centralize retirement plans and create an adjunct job bank reminiscent of the old union hiring halls.

“That’s the way building trades organized 130 years ago—not by individual employer, but by those practicing the craft in that immediate area and then they made all employers have the same standards,” says Joe Berry, whom many credit with crafting this strategy for contingent faculty. “Entertainers—the musicians, the actors—organized on that basis. There’s a lot of precedent. … It’s the workplace-appropriate strategy for organizing this sector.”

Perhaps recognizing the need to make its contingent organizing more nimble and adaptable, AFT has even integrated the metro organizing strategy into one half of a two-pronged approach. In Philadelphia higher education, the union is attempting to organize a high density of contingents. It still remains invested in the power of the wall-to-wall unit, but in metro areas with a number of higher education institutions, where contingents often work at multiple schools, the metro organizing strategy just makes
more sense. It’s a matter of pinpointing which strategy fits. “The real issue becomes, what creates a power for workers to have a voice and a decent shot at earning a living wage and the professional conditions they need?” says Weingarten. “So you try both.”

Indeed, where wall-to-wall organizing isn’t feasible, AFT seems now to have fully embraced the contingent reality. The union’s higher education director, Alyssa Picard, comes out of the contingent faculty and grad student movements. This change in strategy, argues Berry, is the result of the growing tumult and militancy of contingent faculty. “It’s pressure from below,” he says. “The national unions had to get on board because the train was on the tracks.”

The SEIU announcement of its Adjunct Action Network campaign in 2014 was a calculated attempt to build on the early successes that its locals in D.C. and Boston had with adjunct organizing in urban areas. The union had been monitoring the organizing in D.C. and announced the campaign less than a year after Georgetown adjuncts had voted to unionize. The Adjunct Action initiative, later renamed Faculty Forward, has rapidly scaled up efforts in 18 states or metropolitan areas, from Los Angeles and San Francisco to St. Louis and the Twin Cities. About 8,000 adjuncts have been brought under the Faculty Forward banner so far, and the union says thousands more are in the organizing pipeline.

While many in the adjunct movement community commend SEIU for expanding aggressively, some are skeptical of the long-term efficacy of a campaign that seeks to model a national effort on two locals’ successes, and that perhaps puts a premium on the speed, rather than the depth, of organizing. Others wonder whether SEIU, which has taken a financial hit from a Supreme Court decision undermining its home-care locals and is devoting major resources to its Fight for 15 campaign, can deliver resources adequate to its ambitions for organizing contingents. On the surface, though, SEIU appears to be steaming ahead, not pulling back. It recently announced its Faculty Forward initiative that calls for a minimum of $15,000 per course, benefits included. It’s a bold, flashy move and one that is admittedly aspirational. However, the move has been widely applauded for bringing greater visibility to the adjunct movement, largely by tapping into both the rhetoric and the action of the Fight for 15 movement among low-wage workers.

DESPITE THE GROWING prevalence of contingent faculty, it took a long time for a national contingent organizing strategy to emerge. Until the turn of the century, most efforts were isolated into campus, city, or state silos. It wasn’t until the late 1990s, with the advent of the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL)—independent but supportive of particular union efforts—that the movement began to develop a national strategy and vision, particularly through its advocacy events like Campus Equity Week. In 2009, aided by the rise of social media, the New Faculty Majority (NFM) formed as an organization intent on connecting the various moving parts necessary to stem the tide of increasing adjunctification—unions, nonprofits, activists, legislators, students. “We see ourselves very much as a
page in the evolution of the movement,” says NFM President Maria Maisto. “We try to be both a hub that connects the various spokes of the wheel and also to identify the issues that need to be addressed.”

The group has worked with unions and the Department of Labor to try to fix unemployment denials for adjuncts over the summer as well as addressing wage and hour violations that have occurred because of the Affordable Care Act. Maisto believes that legislative reform would be one of the most effective ways to advance contingents’ interests. With the Republicans’ control of Congress likely blocking any pro-labor legislation, Democrats have begun to use their power to outline the problems and propose solutions that future Congresses might enact.

Following up on the House Democrats’ 2014 investigation into working conditions, Virginia Congressman Robert Scott, who succeeded Miller as the senior Democrat on the House Education Committee, has expressed interest in continuing the committee’s work in support of adjuncts. In the Senate, Richard Durbin of Illinois and Al Franken of Minnesota have sponsored a bill that would extend loan forgiveness to adjuncts.

The Internet has broken down the silos of geography and discipline that historically divided contingent faculty. Facebook and Twitter especially have catalyzed the conversation surrounding contingent working conditions, seen most recently through the promotion of National Adjunct Walkout Day in late February.

As the adjunct movement gains traction, one big obstacle remains lack of student awareness of who is even providing them with their education. “Most students, when they hear [who is teaching them], are shocked,” says Troy Neves, a third-year student at Northeastern University in Boston. “A lot of people don’t even know what an adjunct professor is.” Neves is a regional organizer with United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), a social justice advocacy group. As part of its Campus Worker Justice Campaign, the organization has made adjunct equality a major focus.

Northeastern University contingents successfully unionized with SEIU and are currently in contract negotiations. The USAS chapter was a vocal supporter of their efforts. “One of the main ways we support our adjuncts is by making sure that while in the bargaining room, our university knows that students are watching [and] are going to hold them accountable for treating their workers fairly,” Neves says.

Higher education administrations have varied greatly in their responses to adjunct organizing efforts. Some have declared themselves neutral. Some have waged blatantly anti-union campaigns. Most land somewhere in the middle. “Our official position was that it was within their rights to decide for themselves,” says Jim Glaser, the dean of Tufts University School of Arts and Sciences. “But our perspective was that there would be real costs, both in dollars and bureaucratically, to unionization.”
In Tufts’s School of Arts and Sciences, more than half of the instructors are not in the tenure stream. In September 2013, part-time lecturers voted to form a union. The administration prepared for contract negotiations with a clear sense of what their bottom line would be, with a vision of what they hoped to come out of it. “Tufts, like many other [universities], has resources. But they are constrained—we live within a tight budget,” Glaser says. Its main goals were to stay within that budget while developing a “simple structure that was easy to follow and administer.”

About a year after the unionization vote, the administration and the union settled on a contract that’s since become a model for SEIU’s Faculty Forward campaign. It offers, at a minimum, year-long contracts for all adjuncts and up to three-year contracts for those with more experience. The part-time lecturers also get first notice and a guaranteed interview for full-time openings. Increased compensation was, of course, a key part of the contract, with as much as a 40 percent pay bump for those teaching Romance languages. By 2016, all part-timers will make at least $7,300 per course; those with eight years of service will earn a minimum of $8,760. And work done outside the classroom will be compensated.

A common point of agreement between the union and the administration was the need for a better evaluation system for part-time faculty. Adjuncts wanted feedback on their performance, says Glaser; the school wanted more accountability. “I think [the evaluations] were one of the good byproducts of unionization,” Glaser says. “We are going to have better accountability and better communication and recognition of high-quality work.” Adhering to the new contract, he acknowledges, will require a big adjustment on behalf of the administration. “The university is taking on more costs and we have less flexibility as a result. But we also feel the outcome is contributing to more fairness and to, we hope, better pedagogy and to more satisfied faculty.”

Tufts provides a case study in what a successful negotiation between union and administration can look like. However, as Glaser notes, Tufts is a wealthy university with a lot of resources. As are Boston University, Northeastern University, and Washington University in St. Louis—all schools with adjuncts who have voted to unionize with SEIU. A key question for SEIU’s campaign is what kind of concessions unions can get outside the bubble of elite universities that educate a small slice of U.S. college students. To date, although SEIU has organized some community colleges, its campaign is almost exclusively focused on private universities—mostly because of Yeshiva, it’s easier to organize adjunct-only units at private colleges.

But SEIU can’t come anywhere close to unionizing even a fraction of those one million adjuncts without figuring out how to organize in the public universities and community colleges where the vast majority of contingents are employed. These are the institutions that have seen their state funding gutted over the years and have responded by embedding just-in-time instructional labor into their operational models. Can such colleges afford what the adjunct movement is calling for?
John Barnshaw, the senior higher education researcher for the American Association of University Professors, took an informal stab at answering that question. Using Ohio State University and its nearly 60,000 students as an example, he tried to come up with a rough figure of just how much it would cost to put its entire part-time faculty onto the tenure track. The university is actually less dependent on contingent faculty than the average institution. Of its 5,000-person instructional staff, less than a quarter are part-time.

The lowest-paid tenure position at OSU for the 2014–2015 academic year was assistant professor at $85,200, with an average benefits package bumping up total compensation to more than $100,000. To promote just half the part-timers to tenured positions would cost roughly $67 million in salaries and benefits. That’s not an insignificant number, especially at a public school heavily reliant on public funding. “It’s not without its costs,” Barnshaw says, but to put that in perspective, OSU spends a total of $1.8 billion in salaries and benefits.

Paving the way for a new reality in academia will likely require a multi-pronged approach—through unionizing drives, coalition-building, legislation, and ultimately innovative new employment models that don’t demoralize faculty.

“I don’t think people understand how oppressive it is to work without job security, to work on a terminal, sometimes ten-week basis, without knowing you’ll be employed,” Tiffany Kraft says. “It wears on you psychologically, physically. ... Not only are you underpaid, there’s absolutely no respect. Over time, that hurts. It just hurts.”

What this adjunct movement could mean for Kraft, and legions of other disenfranchised faculty members, is simple: not just fair pay and stability, but a chance to engage in academia. “I would have a lot less stress in my life,” Kraft says. “I wouldn’t constantly be panicking and looking for jobs on Craigslist. I’d have time to publish and research more. I’d have time to just be academic, really.”