

Practical Strategies for Supporting Contract Workers

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[See table of contents](#)

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Practical Strategies for Supporting Contract Workers

ERIN WUNKER How do we keep Contract Academic Staff (CAS) issues at the forefront of the public's attention? Indeed, how do we keep these issues at the forefront of tenured colleagues' attention? Like so many other dispersed, issue-based actions, it can be difficult to maintain public concern and collective momentum on the Internet and in your daily life (think of Idle No More, Occupy, and anti-fracking protests like those in Elsipogtog; in a different context, think of the outrage over Jian Ghomeshi, Dalhousie University dentistry students' "Gentlemen's Club," and other serious issues that have responses constellate, for reasons of practicality, on social media).

Well, here's a shocker: there are no easy solutions and all ideas take work. However, I do have some practical suggestions for maintaining momentum in your daily life, in your academic context, and in Canada. I'll identify suggestions for tenured colleges, CAS—from sessionals to limited-term folks on salary—and interested students.

Contract Academic Faculty

Talk about your working conditions in a clear and factual way. Building support means building diverse communities of people from different working conditions. It is hard. It takes time and energy. Anger only gets us so far, so keep your anger, but refine it. Make it clear, cogent, and compelling. The facts, if you will, and the narrative are needed to understand what it is to live those facts.

Talk with colleagues about your working conditions in a formal way. Do you have access to photocopiers, letterhead, a mailbox, an office, the library? If not, let them know formally and ask for their help. Many tenured colleagues simply don't know the material conditions of CAS work.

Talk with the union you are affiliated with, or would like to be affiliated with, and do this in collaboration with

other CAS in your academic setting. Can the union help? Can it shift its membership parameters?

Build metro-allegiances with other CAS in your city, if this is a possibility. Networking can mean sharing job resources. (I know. Sharing is hard enough in the best of times, but I tell you, bridges are better built than burned.) Join national organizations and make your voice heard. And perhaps most importantly, don't internalize your material conditions as personal failure. This is, admittedly, the hardest. It requires vigilance, vulnerability, and radical attitude re-hauls. Doing something proactive helps.

Tenured Colleagues

Recognize—really recognize—that CAS issues are your issues. They are issues of sustainability for the department and the discipline to which you've dedicated your life. Sustainability and long-term planning require faculty renewal and replacement strategies. How can you build a departmental argument for renewal and replacement? What tactics might collaboration with other departments, programs, and faculties open up?

Strategize hiring at the CAS and tenure-track levels with your tenured colleagues. Can your department pioneer and advocate radical job ads? I mean something more in the realm of job sharing, cross-appointments, and meaningful and energizing ways to preserve what needs preserving while working in this long moment of austerity.

Think in terms of curriculum development at the undergraduate and graduate levels. If teaching is the bread and butter of your department's budget, how can you keep the dollars in sight while also thinking about what other successful departments around the country are doing to meet the changing needs of students? Can your department not only adopt a CAS best-practices checklist, but also create a bespoke one that addresses the material conditions of your context? I bet it can.

Some of my incredible colleagues at Dalhousie University go out of their way to directly address the Dean, VPs, President, and Senate about budget cuts to hiring. They give me hope. I see how time-consuming and emotionally exhausting it is for them, and I want to give them a great big hug every time I see them. Why? Because they are using their tenure on behalf of their departments, their faculties, their students, and their precarious colleagues. Consider how you and your department might proactively address the powers that be in a way that benefits your community in the short and long term.

Students

You have more power than you think! The trick is to learn which questions to ask and to figure out why these issues matter for you. Student governments have incredible potential power for positive change. Are you involved? Can you become involved, or at least informed?

Ask for the numbers: How many of your professors are precariously employed?

Think: If your favourite professor is precariously employed, will they be able to write letters of recommendation for you? In other words, will they be at your institution next semester or next year? Chances are, no.

Ask: How much of your tuition goes to paying teachers?

Ask: When was your department last able to hire a permanent faculty member? Address your concern not to the department, but to the Vice President or Provost. Go together in a delegation. Co-sign letters. Make your request clear and compelling. Get the media on your side.

Ask: How often is your department's curriculum revised in relation to current trends in the discipline and the job market? And how are faculty in your department engaged in continuing to learn about trends in these areas?

Think: What kinds of campus venues are there for discussing these issues? Is your student association engaged

in real and meaningful conversations about sustainable teaching environments? Is your campus newspaper?

Parents, Caregivers, and Alumni

Put public pressure on the administration. Ask how many of your university students' professors are precariously employed. Withhold donations as a means of pressuring administrations to hire on a permanent basis. Apply public pressure with your vote: Contact your Member of Parliament and express your concern about the sustainability of post-secondary education in Canada.

Remember: A great proportion of people teaching your child are early-career teacher-researchers who, like your child, went to university and trained in order to both broaden their thinking and enter the workforce. That workforce isn't going to change without sustained, inter-generational pressure on the people and governing bodies in power. ¶

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