The New Majority Faculty: A Class Analysis for Organizing

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Purpose and Framework

The purpose of this discussion is to highlight and accurately depict those characteristics of the majority contingent faculty workforce, and the contexts in which they reside, that are most relevant and needed for organizing. Further, since organizing, of the nature being assumed here, is meant to be especially self-activated, as opposed to externally driven, then the question of the point of view is paramount. Specifically, what this means is that the perspective will be primarily of the worker, the contingent college teacher, not of the market; from the point of view of labor power, and not of managerial challenges. This also means that it will not primarily use the human or cultural capital theories despite their useful contributions in some respects. In this case, to use them would "cover" or hide with the terminology of "capital" what is really a question of labor power. The larger question, therefore, is not the disinterested, "What determines the terms of exchange in this particular segment of the labor market?" but rather, "How can those terms of exchange be altered, if not literally abolished, to the advantage of the sellers of labor power?" It is within this context that I attempt a brief class analysis of the new majority contingent faculty.

Any class analysis, especially one driven by the desire to organize, necessarily revolves around two basic considerations. One is the material realities of the workplace and the power relations therein. In other words, what are the objective class lines? The second consideration is how do the actors individually and collectively think and behave now, and how might they be led to think and behave under conditions of active organizing? In other words, the subjective factor. This is the classic dualism of the class in itself and the class for itself. This is not to say that the line between these two is always firm and hard, but, conceptually, these are the two categories of factors that together both create and re-create the terrain upon which organizing takes place.

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The Objective Reality

On the first consideration, the objective, I would argue that drawing the class line in higher education involves a very important historical dimension. The relationship between contingent faculty and their employers and also their relationship to full-time tenured faculty has changed over time as the number of contingent faculty and their roles within the institution have increased. My central argument here is that the new majority faculty is a group that has experienced and is continuing to experience proletarianization in nearly all of its classical components: decline of wages, decline of job security, loss of ancillary compensation, loss of autonomy, loss of control of work process, and finally, loss of the craft ("professional") perquisites that have traditionally gone along with the work of a college teacher. This has been accompanied by the splitting of full-time jobs in both of the possible ways: first, simply cutting them into smaller pieces, i.e. a three or four or five-class full time load individually parceled out as one or two class assignments to adjuncts, and second, the unbundling of the various faculty tasks so that these adjuncts are mainly teachers, and play no role in the research, service, governance, or generally collectively professional aspects of the institution. This latter can reach down as far as selection of textbooks, definitions of acceptable class size, copying limitations, classroom assignments, etc.

The conditions of contingent faculty in general have changed radically since the sector began to grow in the 1970s. For analytical purposes, it is useful to posit that, in fact, these conditions have changed radically enough to meet the dialectical requirements of quantity changing to quality. This means that the progressive deterioration of conditions, pay, security, independence of action, as compared to full-time tenure track (FTTT) classically "regular" faculty, have proceeded so far and become so standard, as the numbers of these contingent faculty have increased in higher education, that the quantity of changes can be posited as having transformed into the qualitative change of a new class line being drawn in higher education institutions. This class line is not meant to be drawn between contingent and regular faculty, though some have attempted to do so, but rather, as contingent faculty have become the majority, this class transformation has set them, now the normative (majority) group of college faculty, clearly onto the other side of a class line from those who own, control, and/or manage institutions of higher education in the United States. It is not so much that contingent faculty have become more different from regular full-time faculty than before, but that they have become the faculty norm. This change, of course has also impacted full-time faculty in many ways. The implications and details of these changes for full time faculty will be discussed in greater detail as a strategic consideration in a later section. Fundamentally, this is the classic proletarianization argument applied to higher education, just as this argument, now nearly universally accepted, was applied starting in the early 1900's to public school teachers. This class line

was the implied theoretical and practical basis for the rise of the AFT and teacher unionism, as opposed to the NEA and the concept of the schoolmaster.

This is not to say that these new professional intellectual proletarians (contingent faculty) are purely that, leaving aside the question of whether anyone in a complex advanced capitalist society is purely anything in class terms (Wright). Rather, this is an argument that their primary class position has changed in the last thirty years and that they are now fundamentally, in all their variety, members of the working class and in fact, the single largest numerical group of the working class residing within the walls of academia.

They retain a contradictory class position from a variety of bases. As contingent and in many cases part-time workers, many of them have other occupations, either simultaneously or consecutively, than teaching in higher education. Also, in common with most other contingent workers, their class position, and certainly their class perception, is heavily influenced by the class position of their spouses and other family members who may have more secure and middle class economic positions. Yet another source of contradiction in the class position of this group is the fact that the vast majority of them do not come from working class origins, either self-described or objectively delineated. In this way, they could be seen as paralleling other groups whose massive entry into the American working class was from non-working class origins, such as the vast majority of rural immigrants to the factories of the cities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, whether from rural America, especially the South, or from Europe, Asia or Latin America. What those folks all had in common was the rural-to-urban transition and also, in most cases, the transition from peasanthood of some sort to wage labor in an industrial society. For many of these ex-peasants, this constituted a lateral or even upward move in class location. For our contingent faculty, it is often a downward motion, even if their education is greater than their parents. This crucial fact of personal and group history is one of the central mapping elements that must be used in constructing organizational strategy for this group. The trigger, or at least the visible trigger, of this massive transition in the academic workforce was the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education's Recommendations on the Academic Workforce (Schell 34, Abel 69).

Even more important than the absolute condition of contingent faculty, and their progressive deterioration, are the changes in power relations governing their labor. These power relations have been altered as the organizational structure of higher education has undergone change, both through the growth of the community colleges and through the transformation of more traditional institutions. One of the central facts of these power relations from the point of view of contingent faculty is that many of those considered by higher administration—and by the public at large—as "faculty" are, to contingent faculty, "bosses." This large sector of full-time tenure track faculty appointees are seen by themselves, and many

others, as "faculty," but in their role as department heads, lead faculty, coordinators, program directors, and assistant deans, are seen by contingent faculty as the employer. The contingent and casual nature of the employment relationship that has been constructed in higher education, similar to the phenomenon in the rest of the economy, has also been accompanied by de-centralization of authority and practice regarding the hiring, scheduling, evaluation, assignment, and firing of contingent faculty. Since these administrator/faculty perform all these functions upon contingent faculty, they are objectively "bosses" and seen as such by contingent faculty.

Subjective Consciousness

Along with this description of this new proletarianized majority teaching classes in higher education must go the understanding that, like others whose work has become casualized, these faculty are now impelled to constantly search for multiple employment, either within or without academia, and frequently both. One result of this, which has substantial strategic implications, is that for virtually the first time in American higher education we have a substantial group of faculty, not just administrators, who have intimate experience in multiple institutions, and often in various sections of the country. This collective knowledge, if organized strategically, can provide a substantial factor in countering the united opposition of university and college administrators vis a vis adjunct and contingent faculty unionization as well as other issues within the institutions. What we may have here, if authors like Paul Johnston's predictions are accurate, is the creation of a group that can collectively more fully realize the old Marxist dream of the workers actually understanding and thereby potentially controlling the whole work process of an entire industry nationally. In any case, at least, this mobility does provide the ability of contingent faculty to avoid being taken in by administrative assertions couched in the language of "This is how it has to be done," "We've always done it this way," or "This is how professionals do it."

As a proletarianizing group, who mostly are also individually engaged in downward mobility, in aspiration if not always in material reality, contingent faculty naturally exhibit a dual consciousness and behavior. On the one hand, the long years of higher education have instilled in them a belief in individual merit, the "Protestant work ethic," and higher education's version of the Horatio Alger myth. Their close proximity throughout this education to those who occupy the positions to which they now aspire, intensifies this feeling, and leads them to frequently pursue, sometimes for years and even decades, the search for individual solutions and personal recognition of their "merit." On the other hand, the radically altered reality of higher education employment since the 1970s cannot help but impact the consciousness of even those most highly socialized products of American capitalist ideological hegemony—the holders of masters and doctorates.

These breaks in consciousness manifest themselves in a variety of ways. Many initially retain the individualism of the striver while at the same time attempting to militantly struggle against what they perceive as individual unfairness directed against them and frustrating their ability to achieve individual recognition of their merit, such as a full-time tenure track (FTTT) position. This can sometimes take a very personalist tone, with contingent faculty one minute kow-towing in the most obsequious way to administrators and full-timers and at another moment expressing positively murderous feelings toward those very same individuals. It goes without saying that neither of these behaviors nor the specific consciousness that contributes to them is a particularly useful building block for organizing. However, the understanding of where this comes from and its fundamental instability can provide the organizer with the tools to help transform this primitively and individually rebellious consciousness into something of a collective nature. Since it arises from a fundamentally unstable and changing situation, namely the uneven proletarianization of the group, this consciousness is susceptible to fairly rapid transformation under the proper collective circumstances, but is always likewise susceptible to backsliding when isolation takes hold.

Finally, I would argue that this context creates the possibility, probably for the first time in the history of American higher education, for a mass working class consciousness among faculty, not merely sympathy with workers elsewhere in the economy or the world, as was the basis for faculty unionism in the pre-collective bargaining days. Further, I would argue that this provides a basis not only for the fairly narrow trade or craft consciousness of the professional, such as has dominated FTTT-led faculty unions since the 1960s, but rather represents the potential for actual class consciousness that could be spread into the rest of the working class, starting with the working class students of most contingent faculty. The strategic power of the right to legitimately stand in front of a class of working class students and talk about the social realities that students, and now most faculty, face, using the pronoun "we" unselfconsciously, is a power that has only barely begun to be realized by a few activists and not yet by the movement as a whole. However, all of us who have experienced this power first hand can have no doubt of its potential.

Full-time Tenure Track (and Tenured) Faculty

Just as the new majority contingent faculty have had their objective and therefore subjective positions changed in the last 30 years, so have the other two key groups that impact them, namely full-time tenured faculty and administrators. FTTT faculty are coming to occupy a deeply anomalous position. They are clearly not employers or bosses in the main, the Yeshiva[1] decision and its contorted interpretations notwithstanding. And they are becoming even less so in the years since that decision was rendered. The exceptions, namely the star faculty in a few departments at

Research I universities, are merely the exceptions that prove the rule of a gradual degradation of the FTTT employment situation, which is most potently symbolized in the public view by the continuing and regular attacks upon tenure.

One way the discussion of the space between the contingent faculty and the FTTT faculty is being carried on is through the current debate in the California community colleges over what constitutes equity or parity and thereby guiding the local allocation of the pay equity money in the state budget. This debate holds great importance not only because the California community colleges constitute the largest system of higher education in the United States but also because it is the sharpest version to date of the decades-long discussion of what are the differences and similarities between the duties of the FTTT and the contingent faculty, expressed most baldly in a single percentage. The direct question being addressed pursuant to the legislation in California is, "What percentage of a full-time faculty member's total work is constituted by the teaching and other duties that part-time (contingent) faculty members do?" This debate is being conducted in every single community college district in the state through the collective bargaining process, and the percentages may well end up ranging from the sixties to one hundred.

Of course, community college full-time faculty, as mainly teachers, do not have exactly the same duties as university faculty, so this will not be the final word in the discussion of what constitutes equity for all contingent faculty. However, this debate opens up discussions that, depending on how they are pursued, can be positive or negative for the future of higher education and for contingent faculty organizing. Positively, it forces out into the open discussion of all of the tasks that contingent faculty are presently conducting pursuant to their instructional duties, whether paid or unpaid. It thereby creates pressure for those duties to be considered necessary and paid, in the context of revisions of compensation strategies. Examples of this would be office hours, syllabus development, materials development, collective grading of departmental exams, development of grading norms, student advising, and much of the rest of department activity that directly relates to instruction. Negatively, however, this debate could result in support for the existing administrative thrust to unbundle faculty work by focusing attention on the potential to separate the work of curriculum development from instructional delivery, from evaluation, from individual student contact such as tutoring and advising, all of which have traditionally been packaged in the person of the individual faculty member, and the norms for which have been developed collectively by faculty. So, as is nearly always the case for important discussions, the results could make things better, or worse. That's why it's important.

At the same time that contingent faculty numbers have been increasing and their conditions have been proletarianized, an evolution has also taken place among the full-time tenure track faculty in almost all sectors of higher education. At the Research I uni-

versities, this has manifested as greatly increased publishing requirements, a much higher bar for hiring, promotion and tenure, and, at the same time, pressure upon the non-stars to teach more, though that pressure has often been successfully resisted. The overall decline in full-time tenured faculty at Research I universities as a percentage of the total teaching faculty has meant that departmental curricular work and other collective business is split among fewer hands. So for those who are not "stars," able to command the astronomical salaries that one sees on the front pages of the newspapers, even this relatively elite group has found their traditional perquisites threatened.

For those in universities not granting PhD's, and with a heritage of focus upon teaching, the changes have been in the direction of higher research requirements but not necessarily a lowering of teaching loads. At these institutions as well, we see the spectacle of committees passing on the hiring, promotion, and tenure of applicants, when the majority, or at least many on the committee, could not pass the bar themselves. This pattern is reflected throughout higher education over the past two decades.

The liberal arts colleges seem to have been impacted by these changes the least, internally, but externally the environment in which they function has become much more hostile to the traditional niche market that they occupy. So while liberal arts colleges have hired fewer contingents and have transformed the work of their full-time tenure track faculty less, a great many of them have simply collapsed, through bankruptcy, merger, or a radical transformation to attempt to live with the new market realities. This trend accelerated in the 1970s, with religiously-based liberal arts colleges in small towns throughout America (with Parsons College in Iowa becoming Maharishi University the most famous), but it seems to have greatly accelerated.

In the community colleges, which are by far the single largest sector of American higher education, full-time faculty have found themselves a decreasing percentage of the total instructors, now almost always a minority. In more than a few cases, entire departments have been reduced to one full-time department chair managing a flock of "birds of passage" part-timers. In institutions where the department chairmanships were never highly coveted, generally only giving partial release time and little if any increased pay, this new situation has resulted in departments literally conscripting chairs on rotational or name-in-the-hat basis, under the threat that if existing full-timers did not "pull their weight," their whole department would be consolidated with another or leadership would be imposed upon them in the person of a Dean or Dean's selection. This has taken place at the same time that the general drive to eliminate departments as arenas for faculty governance and collective academic decision making has continued. In a great many community colleges today, the word "department" is merely an archaic colloquialism with no official administrative meaning any more.

The changes this has meant for the average full-time community college faculty member include the following: pressure to teach

more and to teach larger classes; pressure to serve on more committees and spend more time on collective departmental business; and pressure to perform more semi-administrative functions, despite the fact that administration has been one of the sectors of higher education growing in numbers along with academic professionals and contingent faculty; and a loss of full-time disciplinary colleagues, and thereby a loss of the sort of collegiality in all ways that used to be the particular mark of these teaching institutions. All of this has occurred while the FTTT faculty as a group have been aging as well as shrinking and while the general level of economic support on a per-student basis for community colleges as institutions has been shrinking. The result has been a drop in morale, individually and collectively, such that few who knew the community colleges in the 60s and early 70s would fully recognize them today.

The Two Tiered Faculty in Summary

So if one is to compare the trajectory of the changes in the work and work life of contingent and FTTT faculty, they might be summarized thus: one, contingent faculty have changed from being the occasional professional imported to teach a specialty class as a professional courtesy to their fellow professionals in academia, the situation pre-1970s, to the present situation where contingent faculty of various sorts together make up a majority of the faculty and at a great many universities are doing the majority of the teaching under conditions much inferior both to those of the occasional professionals of the 1960s and to their FTTT colleagues. This, with some wiggles, is basically straight-line deskilling and proletarianization. Two: Full-time (FTTT) faculty, have been affected more variously across the sectors, but virtually all, except for the minority of "stars" at Research I universities or the minority in other places who have become mainly administrators, have seen their working conditions and traditional perquisites degraded.

This is now a complicated calculus, for while in some ways the difference between the FTTT faculty and contingent faculty is now greater than ever, in other ways the forces acting upon them both have now exposed themselves much more obviously and potentially laid the basis for alliance much greater than ever before. If present trends continue, and many top administrators and their consultants are openly pushing for them, we will see a convergence, but it will be a convergence of the casualized, the de-skilled and the insecure with a just a few holding super-professor/consultant status left at the top, who will be making the sorts of decisions that traditionally were made collectively by all FTTT faculty.

Implications for organizing contingent faculty, especially their relation with FTTT, will be greatly impacted by how both groups respond to these changes. If most FTTT see their danger of job loss or job degradation as converging with the contingent majority, then new openings for faculty unionism are clearly available. If, on the other hand, the majority of FTTT faculty respond to these condi-

tions by looking for individual ways out—counting the days until their own retirement, seeking to become a "star," pursuing administrative advancement, developing outside consulting businesses related to their discipline—then the potential for alliance greatly decreases and the potential collective power to defend FTTT positions for the future will decline as well. The attack on tenure in all its forms is merely the most obvious example of an administration strategically responding to these changes. Administrators also wave the carrot as well as the stick in encouraging individual responses with early retirement packages, increasing numbers of administrative or partially administrative positions, and rewarding outside entrepreneurial behavior (including grants and corporate contracts). They also encourage faculty unions to allow for multiple tiers "selling the unhired," by creating further degraded conditions for future FTTT faculty. The fact that most faculty unions have been led by representatives of the older FTTT cohort has allowed this tactic to be effective in many cases.

Faculty Compared to other Workforces

FTTT faculty thus exhibit a number of characteristics typical of what is happening to the rest of the "full time permanent labor force," just as contingent faculty exhibit many of the characteristics of the growing "non-standard" labor force in the rest of the economy. Ultimately, these changes may make the very vocabulary of "contingent" and "permanent" passé. Unlike most other industrial nations, and even many developing, less industrial nations, in the United States most employees who do not have union representation function under the "at will" common law doctrine. What this means from the worker perspective, and also from the organizer perspective, is that there is no legal restriction upon the employers to keep them from dismissing employees for any reason or no reason and with no notice or explanation. The exceptions to this, which cover only a minority of the workforce, are 1)union contracts with just cause discipline and discharge provisions; 2) public employment with civil service due process discipline and discharge protections; 3) civil rights laws forbidding discrimination against protected groups (race, sex, color, age, national origin, religion, veteran's status and in some localities, sexual orientation—but these can be difficult to enforce, more and more requiring a "smoking gun" for successful litigation); 4) retaliation for exercise of rights under various labor and employment laws (National Labor Relations Act, OSHA, FMLA, etc.), and 5) legally enforceable "tenure" regulations for traditional FTTT faculty. While this list of protections has expanded over the years, the practical ability of most workers without an organization to stand with them to enforce these laws has actually declined, along with unionization rates, in the decades since contingent work became more common.

Since World War II, there has been a social expectation, at least in the primary labor market, where standards were largely set,

directly or indirectly, by union contracts and the labor management "pact" post World War II, that regular jobs would be full-time, include benefits, and carry the expectation of continued employment as long as work was adequately performed and the employer did not experience an economic crisis. There might be temporary seasonal or emergency layoffs, but the relationship between the employer and employee was seen by both as ongoing and having some permanence. The fact that this social expectation had virtually no legal standing in nonunion workplaces did not make it any less real in the relationships at the workplace. It is the destruction of that relationship, legally supported or otherwise, that is much of the story of the changes in the entire American workforce in the years since the 1970s. In application to higher education, where this expectation had been considered legally enforceable, through tenure statutes, case law, and frequently union contracts, the change has been somewhat more gradual as it applied to those occupying the permanent positions, but the pressures for change have built up just the same.

Department Heads and Others "Similarly Situated"

Contingent faculty, as the above should suggest, are not the only ones who are in a changing and contradictory class location in higher education. With growing pressures to abolish elected department heads and at the same time assign administrative duties to regular faculty, in a piece meal fashion, while growing the ranks of the full-time middle management, academic professionals, and their support staffs, (Rhoades 80) the inhabitants of slots labeled "department head," "assistant dean," "program director," etc. have found themselves torn by their very obvious contradictory imperatives, as their percentage grows. From the point of view of contingent faculty, the fact of being managed, hired and fired by those who themselves occupy a contradictory class location, is no gift at all. Since many of these supervisors still see themselves as faculty, with, in many cases, more than a whiff of populism and even leftism in their bloodstream, they frequently play the role of supervisor in a uniquely ambivalent and incompetent way. Since many of them have not come to grips with the fact that, to those faculty whom they supervise, they are the boss, the manner in which they relate to them, in many cases, has some of the superficial attributes of collegiality but none of its content. This creates a situation in which these supervisors tend to minimize the time spent on their supervisory duties—to the detriment of those being supervised - and react very defensively to being questioned, even in the most neutral and information-seeking way, by those below them about their exercise of these duties. When faced with collective action, even of the most benign sort, many of these faculty-supervisors turn their ambivalence into feelings of personal betrayal and generalized hostility. This reaction has perhaps been most extreme in the case of many full-time tenure-track faculty members' reactions to graduate employee organizing, because it highlights the fact that

they are playing the role of employer and agent of the higher levels of the administration in their economic relationship to those under them, as well as the more familiar relationship of academic mentor and professor. All of this is heightened by the increased use of contingent faculty of all sorts, including graduate teachers, and the declining numbers, at least percentage-wise, of full-time tenured faculty.

Administrators

Having looked in some detail at both the contingent and FTTT faculty, as well as briefly at the department head or "faculty as boss", let us now turn our attention to those who exercise real power in higher education: the administrations. In a counter-cyclical industry, such as most of non-elite higher education, there has always been a certain pressure on administrators to let the bottom line lead institutional policy. Non-elite higher education is a counter-cyclical industry in the sense that the demand (and arguably need) for its product grows in periods of recession and depression, just those times when funding for the institution either through government appropriations or voluntary donations, is likely to be at its lowest. Likewise, in good economic times, more potential students are likely to find living wage jobs and therefore delay their return or continuation in higher education. This phenomenon has become both more pronounced and more important since the 1970s as the percentage of college students who are working adults as opposed to new high school graduates has increased. This countercyclical condition of the industry has always produced pressure on administrators to pay attention to the short term economics of their enterprise, but in the period of the post World War II boom, there was enough money coming to the system to sustain growth, real growth, even in times of recession.

What changed for administrators in the 1970s was the same thing that changed for employers throughout the economy: in the private sector it was called "the profit crisis." In higher education, being mostly public or non-profit, it was referred to as a "budget crisis." But it amounted to the same thing. The attempt to prosecute an unpopular war on the basis of government borrowing, while at the same time not raising taxes or seriously reducing (in fact they were expanded) public services, resulted in a lessening of economic growth and rising prices, the heretofore capitalist impossibility of "stagflation." This manifested itself in higher education with increasing numbers of non-traditional students, many of them veterans, literally banging on the doors of higher education while at the same time the disposable institutional income of administrators was shrinking. They responded to this problem, some with serious soul-searching, others arguing to themselves that these were mere temporary expediencies, by hiring legions of contingent faculty and also cutting costs in other ways (larger class sizes, deferred maintenance, contracting out of non-instructional services and seeking educational contracts outside the institution or "contracting in.")

The net result of these pressures upon higher education administrators was to make that generation of administrators more open to traditional corporate management models to solve their problems. As that generation of administrators retired, in the years following, many college presidents and boards of trustees, quite rationally from their perspective, replaced the retirees with people directly from the corporate sector, figuring that if the problem was that of corporate management, why should the institution pay for on-the-job retraining of academics when it could hire people who were ready to go "just-in-time?" Thus, in the 21st century, we have many more educational institutions being run by people who not only have taught very little but who quite frankly do not see themselves primarily as educators, even rhetorically, and who much prefer to be labeled CEOs than to bear the burden of "educational or academic leadership."

Conclusion

College faculty have changed. The majority are now contingent, and have a different power relationship with those who own and control institutions of higher education than did the classic full-time professor of the pre-1970's "golden age" in academia. These contingent faculty are clearly skilled workers and now are the largest tier of the faculty as a whole. If the faculty as a whole are now "managed professionals" in Gary Rhoades' term, then the contingent majority might be better seen as professionally trained skilled intellectual craft workers. Accompanying this transition has been the degradation of conditions and power of FTTT faculty as their percentage has dropped. To complete the class clarification, pressures upon supervisors and administrators have increased to force them into behavior and thought patterns much more like those of capitalist managers and owners than that of academic and educational leaders.

Further, I argue that the primary significance of these changes is to open the door to a new organizing movement, primarily based upon and led by the contingent majority, which can make common cause with a broader class based labor movement, on campus and outside it. We can now envision a faculty social unionism that is not just sympathetic with the rest of the working class movement, but actually part of it as well.

Note

[1]National Labor Relations Board vs. Yeshiva University was a 1980 US Supreme Court decision that generally stated that FTTT faculty in private higher education were to be considered managers under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and therefore not eligible for collective bargaining rights under the protection of the NLRA.

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