

Take Back Our University:

MUNFA's Take on why Contract ASMs matter, a lot, in this round of bargaining

"I apply for my job every year ... twice a year: [first] with MUNFA and, then, LUMUN per course work [for the summer]. I am really sick of it!"

-MUN Term Appointee

MUNFA entered the current round of Collective Bargaining on a platform of increasing equity at Memorial. No group of MUNFA members better exemplifies academia's equity-deficit than our colleagues on "term appointments," many of whom work contract after contract, year after year, without any guarantee that they will be rehired. Term appointments – which include both regular term appointments (RTAs) and teaching term appointments (TTAs) – may have to reapply

for the same job annually, or even every semester, and those who are rehired often must accept significant changes to contract terms (e.g., the length of contract or type of appointment).

Regular term appointments have equivalent responsibilities to tenured and tenure track appointments, but without the job security. Teaching term appointments are paid to teach and nothing else. Research and service is not included in their recognized workload (even though many TTAs are active in both these areas).

TTAs' contracts can range from 4 to 36 months, and TTAs can be assigned the equivalent of 3 lecture courses per semester, or 4 courses if they are assigned two sections of the same course. Those on 12-36 month contracts can be asked to teach 3 terms per year. TTAs are paid significantly less than tenure stream or regular term faculty, even when they have equivalent qualifications and experience. And those hired on 4-month contracts have no access to health or pension benefits.

"Technically I am paid only to teach, but I am invited (and motivated) to participate in committees and engage in ample service in my unit and across the university. ... My colleagues and superiors value the work, but there aren't any official mechanisms for it to be "counted." Furthermore, I am interested in pursuing research... . [But] I have certainly caught myself in professional conversations saying, "I'm just on a contract" as if I am not equal to my colleagues. I actively feel a mismatch explaining to colleagues what I technically do (teach) versus the other professional things I have done (research interests, service experience)."

And yet, the University works because they do.

-MUN Term Appointee

The Collective Agreement restricts the proportion of term-appointed ASMs in any semester to 25% of the total MUNFA membership (although the portion of our membership that is actually hired on a limited term basis is lower). Yet faculty outside the tenure stream taught over 40% of courses at Memorial in 2013-15. In some academic units, well over 60% of classroom teaching is done by term ASMs and per course instructors (PCIs). Some might think that PCIs, who are represented by the Lecturers Union (LUMUN) are not MUNFA's business. But contingently employed teachers frequently move between MUNFA and LUMUN, depending on the available work.

"We know our [academic unit] cannot deliver the program without contract labour, but that doesn't make us feel secure and particularly so in the current climate. ... We also do work (course prep, respond to department emails and student emails) during the months when we are unemployed. We are 8 month employees, but we work 12 months of the year. This is something very few [permanent] members of our [unit] realize."

-MUN Term Appointee

But why should tenure stream academics care about contingent colleagues?

Most obviously, it's a matter of basic justice. MUNFA has, in the past year, filed multiple association (policy) grievances on behalf of term ASMs. At issue are employer requests for work outside the period of these ASMs' paid contracts, lack of support for their research work, failure to extend institutional support for their work, and contract length. We have also worked to improve term appointees' access to benefits, although, to date, we have had limited success for 4 month contracts. But even if we won on all these issues, it would not take away the personal toll wrought by continual job insecurity.

“Every year it is the same stress we feel. Do we have a job next year? Have I/we saved enough so that when we are unemployed in the last term we can financially survive? Will I get sick and then be responsible for my own benefits as they end Apr.30? We all experience this, but for contract employees (like me) who are the only earner in their household the stress is magnified.”

-MUN Term Appointee

At the same time, tenure stream faculty have a direct interest in the working conditions of their term-appointed colleagues and in the proportion of faculty working on term appointments. We all lose when our colleagues are not properly supported in their roles as researchers and teachers, and when departments must rely on revolving-door appointments to sustain themselves institutionally. Vibrant intellectual communities can't survive – much less grow – amidst constant insecurity and pervasive inequality.

“[If I had a permanent position] I would feel more rooted to tackle longer-term teaching and research projects for the good of my Academic Unit. I take my work seriously and try to give it my best no matter what, but permanent employment opens up more space to plan and reflect and revise both in teaching and research. I would also feel in a better position to help the university attain its long-term goals and be a proud bearer of institutional memory. ... it would be quite easy to reciprocate dedication to being a productive university citizen and ambassador in university affairs. I think I try to do this anyway, but it's always with an underlying feeling of reciprocation “despite” being on contract.”

-MUN Term Appointee

Many of our students don't understand that their university teachers often hold qualitatively different positions. When such students look for reference letters, advice, or mentoring from an inspiring professor, they may be disappointed to learn that the person no longer has a job at Memorial.

“...It must sound like I hate my job. Well, nothing could be further from the truth. I love what I do. In fact, I love teaching more today than I did 10 or 20 years ago. I've learned to keep my focus on my students and not the other aspects of departmental life. ... I've received two different teaching awards over the years and they were proud moments for me. I have also received many letters, cards and emails from students over the years thanking me for the experience. Sometimes these letters come years later when I can hardly recall the student.”

-MUN Term Appointee

Beyond all that, intensified reliance on precarious academic employment reflects wider problems. As Canadian Association of University Teachers President James Compton put it, [contract faculty are canaries in the academic coalmine](#).

He connects the increased casualization of academic work to wider institutional changes in universities: an “uneven and contradictory mixture of entrepreneurialism, top-down managerialism, and audit culture being foisted upon universities” that Gary Rhoades and Sheila Slaughter call “academic capitalism.”

These have led to growing stress levels even for tenured academic staff, while scholars facing job insecurity and whose heavy teaching loads prevent them from building the research records they desire sit at the acute end of an increasingly corporatized system that, by design, fosters anxiety. As Compton puts it: “we're all in this together.”

The devaluation of university teaching

Teaching is one of the major ways universities contribute to the public good and connect to the wider community. For many outside the university system, our work educating young adults is the core reason for supporting universities and the main way they relate to universities.

“My proudest teaching moments come when students disclose either personally or in an assignment that they now see the relevance/value/importance of something in my course that they were initially skeptical about or dismissive of. As an advocate of transformational learning experiences I recognize that discomfort can mean growth (for both teacher and learner) and it’s always my objective to equip students with lifelong tools and approaches for personal growth. It’s not always an easy journey but I’m proud when they can say it was worthwhile.”

-MUN Term appointee

Such teaching is also intrinsic to scholarship. As political scientist Robert Keohane points out, the best political scientists – those for whom their discipline is a vocation - are active teachers. Teaching undergraduates compels them to articulate their thinking clearly with people not steeped in disciplinary arcana. Graduate students offer critical interchange and new ways of thinking. And yet, as Keohane says, “Colleagues bargain to reduce their ‘teaching loads.’ The language is revealing, since [we speak of ‘research opportunities’ but of ‘teaching loads.’](#)”

Moreover, as anthropologist Deirdre Rose notes: “there is often an inverse relationship between teaching load, pay, and relative prestige.” Such disparagement of teaching is inseparable from the rise of underpaid contract scholars whose work is confined to teaching – indeed, whose working conditions and the rules of the funding game often deprive them of opportunities to pursue research, [at significant costs to their own careers and to disciplinary knowledge.](#)

“Redressing the issues facing non-tenured faculty,” Rose continues, “requires equitable pay, job security, and fair treatment. Pay increases alone, while welcome, will not remedy the marginalization of this group of academic workers. And pay increases will not remedy the more widespread devaluation of the teaching role within the halls of higher learning.”

Speaking of teaching: surely those of us involved in training PhD students have an interest in ensuring they have a meaningful shot at a researcher-teacher tenure-stream position if that’s the career path they want?

So what is to be done?

As employees, term appointed faculty at Memorial rarely have the “exit options” available in other labour markets: alternative academic employers are few (or none) and, having made enormous investments in specialized human capital, they are understandably reluctant to seek work in other sectors. This gives the employer a profound bargaining advantage – and the University knows it. It is precisely the goal of organized labour generally, and of MUNFA in particular, to level the playing field in circumstances like these.

MUNFA’s take is that the best long-term approach is to ensure that most teaching at Memorial is done by tenured or tenure track faculty. When new positions are created they should be good jobs.

As a result, we are negotiating for complement language that would stipulate that 90% of teaching at Memorial be done by tenured and tenure-track faculty.

For contractual ASMs, MUNFA is proposing longer contracts, fairer salaries, access to research support, and meaningful provision for conversion to the tenure stream. And we are asking for a cap on the proportion of term appointments hired as TTAs, so that more term ASMs will be supported as researchers as well as teachers.