

What's a Fair Wage for Adjuncts?

By Audrey Williams June | DECEMBER 07, 2017 ✓ PREMIUM



David Sanders

As CUNY's faculty union prepares to negotiate a new contract with its administration, protesters call for a minimum wage for adjuncts of \$7,000 for a three-hour course. The current rate is less than half that.

The impending negotiations between the City University of New York's faculty union and administration may come down to a fundamental question: How much is adjunct labor worth?

The union's answer is \$7,000. That's the minimum pay per three-credit course that it's seeking for the roughly 14,000 adjuncts it represents — about double the minimum that adjuncts there now earn per course.

The current pay rate is "insulting to adjunct faculty and not commensurate with their experience," said Barbara Bowen, president of the Professional Staff Congress, which represents 30,000 faculty and staff members at CUNY. Increasing the pay for adjuncts, who teach more than half of the courses in the nation's largest urban university system, would, she said, send an important message to students and the part-time faculty.

"Our students are worth investing in the people who teach them," said Ms. Bowen, who is also a professor of English at Queen's College and the Graduate Center.

The union is no stranger to drawn-out battles at the bargaining table. Its last contract, which ended November 30, took six years to settle. The agreement yielded faculty victories on benefits and working conditions, which are areas that can make adjuncts' lives feel particularly precarious. These areas included health insurance, paid office hours, and multiple-year contracts for some veteran part-time faculty that guarantee pay for two courses each semester.

By seeking higher pay, Ms. Bowen said, "we're trying to prevent further degradation of the adjunct salary."

But efforts to win substantial pay raises for adjuncts have met with uneven success in academe. Even at CUNY, where adjuncts might celebrate workplace improvements in recent years, the union has, since 2000, repeatedly and unsuccessfully pressed for pay parity, Ms. Bowen says. This time, the union is organizing its advocacy around adjunct pay, calling it a campaign for "7K."

The union arrived at the \$7,000 figure for adjuncts by reverse-engineering from the wage of a different group of contingent faculty — full-time lecturers. The salary of full-time lecturers at CUNY for a full teaching load of eight courses a year is about \$60,000. A part-time adjunct teaching the same number of courses would earn only about \$25,000 at the current minimum per-course rate of about \$3,200.

"That's clearly not a living wage for New York City," says Carly Smith, a part-time communication-studies faculty member at Baruch College who this semester began working under one of the new multiyear contracts. "7K would compensate me for work I'm already doing — grading, meeting with students outside of class, commenting on drafts."

CUNY's administration did not immediately respond to *The Chronicle's* request for comment. It told NY 1, a local television news channel: "The union will have an opportunity to make the case for higher pay during the next round of collective

bargaining. We do not plan on negotiating in the press."

Other Pushes for Raises

The union also took into consideration the minimum per-course compensation suggested by professional associations like the Modern Language Association — which in 2011-12 recommended \$6,800, but is now calling for \$10,700.

Levels of per-course pay that are in line with what CUNY's union is seeking have cropped up in recent years in cities with similar costs of living — but they have been at private institutions. Three years ago, Tufts University agreed to pay part-time faculty members at least \$7,300 per course, and a new contract promises further pay raises.

And in New York, newly unionized adjuncts at Barnard College can now count on making \$7,000 per three-credit course — a 3-percent increase. By the fall of 2021 that figure will increase to \$10,000. Barnard makes a point of touting the pay on its human-resource department's web page, calling the wages "among the best in New York City, and among elite, urban colleges and universities nationally."

Public institutions, however, have weathered years of austerity as state appropriations continue to supply less and less of their operating budgets. With such financial pressures, is the timing right for such an effort at CUNY?

"This is an institution that is very dependent on adjuncts, so they have to think about this demand," says Ronald G. Ehrenberg, a professor of industrial and labor relations and economics at Cornell University and director of its Higher Education Research Institute. "But CUNY doesn't have the money, so this is going to be a tough one. It will be interesting to see what happens."

In late November, the Professional Staff Congress filed a formal request with the chairman of CUNY's Board of Trustees to start negotiations. Among the union's other demands: 5-percent raises each year, support for department chairs, and improved

working conditions for all faculty.

Faculty and union leaders say the items on the union's bargaining agenda, especially the per-course minimum, mean CUNY's governing board, administrators, city and state leaders will need to make a commitment to deeply invest in public education — no matter what. "You can't wait for a propitious time in the economic environment," Ms. Bowen said, "because there will always be a time NOT to do this."

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