

Higher education and unions

By [Amy Frykholm](#)

April 5, 2011

While I was finishing my Ph.D. I took a job as an adjunct professor at a small, state-run college. The experience was a lesson in humility. Most of the time, fancy graduate degree or not, I was treated like a cog in a machine--and a suspicious cog at that. When friends asked me about it, I would say, "It feels a little bit like working in a university and a little bit like working at Hardee's." (I'd done both.)

In the name of standardization, the legislature wrote the course descriptions, and my job was to download the appropriate description from the college's website and insert it into my syllabus. I got the feeling that the state legislature would have preferred to download my lectures directly into my mouth as well.

With the large-scale withdrawal of state funding from many public colleges and universities--and the successful state-level efforts to undermine the rights of public employees--two recent op-ed pieces shed some light on my now-thankfully-past situation. In a conversation with Walter Benn Michaels about unionization in higher education, Stanley Fish [writes](#) that for many years, he opposed unionization on the basis that faculty members are not workers in the same sense as people working in factories. But he's since changed his mind:

If I and my colleagues are not employees, from whom do we receive salaries, promotions, equipment, offices, etc., and to whom are we responsible in the carrying out of our duties? (If it looks like a duck) It's not God and it's not (despite some claims to the contrary) students, and it's not awestruck admirers of our dazzling intellects. It must be our employer, and if that is so the only question becomes whether, as employees, we can do better for ourselves by ourselves or whether we will be in a stronger position if we unite.

Fish and Michaels are responding to a [piece](#) by Naomi Schaeffer Riley, who argues that unionization in higher education caters to the lazy and the radical. I heard in Riley's words the same anxiety that made the Colorado legislature suspicious of me and my probable laziness and radical tendencies.

The unionization of faculty is a compelling prospect, but I wonder if it would have had any impact on me as a part-time adjunct. I never considered my status permanent, and despite my left-leaning support of unions, it would have been painful to pay any portion of my scant wages to a union. But the scenario might be better for full-time faculty as they find ways to have more say about their curriculum, teaching and research.