

Maine adjunct professors join push for wage increases

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By Lana Cohen

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Katrina Ray-Saulis loves teaching English and women's studies at Central Maine Community College.

"From the minute I stepped in front of a classroom, I was like, 'Oh, this is what I'm meant to do,'" she said.

But Ray-Saulis recently left her job as an adjunct professor – a part-time instructor contracted to teach individual courses – because it was not financially sustainable. Now she is working full-time as a union organizer in Maine.

"In a world that had an education system that was treating educators well and paying them what they deserve, I don't think anything could make me happier than being a community college teacher," she said. "In this world, I feel like there is nothing better and more important to do than to fight for teachers to be respected and awarded livable wages."

Ray-Saulis is president of her adjunct professor union, a chapter of the Maine Service Employees Association SEIU Local 1989, which has been negotiating a two-year contract since its previous one expired in January.

Adjuncts at Maine's community colleges make \$2,790 to teach a single semester-long class that meets three hours a week. Full-time faculty make annual salaries ranging from \$42,136 to \$96,404 – depending on experience and tenure – to teach a minimum of five classes per semester. They also receive full benefits. Adjunct faculty do not get some benefits such as health insurance, but they are guaranteed interviews for faculty positions and the ability to take time off, among other things.

The qualifications required to be an adjunct teacher or a full-time professor at community colleges are essentially the same: a master's degree or equivalent professional certification.

Because adjuncts are paid per class and full-time faculty are salaried, it's hard to directly compare their pay, but according to union calculations, salaried community college system faculty end up making at least \$5,400 per class, just about double adjunct pay. Adjuncts say they want to pay closer to that of their full-time colleagues.

For many adjuncts, teaching is a side gig. This semester, 71% of adjunct faculty taught just one or two classes. But others take on more significant class loads and more heavily rely on adjunct teaching to support themselves.

Ray-Saulis has taught four three-credit classes a semester – the maximum allowable amount for adjuncts – for almost every semester she has worked at Central Maine Community College.

The amount of time adjuncts work outside strictly teaching varies and the issue of how to calculate and compensate those hours has long been debated. In 2014, the federal government said employers should use a “reasonable method” of calculating hours worked by an adjunct outside of classroom time. Assuming an adjunct works an hour and 15 minutes for every hour of teaching would be a “reasonable” calculation, the government said at the time.

Using that method, a Maine community college adjunct teaching four classes would spend 27 hours working, plus office hours, and could net a total of \$22,320 from the system for that work. Most adjuncts who spoke with the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram, including Ray-Saulis, said they spend between 28 and 36 hours per week or seven to nine hours per class teaching, getting ready for the semester, prepping for class, grading, and meeting with students.

When Ray-Saulis, who has a master’s degree in creative writing, started as an adjunct professor at Central Maine Community College, she hoped to eventually become a full-time professor. She has applied to multiple positions over the years but has never been chosen to fill one. Of the three full-time positions in her department that have opened up in the past six years, all were filled by outside candidates, Ray-Saulis said.

To make ends meet through the years, Ray-Saulis has supplemented her adjunct income by working as a nanny, as a tutor, and by doing freelance writing and graphic design work.

Adjunct professor pay

Here is what some Maine colleges and universities pay part-time professors to teach a single three-credit course.

Institution	Avg. wage
Bates College	\$12,000
Maine Community College System	\$2,790
University of Maine System	\$4,200
University of New England	\$2,700

SOURCE: American Association of University Professors
STAFF GRAPHIC | JAKE LAWS

The state community college adjuncts' push for better wages is part of a wave of labor-organizing movements in higher education that has swept the country from California to New York and up the coast to Maine.

Graduate students, undergraduate workers, faculty, and staff across the country – including some in Maine – have come out to demand transparency, higher wages, better benefits, and a voice in institutional decision-making. Many have won significant gains.

Following a six-week-long strike, University of California graduate student workers, teaching assistants, tutors, and other student academic workers took home increased benefits and wages, including child care benefits and a 46% salary increase compounded over two years for graduate student researchers. After a one-week strike, New Jersey's Rutgers University adjuncts won an increased salary floor and increased job security. Adjuncts at New York City's The New School, through a three-week strike, forced the school to increase the adjunct professor pay ceiling for a three-credit course from \$5,753 to \$7,820.

"We're seeing a labor resurgence, including increased strike activity in academic labor," said William A. Herbert, executive director of the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions at Hunter College-City University of New York. "There is a recognition by younger generations that taking collective action is the strongest way of improving their working conditions."

The spike in higher education labor organizing comes as a new, more union-friendly generation joins the workforce. It also follows a five-decades-long disinvestment in public higher education that has led to a massive increase in lower-paid, less-secure faculty positions and a decrease in full-time tenure-track positions.

The percentage of higher education instructors who are full-time faculty decreased from 78% in 1970 to 50% in 2018, according to the latest available data from the U.S. Department of Education. Conversely, the portion who teach part-time increased from 22% in 1970 to 46% in 2018. Adjuncts generally earn significantly less than full-time professors, lack job security, receive almost no benefits, and do not get raises for the length of time at an institution.

Half earn less than \$3,500 per class, around \$28,000 for a typical course load, according to a survey from the American Federation of Teachers.

In response to low pay and the slashing of more secure, full-time positions, instructors around the country have organized for benefits, higher wages, and job security. Academic workers, including professors and graduate teaching and research assistants, went on strike 15 times in 2022, hitting a 20-year high, according to Bloomberg Law.

The increased organizing on college and university campuses is part of a greater trend of labor organizing and support for unions. Approval of unions in the U.S. is at its highest point since 1965, with 71% of Americans approving of labor unions, according to a 2022 Gallup poll.

The state community college system adjunct faculty are not the only part-time faculty at Maine schools to make noise over low pay in recent years. Bates College part-time educators and staff 2021 began a union drive. The effort failed earlier this year but organizers said they will continue to advocate for a greater voice for educators and staff at the college. The University of Maine System has been spared any significant uproar over pay, but faculty have shared concerns about full-time faculty being replaced with part-time ones.

The UMaine System declined multiple requests to provide data indicating how its percentage of full-time versus part-time faculty has changed over the last decade.

The Maine community college system currently employs 572 adjunct faculty and 258 full-time faculty at its seven campuses. Over the past decade, the system has decreased both the number of adjunct and full-time faculty it employs. Ten years ago, it employed 1,425 adjunct faculty and 367 full-time faculty.

Adjuncts and full-time faculty have different responsibilities. While both instruct, many adjuncts have careers in other fields and teach in addition to a full-time job. Full-time faculty teach a minimum of five courses, advise students, participate in departmental meetings, write curriculum, and do research.

The system said those distinct responsibilities play a factor in their compensation.

“The work of full-time faculty and the work of adjuncts is functionally different,” said David Daigler, president of the state’s community college system.

But adjuncts say that while they have different roles than full-time faculty, they should be paid similarly for tasks they both perform, like teaching.

“When I teach English composition, I’m doing the same amount of work as a full-time teacher teaching English composition,” said Camilla Lovfling, an adjunct professor at Southern Maine Community College who holds a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing, fine arts, and literature and has a teaching certification. Lovfling has been teaching at SMCC since 2009, teaching four classes per semester almost every year. Now, being part of a two-income household, she can solely teach, but over the years she has worked two or three jobs at a time, including working at Blockbuster, in retail and doing phone surveys.

The adjuncts are asking for a 6% pay increase – around \$170 per class per year – in each of the contract’s two years and for the system to implement a set of raises based on years of experience. The system has proposed a 4.5% annual increase – around \$130 per class per year.

The adjuncts say that with inflation and the starting figure at \$2,790 for a three-credit class, 4.5% is too low. If an adjunct were allowed to teach a full five-class course load like their full-time colleagues, they would pull in only \$27,900 per year, around the federal poverty level for a family of four.



Adjunct professor Richard Rottkov listens to a presentation during an oral communication class at Southern Maine Community College in South Portland. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

“The system takes advantage of the fact that people who love to educate will sacrifice a living wage to take on this public service,” said Richard Rottkov, an SMCC adjunct of 20 years who has taught between one and four classes per semester over his tenure. “Teachers should be paid a fair, living wage.”

The issue of wages is particularly tense as the state finishes the first year of a pilot program offering free community college to Maine residents impacted by the pandemic, a move that many adjuncts support but said has been a hard pill to swallow as they struggle to make ends meet working for a system offering their services for free.

“We support what legislators are doing,” Rottkov said. “But it’s only possible because adjuncts are willing to work for low wages. There may be money available for free college, but it’s at our expense.”

Between 2019 and 2022, to stabilize wages across campuses so all system adjuncts would earn the same pay per credit, the system raised adjunct wages between 15% and 82% depending on the college.

Officials say the system has budgetary constraints that keep it from significantly raising salaries year over year. It also said that adjunct teaching is not supposed to be a full-time gig, that it regularly hires adjuncts as full-time faculty and has increased its full-time faculty roster in recent years, and that those pushing for greater wage increases are a minority of the system's adjunct faculty.

"There is a small group of adjunct faculty who want an instant solution and we don't have an instant solution," system president Daigler said.

But the adjuncts said higher wages for educators are long overdue.

"Adjunct professors bring a lot to the table because we don't come just from academia," Rottkov said. "We've had other careers, other experiences. We are the heart and soul of the system and schools could not function without adjuncts."

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