



## **THERE IS NO SOLIDARITY IN A MERITOCRACY:**

### **PRECARITY IN THE HISTORY PROFESSION IN CANADA**

A Report by Steven High, Vice-President, Canadian Historical Association

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*“We all love what we do deeply.... This love is taken from us by our institutions, employers, and administrators. It’s used to exploit us every time we do extra work or support the students we teach or mark papers properly even though we’re not paid enough to do it, or get a course outline just right even though we’ve only been given a week.” – Dr. Jeremy Milloy, CHA round table, January 2021 (and published in [Active History](#))*

*“To all tenure-track and tenured professors who have and have not yet signed the letter: step up to the plate and take action. You benefit from a system that systematically exploits the labour of both precarious instructors and graduate students. You might think this has nothing to do with you, but it does. You might wring your hands and say it’s the department, but you are the department. You might say it’s the administration, but you are the administration. You have power and job security, and the ability to make real changes in the lives of so many people. It’s on you to use it,” – Dr. Andrea Eidinger, CHA round-table, March 2021 (and published in [University Affairs](#))*

The Canadian Historical Association must recognize precarity within our discipline for what it is: a form of structural violence. The “collegial” structures within the academy implicate full-time faculty in a system, while not of our making, that is fundamentally unfair and exploitative.

As Rob Nixon has shown, structural violence is a slow violence that is normalized to such a degree that many don’t even recognize it as violence at all. The dismissal of precarity in our universities has been aided by the corrosive idea that we live and work in a meritocracy: that the “best” candidates do find full-time employment. On the one hand, the internalization of the meritocratic idea has caused many contingent faculty and recent graduates looking for work to doubt themselves. If only they had worked harder, published more, met more people: then the outcome might have been different. On the other hand, meritocratic thinking has served to comfort the comfortable: effectively depoliticizing precarity and rendering the structural violence all but invisible to others. There is no solidarity in a meritocracy.

That is why the [Precarious History Instructors Manifesto](#) has been so momentous – shattering the silence surrounding precarity in our profession and demanding that full-time faculty, department chairs and our professional association act.

### **PROGRESS TO DATE**

After endorsing the Manifesto at our June 2020 Annual General Meeting, the CHA Executive and Council have begun to implement its action points. I can point to six specific actions:

- **DATA:** A new precarious worker's section was added to our survey to department chairs that will allow us to collect essential data from across the country. The precarity section will be part of the wider survey every three years going forward (alongside sections on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion as well as graduate students), providing us with regular milestones to assess the situation and progress. The questions on precarity are as follows:
  - In the past year, what proportion of your department's course offerings were taught by:
    - permanent faculty (e.g. tenured, tenure-track, etc.);
    - full-time but temporary instructors (e.g. on year-long contracts as sabbatical or parental leave replacements);
    - part-time instructors hired by the course;
    - PhD or other graduate students who are teaching as part of their program?

For permanent faculty :

- To what extent do these faculty members in your department teach "overload" courses?

For full-time but temporary instructors only :

- How does the teaching load they are assigned compare with that of tenured or tenure-track faculty?
- How does the salary compare with that of a new tenure-track hire in the department?
- For ALL non-permanent instructors (including full-time but temporary and/or part-time per course sessional):
  - Are these instructors unionized in your Department? If so, what is the name of their union? Is this union the same union as represents permanent faculty?
  - If there is no union, does your department recognize seniority or right of first refusal in allocating per-course appointments?
  - Are they eligible for professional development funds or internal research competitions?
  - Do these instructors have access to research support?
  - Do these instructors have access to conference support?
  - Do these instructors have access to marking support to the same degree as full-time permanent faculty?
  - Do these instructors have shared office space and/or equipment required for online teaching during the terms that they teach?
  - Are these instructors listed on your department website?
  - To what extent are long-term non-permanent instructors taken into account in determining course offerings?
  - Is there a ladder for non-permanent instructors to become internally promoted to permanent faculty?
- *Additional Questions*
  - Approximately how much are per course sessional paid per course?

- Are teaching and research assistants unionized in your Department? If so, what is the name of their union? Is this union the same union as represents permanent faculty?
- To what extent do graduate students, including MA and PhD students in the department, gain teaching experience by teaching individual courses?

The information collected from the survey will be evaluated and shared. It will include an article in *Intersections* and be brought forward to that year's all-chairs meeting.

- **IDENTIFICATION:** We no longer identify presenters at our annual meeting by their institutional affiliations.
- **REGISTRATION FEES:** The CHA waived the fees for this year's (now deferred) annual meeting for precarious historians and students. I hope that this sparks a longer-term re-evaluation of our fee structures, particularly since the Congress fee is so high. Students and precariously employed presenters at our annual meeting should pay, at most, a nominal fee.
- **HONORARIA:** Honoraria were accorded to precarious historians presenting at CHA disciplinary round-tables during the past year, a practice which should continue.
- **PLAGIARISM:** The CHA executive updated the CHA Legal Fund policy, which always covered plagiarism cases, to allow for expedited review of applications from members and a mechanism for advancing financial support in cases where the member is precarious. We have also made the Legal Fund more visible on our website. It was accessed this year for the first time since the 1990s.
- **REPRESENTATION:** A proposal has been developed to amend our by-laws to ensure precarious historians are represented on the CHA Council and that they receive additional financial support for their service to the profession.

## POLITICALLY FRAMING THE PROBLEM

This is a start. To build the political-will needed to effect real change, the Canadian Historical Association organized a three-part round-table series on precarity designed to educate our members about the issues, grapple collectively with the problem, and recognize the ways that many of us are implicated in an unjust system. It was a necessary next step in further politicizing precarity within the discipline. Fundamentally, it is a structural issue rather than some kind of individual failing. It is also part of a wider deterioration in workplace relations in Canadian universities.

To that end, the round-table series began with new research undertaken by Chandra Pasma, from the Canadian Union of Public Employees, and author of [Contract U: Contract faculty appointments at Canadian universities \(2018\)](#) who shared some of the key findings from the data collected from 78 Canadian universities covering the period from 2008 to 2017. There is departmental level data for 71 universities, you can probably find statistics for your history department at [CUPE Database](#). This research provides us with a much better understanding of the scale and scope of the problem, providing us with a political frame through which to understand and talk about precarity within our discipline.

Many panellists spoke of the necessity for precarious workers to organize. The fundamental problem of precarity, according to Dr. Jeremy Milloy, is not a supply and demand problem or a training problem but a power problem, an exploitation problem. Dr. David Tough likewise encouraged us to tackle structural divides within our departments and our profession that render some people disposable or invisible. Dr. Godefroy Desrosiers-Lauzon highlighted the political limits of alliance building, pointing to the pressing

need to organize autonomously. Unions have a seat at the table and are part of the solution. History shows that collective action drives progressive change.

The pain, hurt, and yes, anger, so powerfully communicated by precarious workers during the round-tables stem from the material conditions of precarity but also from a profound sense of betrayal. This is not the life that any of them dreamed of or trained for. And many have experienced demeaning micro-aggressions that have only made their situation worse, alienating them from their departments and their wider profession. This ranges from not being listed on departmental websites to “friendly” corridor advice that they should not speak up about these issues because it would be bad for their career.

Dr. Ian Mosby was precarious for 8-long years until he landed a tenure-track position. Feelings of failure and worry were part of his everyday. It took its toll, as did the “subtle cruelties” of being asked to create new syllabi in applying for jobs. For her part, Dr. Catherine Murton Stoechr challenged the ways that workplace inequality has been normalized. “Academic harm reduction” is long overdue. However, she added: “real problems need real solutions.” There is also a sense of isolation, as precarious historians juggle contracts, often between institutions. Dr. Stacey Zembrzycki spoke of how precarious instructors in her department informally organized themselves and opened up a much-needed conversation within the wider department.

Where do graduate students fit into this conversation about precarity? This was the key question posed by Letitia Johnson, who was the last speaker on the last round-table. She notes that systems of precarity are present in graduate studies, as some students are funded, others not, and some grad students are pushed into sessional work during their studies. Graduate students can’t simply be an afterthought.

Full-time faculty members also spoke from the heart, raising tangible ideas about what departments and full-time faculty might do. Dr. Laura Madokoro noted that these massive structural issues “require radical solutions.” The urgent need to rethink power relationships in our universities can also be tied to wider efforts (such as they are) to decolonize, as raised by Dr. Crystal Fraser. Addressing full-time faculty in attendance, Dr. Tina Chen asked “what are our responsibilities”? When she was hired in 1999, she was the only person of colour in her department. That has slowly changed but only by years of struggle and explicit decision-making. There are lessons to be learnt in anti-racism activism about allyship but it can’t be about speaking for. Her department revisited its honoraria policy for speakers, deciding that those on salary should not get one and that precarious historians should. Dr. Catherine Larochelle also spoke to the added challenges for women in the academy and that many precarious workers are women. Dr. John Lutz’s noted that the full-time faculty association at his university bargained to convert three sessional faculty to tenure-track, including one in history. Internal hiring needs to be de-stigmatized. These small victories matter.

Among the other comments. Dr. Janis Thiessen spoke of the ways that being an historian can destroy your health. There is a lot of ill-health in her department, even amongst those with tenure. Dr. Ele Chenier spoke of the value of an ethics of care in our relations with each other. There are limits to what we as a professional association can realistically do. But there is still much we can commit to undertake, Dr. Harold Bérubé reminds us.

I want to thank all of the round-table panellists, as well as the three session chairs (Dr. Shannon McSheffrey, Dr. Nancy Janovicek, and Dr. Barrington Walker) for agreeing to participate in what was a difficult but necessary conversation. The round-table series caused many full-time faculty and others to read the Manifesto for the first time as well as the other resources circulated, and contributed to the organizing

efforts of precarious workers themselves. New ideas were generated and two presentations by precarious historians were later published in *Active History* and *University Affairs*. About 270 historians attended the live round-table sessions and another 816 have so far viewed the round-tables on our Youtube channel. Taken together, this represents substantially more than the CHA's current membership of 650.

## **STRUCTURAL FORCES TO CONSIDER**

It is important to recognize that the problem of precarity among historians, while longstanding, has worsened in recent years. Canadian universities have seen massive structural changes that are bigger than our departments and even our discipline. The dismantling of Laurentian University via the federal Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act is a reminder that even 'permanent' full-time faculty are vulnerable to the wider ideological assault on the humanities and social sciences. The introduction of British-style metrics represents an existential threat to Canadian universities as we know them.

The jobs crisis in history has been driven by at least five factors:

1. **A SHIFT TO PART-TIME/OCCASIONAL STAFF:** There has been a shift away from the hiring of full-time faculty and towards occasional and part-time employment across the country, though this process has been uneven from one university or region to another. These differences deserve our attention as it suggests that a two-tiered system is not inevitable. Our work to gather data will help us map out the situation and identify where to focus our efforts.
2. **A SHIFT AWAY FROM THE HUMANITIES:** Many history departments are getting smaller, in part because of declining enrolments, but also because universities are investing in what is profitable or shiny and new. There is also an ideologically-driven assault on the humanities in some provinces and internationally where we have seen history programs terminated altogether. Yet some cognate disciplines have been able to fare better than History, even thrive, in this challenging new political and institutional environment. We need to ask why and what more history departments can do to position ourselves and our students? We also need to advocate for the societal value of deep historical training and knowledge, now more than ever.
3. **A SHIFT TOWARDS INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH:** We have seen a shift towards interdisciplinary programs and cross-disciplinary appointments. Historians increasingly find themselves employed in other departments. I don't think I am representative, but former doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows that I have supervised have found tenure-track jobs in religion, women's studies, conflict studies, communications, cultural studies, literature, theatre, and history as well as in the wider heritage sector. That said, a number of new applied history-related programs such as museum or curatorial studies have emerged outside our discipline. Anthropology has been far more successful in training their students to be more than content specialists. Public history, by contrast, remains far less developed in Canada than in the United States, though this is slowly changing. We need to push the boundaries of what a historian is and can do. This means rethinking, together, the training of the next generation of graduate students. How might our PhDs be better positioned to find employment outside or across traditional departments of history and in the wider heritage sector? Carleton's new Public History PhD is one model but are there others?

4. **FEWER CANADIAN HISTORY/EUROPEAN HISTORY JOBS:** Over the past two decades, Departments of History have shifted away from hiring Canadianists and Europeanists in the same numbers. This is part of a long overdue re-orientation towards a more global and less Euro-centric history. There are also more transnational or thematic postings. How might we prepare our students, especially in Canadian history, to work within transnational or global frameworks of historical interpretation and knowledge production?
  
5. **DEGRADATION OF THE CANADIAN PHD:** The frequent hiring of non-Canadians for advertised positions in Departments of History at Canadian universities and the accompanying devalorisation of Canadian graduate degrees is something we need to grapple with. In such cases, Canadian immigration rules require that departments argue that there is “no qualified” Canadian available. This often defies belief given the bleak job market in Canada. All non-Canadian short-lists are not unheard of. There seems to be a persistent idea that faculty from Ivy League schools in the United States are better historians than those trained at Canadian-universities. There is also a certain departmental prestige attached to hiring faculty from elite US, British or French schools. It raises the question about why so many historians have such a low opinion of Canadian-trained historians? Do we risk relegating Canadian-trained faculty to a second-tier of precarious employment? We need to have a conversation about this. It won't be easy, as this issue can be polarizing and nobody wants to put up barriers to knowledge and excellence just for the sake of it. But this is the proverbial ‘elephant in the room’ and leads many of the few new tenure-track history positions being advertised in History to go to non-Canadians.

## SO, WHAT NEXT?

The Canadian Historical Association and its membership must continue to implement the action points of the Manifesto. In addition to the actions already undertaken by the CHA (see above), it is proposed that we undertake five further actions (organized as ten motions) that build on this foundation:

- **DEVELOP** a set of best-practices for department chairs that would become part of an orientation package and perhaps a webinar. The Manifesto identifies a number of tangible actions that departments can take:
  - Work with sessional and part-time instructors in course scheduling
  - Identify opportunities to improve working conditions for contract faculty
  - Consider contract faculty in hiring priorities for tenure-track positions.
  - Integrate contract faculty into departmental governance structures and find ways to remunerate them.
  - Limit what is asked for in the initial application packages and avoid asking job candidates to produce new materials.
  - Track what happens to PhD students after graduation
  - Ensure that contract faculty are included on Departmental web-pages.
  - Find other ways to support contract faculty.
  - Advocate for contract faculty with the administration and faculty unions.
  - Pay students and contract workers for giving guest lectures

- **EDUCATE** members about the structures of inequality within the profession via regular articles in *Intersections*, round-tables, and other formats. Additional ideas will continue to be generated in the years to come.
- **RETHINK** the training of History master's and doctoral students.
- **ADVOCATE** for the value of historical training and knowledge as well as the excellence of Canadian PhD programs.
- **SUPPORT** the collective efforts of precarious workers to organize and promote greater accessibility within the CHA.

The time for action is now.

**Here are the motions passed by the CHA Council following the publication of the report:**

The CHA will form a 3-member committee, including at least one part-time or occasional instructor (who would receive an honorarium), that will prepare a document identifying best-practices for department chairs on issues of precarity. Once approved by the CHA Council, this will be combined with the latest data from our survey and form the basis of an orientation package and webinar for department chairs. The training of incoming department chairs needs to go beyond lists, they need to be oriented to these issues and hear the voices of precarious historians. The CHA orientation package might include a short digital story centred on the experiences of precarious workers themselves (with their permission and collaboration of course).

The CHA will create a regular space in *Intersections* dedicated to issues of precarity including the latest data from the survey to department chairs.

The CHA will establish the practice of honoraria given to graduate students and precarious workers who are authors of solicited texts for blogs and our magazine.

The Canadian Historical Association will establish a 5-member CHA Task Force on History Graduate Training in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with a one-year mandate to assess and provide guidance on the future of History graduate training in Canada. One of the five-members will be a graduate student named by the CHA Graduate Student Committee (and receive a small honorarium). The Task Force will invite written submissions and organize a series of public round-tables open to members, culminating in a written report. Highlights of the report will be published in *Intersections* and a special session organized during our annual meeting.

The CHA will launch a publicity campaign centred on the value of historical training and knowledge. This would involve the writing of op-eds and doing media interviews. A member of Council would be assigned this portfolio and serve as the campaign's coordinator.

The CHA recognizes that during a jobs crisis for PhD History graduates it is often untenable to claim that there are “no qualified” Canadians or landed immigrants. We direct the CHA President to undertake research with attention to issues of citizenship, diversity, and status, and institutional training, and report back to Council.

The CHA encourages the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council to adjust its eligible expense policy so that precarious scholars without full-time employment would become eligible to pay themselves a salary as grant recipients (much as postdoctoral fellows are).

The Canadian Historical Association supports the efforts of precarious workers and graduate students to unionize and take collective action in their ongoing struggle to improve wages and working conditions. We encourage tenured and tenured-track members to be supportive of these efforts.

The Canadian Historical Association invites precarious historians to form an affiliated committee of the association if they wish.

The CHA fees for our annual meeting for graduate student and precarious members will be set at one-fourth that charged to regular members.