

Talking About Contingency at Work

October 13, 2020

Background

This is a set of scenarios for **talking about contingent and precarious labor at work in libraries, archives, museums**, and beyond. It started as a breakout group task at the [Collective Responsibility forum](#) and is now a joint project of the [Collective Responsibility steering committee](#) and the [Archival Workers Emergency Fund organizing committee](#). Our main guiding principle is solidarity with and among contingent and precarious workers, recognizing that even “permanent” workers occupy the spectrum of contingency and precarity.

Do Your [Meta] Homework

If you're new to these conversations a good place to start is to review some of the materials already available to you:

- It is your responsibility to learn about / know and engage with the labor conditions of your organization
- It is your responsibility to understand your position in the organization and how this affects your relationships and power
- Transformation takes place as a result of disruption. Work on labor issues will require a shift from silence and complicity to embracing difficult conversations and taking risks that can be intensely uncomfortable. Conflict-avoidant workplace practices that have gotten us to this point will not get us where we want to go. Conflict is required for change and is a necessary part of interrupting patterns. Think about how you will prepare for discomfort and build your competency in productive disruption.
- How you engage in these conversations and actions depends on the power structures involved. Think about the power you have (and don't). Referring to the [Guiding Principles](#) developed by Collective Responsibility may be a good starting point to help you reflect on what your intentions are and what background information you may need to gather to act. Try conducting this exercise individually or in a group: Where do you feel you have power at work? Where do you feel you lack power? Identify one (or more) area(s) where you do have power and one (or more) area(s) where you do not. Reflect on the types of power that exist and where you are situated within this context. (Adapted from Starhawk/Lisa Frithian [exercise on Power and Diversity](#)).

Reading:

[Collective Responsibility: Seeking Equity for Contingent Labor in Libraries, Archives, and Museums \(PDF\)](#). In this white paper, we describe our methodology for centering contingent worker experiences; share the results of our survey on the experience of contingent laborers in grant-funded positions delve into themes and responsibilities which arose from the forum; and develop outcomes and next steps for the Collective Responsibility project.

[Collective Responsibility Labor Toolkit](#). This website contains several resources on organizing, as well as designing contingent positions and grant-funded projects ethically. Two publications that feature in the toolkit are: [Collective Equity: A Handbook for Designing and Evaluating Grant-Funded Positions](#) and “Do Better” -Love(,) Us: Guidelines for Developing and Supporting Grant-Funded Positions in Digital Libraries, Archives, and Museums, [a set of guidelines](#) for supporting contingent employees.

In addition, the [DLF Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries, Archives, and Museums](#) maintains a [Zotero library](#) and [resource table](#) of citations, groups, initiatives, and materials related to LAM labor. The toolkit and these resources will grow over time with new additions.

Investigating:

Learn more about your workplace

- Find and review organizational charts and identify who’s who in the organization reporting structure.
- Learn about recruitment, hiring, evaluation, and advancement processes at your organization.
- Find out what and how workers are compensated: wages, benefits, etc.
- Learn about the landscape of compensation (wages and raises) across your organization, how it affects workers by classification, funding source, etc.
- Pay attention to how power works at your organization: Formally or informally? Transparently or behind closed doors? What processes hold power over people’s work lives? Are people powerful because of seniority or their positions in the hierarchy, or because of positive personal attributes like competence and trustworthiness, or neutral attributes like charisma and confidence? Who are people and/or positions of power? How do governance and communication work?
- Identify any groups known to be working on labor issues.
- Familiarize yourself with how contingent positions reinforce structural marginalization.
- Find people in your workplace/profession for accountability and solidarity. Consider starting with those who are known to be sympathetic and are in your power band.

- Find out if your workplace has any employee advocacy or support programs you can use and if you are eligible for these programs to navigate the power structure.
- Identify someone in your workplace who was successful in introducing change and ask them what strategies they used.

Take note of what information is not accessible and why.

Who will you talk to?

Which people or groups have a natural affinity with you / your group?

- Who do you work well with already?
- Who has a complementary skill set, similar values, and is trustworthy?
- Which workers in your organization are you similar to?
- What are the skills you don't know/aren't aware of in your colleagues? What work goes unacknowledged or unrespected? Is there invisible work that supports more high profile "innovation"?
- Examples of affinities:
 - Remote workers or workers distributed across remote sites
 - Ties between professional and paraprofessional workers
 - Existing governance bodies in an organization
 - People in similar jobs and/or who are also contingent in an organization
 - Coworkers who share enjoyment or frustrations about the workplace
 - Intra-racial or POC affinities

What is the big picture for the people you're going to talk to?

- How can you build *with* issues that matter to them?
- What power dynamics exist within the affinity or affinity group?
- What will you need to learn and unlearn in order to approach the conversation authentically? Is there historical context or biases that should be acknowledged in the conversation?
- How can you build capacity to organize across affinity groups?

What types of conversations could you have?

What kind of communicator are you? How do you most effectively get things done?

Consider modes of discussion or information sharing:

- 1:1 conversation (informal or formal)
- Conference trip report
- Brown bag reading / discussion group
- Space on a staff meeting agenda
- Workplace social areas (bulletin board, blog, group chat, water cooler, lunch area)
- Worker-only spaces (no managers or administrators)
- Organizing sessions (writing a statement, planning advocacy actions)

Do your homework

1. What information will you need in order to have these conversations / take these actions?
2. Where / from whom can you obtain this information?
 - Work iteratively back & forth between script-writing and information gathering

Write the script

Prepare by writing and thinking through the conversation:

1. What initial actions will you take, and in what order?
2. What will you say, in what order?
3. What questions, responses, points of confusion, or points of disagreement can you anticipate?
 - What disagreements will you let go, and where will you push back instead?
4. What follow-up actions will you take, and in what order?

Role-Based Tactics

The following role-based approaches may be useful across scenarios:

Role	Tactics	Actions
Contingent workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify or build a local trusted network• Learn about organizing• Begin to organize your workplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Start talking to other contingent workers at your workplace or an affinity group & involve them in your planning• Gather information about organizing tactics• Start researching appropriate local unions
Managers - strong internal network power	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop stronger local commitments (<i>policy and practice</i>) to protect contingent workers• Listen to contingent workers!• Work to understand power dynamics within affinity groups that span the workplace hierarchy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meet with higher administration to discuss a specific activity (conference, working group, event) related to LAM labor• Organize a brown bag discussion for colleagues• Take time on staff and manager meeting agendas to discuss labor issues• Learn more about structural barriers to addressing

		contingency (e.g. talk with HR) and share what you've learned with other managers
Managers - weaker internal network power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identify non-workplace domains where you <i>do</i> have network power and think about how those ties can support workplace equity ● Build your internal power, if possible. Take opportunities to educate higher-ups/expose contingency concerns; seek out colleagues with stronger power as possible allies; look for opportunities to participate in new projects/committees/etc. to expand your network and grow power ● Listen to contingent workers! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide safe spaces (no managers or administrators present) for independent reporters and contingent workers to discuss & organize ● Help with information gathering for scenarios ● Learn more about structural barriers to addressing contingency (e.g. talk with HR) and share what you've learned with the people you supervise
Non-contingent workers (non-managers) - strong internal network power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Share information up with managers ● Share information across with peer workers ● Support contingent workers as part of local trusted network ● Listen to contingent workers! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be a conscious communicator and set goals e.g. to talk about labor with two people this week ● Help with information gathering for scenarios ● Identify and reach out to affinity groups and committees to exchange concerns and goals ● Check in with contingent workers before group meetings and offer to propose agenda items on their behalf ● Commit to active participation in organizational planning where support for labor issues is needed (e.g. strategic planning meetings, writing vision statements, project prioritization meetings, etc.)
Non-contingent workers (non-managers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Support contingent workers as part of local trusted network ● Identify non-workplace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Help with information gathering for scenarios ● Show up in situations where

- weaker internal network power	domains where you <i>do</i> have network power and think about how those ties can support workplace equity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Listen to contingent workers! 	support in numbers matters most (e.g. participating in an action as one of many, seconding or thirding a comment)
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Scenario I: Organizing Talk

I'm a "permanent" staff person at a library or archives that employs lots of contingent staff. I want to know more about their experiences and concerns.

Do your homework

- List your goals for the conversation.
- Find out what they're working on and if it is project-based or ongoing core work.
- Find out their job classification (especially if it affects their time reporting, benefits, etc.) and whether they are represented by a union.
- Find out their team and who they report to.
- Find out connections in common.
- Find out whether they are paid through a grant, or with internal funds, or some combination of the two.
- Find out if they are encouraged to participate in organizational activities (service, all-staff meetings, others) - observe and ask around.
- Find out if they are encouraged to participate in professional development activities and if they receive institutional funding to do so.
- Find out about how they feel about working in a contingent position, and whether they would prefer something more permanent.
- Find out what they need to find a permanent position (networking, resume review, practice interviewing, salary negotiation).
- Find out if the work they are actually doing is the same as the work they were hired to do/in their position description.

The script

- How did you come to work [in this organization]?
- What made you want to work in [LAM or this specific sub-field]?
- What do you enjoy most?
- What do you want to do next?
- What's a thing that confuses you about work?

- What are questions you have about work? About the institution?
- What do you wish other folks here knew about you and your work? How have you received credit / recognition for your work?
- Is there anything you'd like to learn about how the library works?
- Are you given opportunities to participate on our committees? In scholarship?
- I've noticed that we have a lot of folks here who are [job category] doing good work
 - (play out with examples)
- Would you be interested in a group meeting to talk about this?
 - (say who else is in)

Follow Up / Post-Conversation Actions

- Document findings
- Map out the organization
- Identify priorities to work on
- Set up a standing time to check in 1:1
- Meet as a group

Scenario 2: Contingency Bubble

I'm a middle manager who is continually offered temp positions to fill gaps. I want to talk to other middle managers about their situations, how they support temp workers, and how we can all move away from this model.

Do your homework

- List your goals for the conversation.
- Find out what projects and programs they have going on.
- Find out the proportion of temp:perm, PT:FT, pre:post-professional, and other job categories for each project or program.
- Explore staffing models at peer institutions of similar size. What are their proportions?
- Find out how many temp workers have cycled through in the last 5 years. What were they working on (project-based vs. core work)?
- Find out connections in common.
- Find out how temp positions are being funded and how this fits into the landscape of compensation at your workplace.
- If grant-funded, find out who is writing grant applications, acting as PIs, and making decisions.
- Are permanent positions being created for other types of work? (e.g. curatorial, instruction)

- How frequently do temp folks get a chance to apply for permanent roles at your institution? Does your institution offer any targeted support to help temp folks prepare for permanent roles there?
- Find out what the training timelines are within each temp position: How many months actually go to productive work for every 12 months of the position when training, etc. are factored out?
- What amount of net progress is being made on institutional priorities that the temp roles are targeting? Is the backlog rate actually being reduced? What data exists to demonstrate net value of temp roles?

The script

- I've been meaning to let you know I'm really impressed with the work your team is doing on [their project]. (explain why)
- And I noticed that the team is only ___% permanent staff / has a lot of temps on it.
- How do you go about designing these positions? Do you get a say in the salary and benefits, mentoring, opportunities provided?
- (Nope so and so always does it. / It is always done this way) or (There aren't really any resources (time/money) to really do anything differently...)
- What's it like to manage that?
 - (Listen to the response)
 - Follow up: How do you support people in those jobs? It seems really challenging for them.
- I have to say my unit is hearing a lot of the same thing, being offered temp positions. I'm trying a few strategies to manage the situation for [my project]. (explain)
- Actually one of the strategies is a thought experiment: What if I said no to new temps? I've played out a few scenarios for what that would mean for [my project]. (talk through scenarios)
- But I am also interested in supporting temps who are already there.
- What do you think? Can we try it with [your project]?
- I've noticed that a lot of folks are in our situation, getting our work done with a mix of staff. When we do strategic planning at the organizational level and grants/project work is embedded/assumed, it causes a lot of harm to workers. How can we address this?
- How does this scenario of constantly hiring, training, and then starting over affect you as a manager?
- Would you be interested in a conversation about this with a couple of other people?

Follow Up / Post-Conversation Actions

- Form a group of like-minded managers to work on labor issues
- Meet regularly as a group and 1:1

- Add contingent positions to the agenda for a general managers meeting
- Compile information about worker and manager experiences across teams or units.
- Develop a script for saying “no” when offered contingent positions and opening up a larger conversation.
- Create a process to review job ads for contingent workers and the elements they should include to build in ethical support for these workers.
- Investigate groups working outside your unit (but within your organization) who you might learn from - and to join forces.

Scenario 3: Austerity Looms

I'm a middle manager whose library leadership is fixing to end a number of workers' contracts as part of digging through the couch cushions for ~~change~~ budget savings. I want to talk to my supervisor (a department head, an associate dean) about the need to extend contracts for or offer new contracts to the at-risk workers in our unit.

Do your homework

- List your goals for the conversation.
- Make a list of contract workers in your entire department (not just the people you supervise), their likely pay range (according to specific knowledge or institutional policy), and when their contracts are scheduled to end.
- Collect data about how many years contract employees have been in positions.
- Next to each contract worker you supervise, list their responsibilities and contributions.
- Make a list of projects and programs you will commit to ending if each contract worker you supervise is **let go** instead of **retained**. What core work will be affected?
- Make a list of alternative work arrangements ([work sharing](#), [redistributing work](#), evenly distributed furloughs, part-time [details/detailees](#), chop from the top) that would retain contract workers and distribute the impacts more equitably.
- Talk to other middle managers in your department. Show them the list and have them fill in additional information about pay and terms of contracts. Have them list responsibilities, accomplishments, and projects/programs to end for each contract worker they supervise. Have them list any other alternative work arrangements they know about *and* mark their preferences on the list you made.
- Share the list with workers (contract and “permanent”) and solicit additional concerns and preferences. Adjust the list and plan accordingly.
- What “valued/innovative/merit-based” work does contingent work enable?
- What would it mean to NOT create new contingent positions because it doesn't make financial sense; identify 1-2 actions that can be done to break the cycle.

The script

I've been reading the [big boss's] updates about budget cuts and am concerned what it could mean for the contract workers in our department. The managers and I have gotten together to discuss, and we are committed to getting contracts extended or renewed for [list names].

These people matter to our department because [list responsibilities and accomplishments, word for word, no interruptions, hand over a print copy at the end].

(At this point, administrators will say something about “needing data” to “make a case” to some unspecified higher-up. Ignore this and proceed to the next line of the script because “metrics” mean nothing and “stats” go down a black hole to nowhere, in exchange for empty promises)

If these workers are let go, we are committed to ending these projects and programs. They're so necessary to those projects/programs that it would be impossible to continue without their institutional knowledge and everyday support. [list & explain why, hand over list of projects in another packet at the end]

(let that sink in. There may be some protestation about the budget, in which case step 1 is to point to contract workers' low pay and, if applicable, their low number)

If pressed about the budget: We've discussed alternative work arrangements that would allow the department to retain our workers while withstanding budget cuts. [explain what they are and why retaining institutional knowledge is good for the department in the long run]

- e.g. We have a plan for requesting staff time from unit X on a Y hours/week detail that will last Z months to accomplish Project A. This will improve the project through _____ while providing professional development for staff through _____ [emphasize that it doesn't take extra professional development funding, another fav source for budget cutting]

Only if extremely pressed, after weeks/months of trying: We've also made a list of projects and programs that we're committed to winding down in order to retain these workers by reassigning them, in order to support the [boss's] effort to reduce the budget. We are putting workers first in order to sustain this [department/organization] in the long term.

Follow Up / Post-Conversation Actions

- Share meeting outcomes with workers, both contract and “permanent.”
- Identify decision-makers.

- Seek support from others in the organization (union, faculty senate, others advocating for similar folks on campus or locally/regionally).
- Seek support from members of the public / library users.
- Make a list of what can't get done if workers are let go. Stop doing everything on the list.

Scenario 4: We Are All Precarious

I work at a library where everyone is on annual contracts. There's a general expectation and historical practice of renewal, but when a major budget challenge arises we feel our precarity. I want to talk to coworkers about our situation.

Do your homework

- List your goals for the conversation.
- Read your contract, talk to your union rep (if applicable), and take notes
 - Make note of lines that stand out (confusing, problematic, etc.)
 - Is the contract based on a template? Find the template and as many previous versions as you can
 - Highlight any changes you notice
 - Ask for clarifications about your contract, either from a trusted colleague or HR
- Seek out any statements / commitments leaders have made in writing to support “permanent” positions.
- Find out what opportunities you may be excluded from based on your contingent status, which may not be mentioned in your contract (such as serving on decision-making bodies, professional development funds, automatic deductions for healthcare, education benefits, union membership, etc).
- Determine what groups are in place within the organization that could advocate on behalf of contingent workers.

The script

- I was reading my contract and did you notice the new line(s) this year?
- It says, [what the line is, e.g. “There should be no expectation of employment beyond the end of the term.”]
- Why do you think HR added that?
- How do you feel about it?
- It's interesting that we're all on annual contracts here. I know we're always renewed, but this makes me question the stability I thought I had.
 - (They might say something about how this doesn't worry them)
- Sounds like you feel pretty safe at work. How do you manage that?

- (They say some stuff)
- Is there anything you want to know about the new contracts? Is there anything we could do to strengthen the organization's commitment to supporting permanent positions?
 - (They might have something)
- I notice that a lot of folks have mentioned the same thing about the contracts.
- (some other examples of concerns)
- Would you be interested in a group meeting to talk about this?
 - (say who else is in)

Follow Up / Post-Conversation Actions

- Use a phone tree structure to make sure everyone affected has a 1:1 (each person in the core group calls 2 others, and so on).
- Set up group meetings or use existing governance structures.
- Compile a list of concerns and group proposals for addressing the concerns.
- Contact HR or others to understand policy and legal landscape.
- Identify other workers in a similar situation at your organization or elsewhere and compare notes.
- Create a forum to communicate.

Scenario 5: “Don’t Make Waves”

I'm a recent graduate and brand new to the field. I am so thankful to have a job (and aware of the limits of my contract) that I am afraid to ask questions. I don't want to sound confrontational or step on any toes. I may err on the side of overcommitment or people-pleasing in attempts to secure longer term employment; this is counterproductive as it generally leads to burnout and failure. I want to identify a trusted local network to discuss my & others' working conditions.

Do your homework

- List your goals for the conversation.
- Find out if your supervisor is supportive of your goal to secure permanent employment.
- Find out if a transition from contingent to permanent worker is possible in your institution. Is there precedent for this?
- Clarify expectations for your job performance and deliverables.
- If you can, find out which workers are similar to you:
 - Who is performing similar work at your organization?
 - Who is performing similar work at other organizations?
 - Who else is contingent?

- List what supports you want from your supervisor / the organization in the event you are denied a transition to permanent employment OR they won't give you a straight answer. Supports might include job search time, professional development (training, travel), research time to write/publish/present, participation in governance, CV and cover letter review, paid leave during end-of-project transition ([lots more here](#)).
- Identify staff supports at your organization that may be open to supporting or at least talking with contingent workers: union, committees, affinity groups.

The script

Talking to your supervisor:

- What are the needs and priorities of the department?
- How does my role fit into that?
- Who will continue [different responsibilities you are carrying out] when my contract ends?
- I notice that there is a precedent here for transitioning to permanent work [cite examples you dug up earlier]. What would make this possible for me?
- OR if no precedent for the transition:
- What would make it possible for me to transition to permanent work here?
- (If they say something about “proof of concept” or “demonstrating value”)
 - You may know that best practices for temporary positions recommend [list the supports you want plus one more that you could take or leave, show them <https://dobetterlabor.com/>]. I'd like to discuss how we can follow these recommendations so that I can make the most of the contract term and build my skills.
- (If they say “nothing would make a permanent job possible”)
 - I know I'll need to start looking for another job in [month], before the project ends. You may be aware that best practices for temporary positions recommend [list the supports you want plus one more that you could take or leave, show them <https://dobetterlabor.com/>]. I'd like to discuss how we can follow these recommendations for the term of my contract.

Talking to workers who are similar to you:

- I noticed that we seem to be working on similar things [explain].
- How did you come to work here?
- How did you come to work in [LAM or specific sub-field]?
- What do you want to do next?
- What's a thing that confuses you about work?
- What are questions you have about work?

- What do you wish other folks here knew about you and your work? How have you received credit / recognition for your work?
- [Have you heard the good news about Collective Responsibility? I've been reading about existing best practices and doing some organizational research. Would you like to look over it with me?] or if you don't know them quite like that [There has been a growing movement to talk openly about labor in our field + a lot of research. Have you heard about Collective Responsibility?]

Follow Up / Post-Conversation Actions

- Share and promote support resources (mentoring, [our manifesto](#), others...).
- Share outcomes of your supervisor conversation with other contingent workers.
- Make a timeline for when you want the agreed-upon supports to kick in. Set calendar reminders to follow up with supervisors and HR and check in with fellow contingent workers about their timelines & outcomes.
- Make a professional development plan and a job search plan.
- Share templates of the above with fellow contingent workers.
- Set up standing times to check in with fellow contingent workers 1:1 and/or as a group.

Additional Scenarios

There are more occasions for LAM workers to talk about contingency than we can cover here. The following scenarios deserve future scripts of their own:

- Building relationships with new coworkers
- Addressing tensions between categories of workers (faculty/staff, professional/paraprofessional, short/long term) and unwillingness to address tensions as barriers to organizing/solidarity
- Getting past organizational hierarchy or politics
- Building relationships with longer tenured coworkers
- Expanding conversations around shared identity to also focus on class/caste and labor politics
- Addressing anti-union sentiment and its impact on employees
- Talking about contingency in a small, resource-poor organization
- Getting past "I don't want to get political at work"
- Laying out the long-term financial case against the cycle of contingent positions

Template: Roll Your Own Script

Use this template to walk through building your own script to address a scenario in your life.

What's the scenario?

- Why does this matter to you?
- What factors or forces produce the scenario? Does pressure to create and hire for term positions come from:
 - Grants
 - Endowments
 - collections budgets
 - innovation mindset
 - anti-union sentiment at institutional, state government, & federal government levels
 - recession planning
 - historic precedent for staffing certain types of work (e.g. processing work = temp workers, digital work = temp workers)
- Who's involved in the scenario? What are their roles?
- What are your ideal, good enough, and unacceptable outcomes?
 - What are the operational impacts of each outcome?
- How will you gauge progress?
 - Relationship building
 - Ask someone to talk to someone else - Did they do it? How did it go?
 - Are you making the connections you need to meet your goals?
 - Identifying [organic leaders](#)
 - Accountability spaces
- How will you sustain this effort, and for how long?
 - How will you build in time to reflect?
 - Who will help sustain *you*?
 - Self-care

Contact

For more information about these scenarios, [contact](#) us.

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