

October 17, 2013



Unethical Academia: The Next Front for Low-Wage Worker Uprising?

Posted: 10/17/2013 12:45 pm

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Recently, the tragic story of Margaret Mary Vojtko, a longtime contingent faculty member at Duquesne University who died after suffering a heart attack, went viral. Although she had taught at Duquesne for 25 years, it was reported that Vojtko died nearly penniless and without health benefits: she had spent years working as an adjunct professor paid by the course. Sadly, Margaret Mary Vojtko's situation is not uncommon. Academia, like the rest of American economy, has seen an explosive growth of low-wage precarious employment in recent years.

In 2009, three out of every four faculty members at two- and four-year academic institutions were contingent workers, according to a report released last year by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce. The majority of these academic workers earned an average wage of \$2,700 for a three credit course in 2010. That meant they barely made the minimum wage for each hour of their work.

Since 2009, the number of contingent workers in academia has only grown. According to John Curtis of the AAUP, the most recent estimate (from 2011) is that 1.4 million academic workers hold contingent positions off the tenure track. That's equivalent to the number of low-wage workers at Walmart, the nation's largest low-wage employer, which also has 1.4 million employees in this country making less than \$10 per hour. Higher education, once the surest gateway to the American middle class, is now contributing to the development of an unsustainable economy of low-wage jobs.

Adjuncts have found it difficult to organize to change their conditions. They often work for a myriad of distinct employers and rarely even know their coworkers. Then there is employer resistance. In the case of Duquesne, university administrators refused last year to recognize a vote in which their contingent faculty overwhelmingly decided to form a union. They appealed the union election to the National Labor Relations Board contending that their Catholic affiliation exempts them from having to bargain with unions. A century of Catholic social teaching endorsing the right to bargain collectively would seem to make hash of Duquesne's contention, but that hasn't stopped two other Catholic affiliated campus -- Manhattan College and St. Xavier University -- from taking the same stand. Now, other religious institutions, including Pacific Lutheran, are following Duquesne's lead.

(Click here to sign Interfaith Worker Justice's petition calling on Dusquesne, Manhattan, St. Xavier, and Pacific Lutheran, to end their campaign against academic workers.)

But the tide may be turning for low-wage workers, including those in academia. In recent months, courageous Walmart employees and workers with the Fast Food Forward campaign have inspired the public with their innovative, powerful, and coordinated actions in cities across the country. They have also inspired the labor community, which has previously felt that they have little prospect of helping these workers organize.

The OUR Walmart and Fast Food Forward campaigns might serve as a model for academic workers. They show that even workers who have divergent interests, and who may even be employed by different companies, can organize together for change.

Two factors have been essential in both campaigns. First, they have coordinated their actions nationally, maximizing their impact. Second, they have developed community support in order to minimize retaliation and build the public awareness needed to sustain their activism. Academic workers could replicate both features of these campaigns and have already begun to do so through groups like the New Faculty Majority.

This is an ideal time for academic workers to build coalitions with their students and other community groups. Total student debt is more than \$1.4 trillion and the president, along with Congress, failed last month to pass legislation that would secure reasonable interest rates for college loans. These same students are graduating into the worst job market since the Great Depression.

At the same time, administrative and non-teaching staff at academic institutions has exploded. As Benjamin Ginsberg notes in *The Fall of the Faculty*, while college enrollment has increased by 56 percent since 1985, administrative positions have expanded by 85 percent and other staff has skyrocketed by a whopping 240 percent.

Budgets have reflected the shift away from academic instruction. Between 1947 and 1995, administrative spending rose at twice the rate of instructional spending. Students should be outraged that they are paying more for an education at the same time as their professors, who provide that education, are being stiffed.

All that must change. We should not let the Margaret Mary Vojtko's death simply be another sad story that vanishes into the ether. It must become a catalyst that compels us to collective action.

A broad coalition of faculty and student groups is ready to lead the way by hosting a week of action called "Campus Equity Week." In line with their effort, we urge faculty, students, and campus workers to join this campaign by planning and participating in Campus Equity Week actions on their own campuses. And, on Wednesday, October 30th, we urge everyone to support the campaign by wearing red or scarlet.

Some universities have already chosen the high road, recognizing the rights of their contingent employees to organize and bargain collectively. While Duquesne bitterly resisted its adjuncts' organizing, another Catholic-affiliated university, Georgetown, took a very different approach.

In 2005, Georgetown adopted a Just Employment Policy, which guaranteed campus employees a living wage and the right to form a union, whether they were directly employed or contracted out. When Georgetown's adjuncts began organizing in 2012, the university adopted a position of neutrality and let the adjuncts decide for themselves whether they wanted a union.

Campus Equity Week actions should push other universities to take the high road. Those who seek a just and sustainable model of labor relations in academia should demand that their universities enact both their own Just Employment Policy, which recognize the rights of campus workers, and also a Just Budget Policy that puts students and teachers back at the center of the academy.

We must demand that college administrators enact equitable budgets that respect both the value of academic labor and the burden that excessive administrative budgets create for students.

It will take more than a few collective actions to push academic institutions to realign their budgets. Yet if we are to succeed, we must act now. On October 30th, let's stand together for justice in higher education.

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