

Virginia universities cut staff hours due to Obama health law

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Since the US Supreme Court upheld the Affordable Care Act (ACA) last June, universities and colleges throughout the commonwealth of Virginia have been preparing for the requirement in the law that large employers provide health insurance to their full-time employees. Universities in Virginia have moved to reduce hours for all adjunct staff, resulting not only in barring many instructors from receiving health insurance, but reducing their pay as well.

As signed into law in 2010 by President Obama, the ACA requires businesses with more than 50 employees to provide health insurance to employees working 30 or more hours per week or pay a penalty. But just last month, in the latest cave-in to business, the White House announced that it would delay until 2015 this employer mandate, which had been touted as one of the central components of the law.

However, this has not stopped large employers, including universities and state and local governments, from taking action to cut their employees' working hours. In an attempt to dodge the mandate, many institutes of higher education have resorted to placing a 29-hour cap on their adjunct teaching staffs in advance. Virginia is one of the first states to implement these measures at universities, with other states sure to follow suit.

Over recent decades, both private and public universities have come to rely on the use of adjunct, or contracted or temporary staff, as a means of cutting down on faculty costs. Adjunct faculty members are generally paid per course and have few benefits or job protections, and are allotted many administrative duties as well. The result of this process has been to slowly replace higher-paid professors with less-protected, adjunct faculty. Since the 1960s, adjunct usage within universities has tripled, from less than a quarter to

nearly 75 percent of all faculty as of 2011.

In deciding to cap teaching hours at fewer than 30, universities have also come down on course-preparation time. The American Council on Education (ACE) has determined that for every credit hour there are two additional hours involved in preparation for a class. Therefore, one course of three credits would involve nine hours worth of labor, effectively limiting the number of courses a teacher may be paid for to three, in order to come in below the 30-hour limit.

In a particularly cruel move, Virginia will not allow its adjuncts to split their work amongst two or more colleges within the state in an effort to obtain more work, and has prepared the means of tracking the total amount of coursework taken on by each adjunct. As a result, many educators will be forced into taking additional employment in the service industry or other forms of low-paying work in order to make ends meet. Similarly, the ACE has pressed for universities not to count student faculty on campuses as full-time, leaving them without health care coverage as well.

A recent survey by the US Chamber of Commerce found that half of small business owners polled said they would either cut employee hours or employ fewer full-time workers to avoid the requirement of providing health insurance. Nearly a quarter said they would hold back on hiring plans to avoid going over the 50-worker threshold to dodge the employee mandate.

As with Barack Obama's policy on education "reform," the administration's efforts in the sphere of health area are being increasingly exposed as a means of cutting costs for corporations and the government while foisting the burden of the economic crisis onto the backs of workers. Last week, Obama signed into law a bill pegging government student loan interest rates to the market. The bill will allow student loan

rates to rise in proportion to 10-year Treasury notes, which are expected to increase as the US Federal Reserve phases out its policy of cheap rates over the next few months.

Along with this increase in student loans rates, the price of tuition at public and private institutions is skyrocketing. A College Board survey found that tuition costs for students at in-state institutions had risen by nearly 25 percent beyond inflation in the past five years. For public four-year institutions, the increase was more than 27 percent.



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