Adjunct professor dies penniless after teaching for 25 years

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30 November 2013

The September 1 death of Margaret Mary Vojtko, 83, an adjunct professor who taught French for 25 years at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, shines a spotlight on the deplorable conditions faced by adjunct professors nationwide and the crisis in higher education as a whole.

As an adjunct professor, Ms. Vojtko was paid $3,000 to $3,500 per three-credit course she taught. When she could teach a full load, three courses in the fall and spring and two over the summer, she was not even clearing $25,000 a year. She had no job security, no medical benefits and no pension from the university.

In contrast, the university charges more than $30,000 per year for their least expensive Liberal Arts degree, and the salary of Duquesne's president is more than $700,000 a year plus full benefits.

Over the past year, the university had reduced her teaching load to one class per semester, meaning that she was earning less than $10,000 a year, which was consumed by out-of-pocket expenses associated with cancer treatment she was receiving. Penniless, she was not able to keep her home in repair, and the utilities were cut off.

She took a job at a local restaurant, working nights, to both earn extra money and stay warm. This past spring, after being caught sleeping on the couch in her office at the university, she was discharged. Despite never having missed a class and consistently receiving strong reviews from her students, the university decided to punish this "transgression" with its most severe disciplinary measure. As is the case for all adjunct professors, she did not receive any severance pay or pension from the university.

On August 16, she received a letter from Adult Protective Services informing her that she had to report to a caseworker the following Monday or she would be turned over to Orphans' Court. Later that day, she had a massive heart attack from which she died two weeks later.

Her tragic death and the horrific conditions that she was forced to live under are not unique to her. Overall, more than 70 percent of all professors at colleges and universities across the country work outside of the tenure track. Most of these are adjunct professors, meaning they are contracted from semester to semester to teach individual courses with no job security and, for the most part, no benefits

Almost all professors working at the many online university and for-profit colleges are adjuncts.

Professors are no longer guaranteed tenure after a certain number of years teaching and doing research. In addition to providing some level of job security, tenure also provides professors with a bit of academic freedom. Adjunct professors, on the other hand, are offered minimal payment per course.

According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a major academic journal in the US, and its new *Adjunct Project*, the salary range in Pennsylvania is from $9,500 per course at the Ivy League University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, down to $1,200 at the Moore College of Art and Design, also in Philadelphia. The $3,000 to $3,500 per course that Duquesne University paid to Ms. Vojtko is typical of, if not better than, what is paid adjuncts at most schools.

In response to the passage of the Affordable Care Act, many colleges and universities have cut the hours that adjunct professors can work so that the institutions will not be required to provide health care.

Mary Vojtko is a contemporary example of the observation Frederick Engels made in his 1845 work *Condition of the Working Class in England: "* But as to the great mass of working-people, the state of misery

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and insecurity in which they live now is as low as ever, if not lower. The East End of London is an ever-spreading pool of stagnant misery and desolation, of starvation when out of work, and degradation, physical and moral, when in work...."

A professor from Pittsburgh who knew Mary Votkjo spoke to the WSWS. Even though she has tenure, she asked that her name not be used due to previous harassment by her employer: "Her story helped to expose the brutality of the adjuncts many of whom do have PhD's and have to work at three different institutions trying to make enough just to make ends meet.

"My point simply is that the position of the adjuncts is one part of the attack on education. This education industry is doing so many things simultaneously to subvert education.

"Tuition is increasing and the true academic learning opportunities are diminishing. This is happening simultaneously. Then students are saddled with huge loans and have no basic knowledge to make intelligent decisions, or lead a meaningful, independent life. They will always be dependent on some boss who controls their existence, their vacation, their leisure time, and health care. That's the poor. Then they will tell them they are lazy when they don't become rich, because like Obama said, 'If you work like hell' you can move up. So, apparently they didn't work hard enough. Therefore, the majority of Americans are just not working hard enough. Yet, the stock market manipulators are working hard enough, and they deserve their fortunes?

"In academia the situation of the adjuncts is part of a neoliberal and corporate project. It is part of a project of transforming education to the point where knowledge becomes inaccessible, where it is being withheld, especially from the working class. Withholding knowledge is the perfect way to control the population and especially the working class and to disable any resistance."

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