

Coventry University in UK attacks teaching staff wages, terms and conditions

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Coventry University, located in the British Midlands, is at the forefront of attempts to denigrate and casualise the employment status of Higher Education (HE) teaching, research and lecturing staff.

Staff teaching English language skills to international students at Coventry are currently being shunted around among various university-owned subsidiaries to facilitate an attack on their wages, terms and conditions.

Coventry University now leads moves towards HE marketisation and privatisation, or what one journalist aptly called “Higher Education PLC.” Last year Coventry University was awarded the *Times Higher Education Awards University of the Year*.

The university’s aggressive business model has been championed by Conservative government ministers. In the Queen’s Speech in May the Tory government announced plans “to support the establishment of new universities and to promote choice and competition across the higher education sector”. The plans are contained in a White Paper detailing changes to the HE system that, if enacted into law, fundamentally changes the social role of universities and allows private institutions to be granted university status.

New for-profit institutions will be able to award degrees immediately and earn university status after three years of operation. Existing universities like Coventry and the new private establishments are free to pursue the lucrative “education export market” with courses, mainly in business and high-paying professions, targeting overseas students who pay sky high fees averaging £12,000 (US\$15,280) per year and reaching £36,600 (US\$45,840) for medical courses.

Coventry is engaged in a rapid expansion of campuses both within the UK and further afield on the global market, the accumulation of a large estate and

property portfolio and burgeoning relations and partnerships with private enterprise. Over recent weeks, Coventry has opened a campus in Scarborough, North Yorkshire and another in central London near the Liverpool Street Station. Next year the directors plan to open another Coventry University campus in Dagenham, Greater London.

The Vice-Chancellor of Coventry University, and now apparently CEO, John Latham, has a career background in marketing and his total pay remuneration package for last year exceeded £300,000 (US\$382,005). Latham is on record wishing higher education to be even more expensive for students to complete their studies. He utters business-speak statements carrying pernicious messages like “We’re challenging the system. We’re bringing in new forms of pedagogy.”

A year ago, staff teaching English language at Coventry had their contracts shifted from direct employment by the university to one of Coventry’s commercial subsidiaries, CU Services Ltd. Inferior contracts were forced on staff with a subsequent loss of benefits. The subsidiary does not recognise unions.

When staff protested about the attack on their terms and conditions, Coventry claimed the subsidiaries were “self-governing, autonomous bodies.” In reality, they are directly and entirely owned by Coventry University. The subsidiaries have one shareholder, Coventry University, which is registered as a charity.

At a meeting between university management and staff, the head of Coventry University Human Resources told workers that the commercial model of university subsidiaries “simply would not be viable” should staff retain the same contracts as their university-employed counterparts.

How long before staff still employed directly by the

university are told in no uncertain terms that their terms and conditions are incompatible with the profitability of the business model?

The English language staff whose contracts have been trashed recently held a ballot for union recognition, with an almost 75 per cent turnout, and a 100 per cent vote for union recognition. Within hours of the ballot result being made public, Coventry responded by calling the staff in and issuing new terms of employment that transformed the workforce into temporary agency workers of another of the university's subsidiaries—the Orwellian-titled *thefutureworks* employment agency. The *thefutureworks* trading name belongs to Coventry University Enterprises, owned by Coventry University.

A member of staff suffering the degrading experience told the *Guardian* newspaper “It’s a McJob now—a McTeaching Job”, in reference to the terms and conditions of the fast food industry being utilised in higher ed.

Coventry claims the new employment contracts are the similar to those with their other subsidiary introduced a year ago. However, lawyers on behalf of the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) say the new temporary agency contracts remove access to company sick pay and company pension scheme. In addition, staff are no longer classified as “employees” and have far fewer employment rights, including protection from unfair dismissal, and their employment can be terminated without notice.

Coventry University denies that transferring staff had anything to do with their ballot for union recognition, but rather that “developments in the higher education sector have driven these changes ... Brexit, for example, has had major implications for universities and how they plan activities going forward.”

UCU policy officer Jonathan White describes events at Coventry University as “old-fashioned union-busting”. He drew comparisons between what a government body described as “Victorian conditions” suffered by staff employed at the Sports Direct retailers’ warehouse and the actions of Coventry University towards staff: “Coventry’s subsidiary company appears to be aping the employment practices of a bargain basement retailer that has been publicly castigated for its disgraceful treatment of staff.”

But in response, the UCU is merely calling on CU

Services Ltd to reverse the decision and for the university to “engage constructively” with the union to negotiate recognition at all its education subsidiary companies. For the union bureaucracy, its negotiating role is more valued than the livelihoods of workers it claims to represent. UCU General Secretary Sally Hunt said of the actions of Coventry University’s subsidiary company, “CU Services Ltd must immediately reverse its decision and Coventry University needs to stop hiding behind the so-called autonomy of its companies and start to constructively engage with UCU at all its education subsidiaries ... For our part, UCU will continue its fight to ensure that everyone teaching at Coventry University and its subsidiaries has the same right to union recognition.”

Coventry University responded to criticism of their methods by explaining that CU Services had employed English teachers on short, fixed-term contracts and this was “standard practice across the sector ... Over the past year, for example, students and PhD staff have moved to contracts with *thefutureworks*”.

The UCU is implicated directly in the fate of HE workers. The union has opposed any meaningful opposition to the moves towards the wholesale privatisation of HE and the accompanying casualisation of the workforce, which has been in train since the initial expansion of HE in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Current events at Coventry University are not an aberration. London Metropolitan University is in the process of sacking one-third of its lecturing staff and hiring new staff on zero hour contracts and other establishments like Leicester and Hull universities are carrying out similar redundancies.



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