

The

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LOWDOWN

WRITTEN BY JIM HIGHTOWER

“We are in the midst of deciding the extent to which we are an inclusive society that will live up to our nation’s promise that hard work pays off.”

— PROF. GARY RHOADES, of the University of Arizona’s Center for the Study of Higher Education, on how fast-food workers and adjunct college professors are both confronting corporate America’s low-wage ethic.

If this can happen to adjunct professors, it can happen to the rest of us

Lessons from corporatized college: Even PhDs are being squeezed out of the middle class

WORKING. POOR. In our US of A, those words ought never be juxtaposed. The very concept of paying poverty wages in the richest nation in the history of the planet is an abomination—a mark of societal failure. Yet, not only have millions of our people been shoved into the abyss of the working poor, but our soulless corporate and political elites tell us to get used to it, for the Walmartization of work is our nation’s future.

If you think it couldn’t happen to you, consider the situation of one group of more than a million workers today who had assumed that they were going to be solidly middle class, but—surprise!—each one has ended up struggling to make ends meet by working three, four, or even more poorly paid, part-time, temporary jobs. To put a name to this little-known segment of Americans, I’ve created “Victoria,” who is drawn from my reading of dozens of their stories. She’s a composite, but all too real:

Now 38, and living in the sprawl of Chicago, Victoria had not expected her life to be so harried and edgy. Juggling three jobs, her days are a frenetic scramble—she leaves her apartment by 6 am to be on time for the first one, darts clear across the city for number two, then hops on I-90 to get out to a western suburb for the third job. It’ll be past 7 pm before she makes it back home.

Victoria is part of fast-growing flock of contingent workers who’re so constantly shuttling from one job to the next that they have the dubious distinction of being dubbed “freeway flyers.”

Not only is her commute a grind, but it also costs a bundle. Victoria’s road-weary 2003 Corolla frequently needs repairs, and her gasoline bill alone runs more than \$100 a week. Since none of her three employers reimburse her travel expenses, that’s over \$400 a month

that comes straight out of her pocket. Victoria worries a lot about the rising prices for gas, food, rent, and other basics, for her three meager paychecks add up to less than \$2,000 a month, gross.

None of her employers provide health coverage, pension, paid sick leave, paid vacation time, ladder of upward mobility, or respect. There’s no job security—she can be fired on a boss’s whim, with no notice and no severance pay. Also, Victoria’s bosses keep shifting her work schedule at the last minute, forcing her to recalibrate on the fly. She gets no say in any of this.

Now here comes the punch line to Victoria’s story. She’s not the stereotypical minimum-wage worker with little education, experience, or credentials. To the contrary, she has three degrees (including a PhD), 12 years experience in her profession, and top performance ratings from her employers, and what most of us think of as a prestigious position: **Victoria is a college professor!**

Like most real life college and university academicians who now find themselves knocked down into the ranks of the working poor,

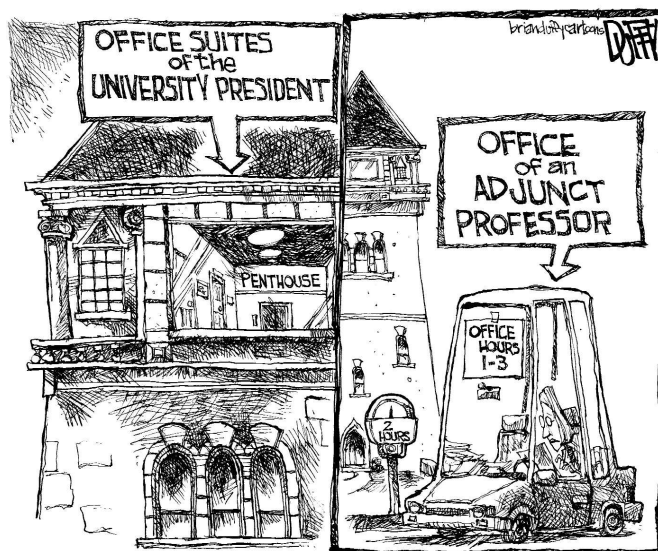
our symbolic “Victoria” is an accomplished teacher. She holds classes at three, supposedly reputable institutions, she is charged with the vital social responsibility of educating the next generation of Americans... and, she’s on food stamps.

What lessons are students to absorb from that?

The scarlet A

The grubby little secret of today’s ivory tower is that it is being propped up by an ever-growing, exploited underclass of educators. “Adjunct professors,” they’re called, and the term itself is a measure of the disrespect they’re shown. The dictionary defines

an adjunct as “something joined or added to another thing, but not essentially a part of it,” something “attached in a subordinate or temporary capacity.” This legion of learned professors now numbers



more than 1.3 million, is rapidly growing, and is on all of our campuses, from Harvard to your local community college. But they are only attached to the school by semester-to-semester contracts, rather than being considered employees and treated as members of the college family.

By simply tagging these talented teachers with the Scarlet A of "Adjunct," the overseers of higher education deem it acceptable to underpay, overwork, and generally mistreat them. As one university administrator concedes: "Walmart is a more honest employer of part-time employees than are most colleges and universities."

Why has this happened? Because unbeknownst to us hoi polloi, including many students and families laying out seriously big bucks for ever-rising student tuition and fees, America's higher-ed system has become thoroughly corporatized. Most schools are run by extravagantly paid CEOs (cloaked with the more benign title of "president") who've never taught, have no personal ties to the institution, feel no need to listen to the faculty, and are most eager to please corporate donors and wealthy benefactors. They tend to be climbers (always looking for a better paying/more prestigious school to jump to) and empire builders (enhancing their power with layers of vice-presidents, executive assistants, lawyers, lobbyists, PR flacks, alumni liaisons, et al.).

As these campus executives drastically bloat their schools' bureaucratic budgets, they seek to balance the bottom line by cutting their teacher budgets—a trade-off sanctioned by boards of trustees, which happen to be dominated by corporate executives who always see the "wisdom" in downsizing the workforce. Yet, with more students enrolling, more teachers are needed. Hence the move by most of these centers of enlightenment across our country to replace full-time professors with adjuncts, thus wholly embracing the corporate culture of a contingent workforce—another name for cheap labor.

In 1970, full-time professors with tenure (i.e., those with secure, well-paying employment) made up 77 percent of America's higher-education faculty. Today, they constitute less than a fourth of the faculty. Meanwhile, the adjunct faculty, which was barely noticeable 40 years ago, now fills *more than half* of US collegiate faculty positions. (The rest of the schools' teaching slots are assigned to graduate students and full-time-but-non-tenured lecturers).

THE PAY. Let's be blunt: it's piss poor. Adjuncts aren't salaried. They're paid a piece rate, a non-negotiable fixed amount for each college course they teach, no matter how long and hard they must work to deliver it. The rate for a college course varies from school to school, but it generally falls between \$1,000 and \$5,000—and the Coalition on the Academic Workforce calculates that the median pay across

the country is \$2,700. With a full load of eight courses in an academic year, that adds up to only \$21,600—before taxes and expenses (travel, teaching materials, etc.). And they get zero pay for the extraordinary hours they spend preparing for class, reading and grading papers, meeting with students, and all the rest that good teachers do.

Moreover, adjuncts are routinely denied full loads, leaving gaping holes in their annual incomes. One 42-year-old with a PhD and a rising credit card debt was asked how he felt when he was abruptly denied a course that would've paid \$3,000: "scared," he said. Even if these teachers are able to land eight or so courses a year, the jobs are usually not located on one campus, but at three, or more schools. One adjunct says he drives 12 miles from home to his first assignment, another 12 to the second, 42 to the third, and 77 to teach his fourth class. He notes that campus hopping adds an extra gotcha to his out-of-pocket costs: a parking fee at each school.

Benefits? Get real. Last fall, Rep. George Miller and the Democratic staff of the House Education Committee organized an eForum to hear from adjuncts about their working conditions—75 percent said they are offered no benefits. Even when a health or pension plan is made available, the schools price them out of reach of most adjuncts. "My 'retirement' plan is to work until they bury me," explained one participant.

Well, then, thank God for Obamacare, right? It did raise hope for adjuncts, since any large employer of people who work 30-plus hours a week must now cover them under the

Affordable Care Act. Many colleges quickly leapt at this opportunity! Not by offering coverage, but by adopting new work rules limiting their adjuncts' hours to under 30 per week. Clever! And crass. Cutting the hours not only crushes the teachers' hope for access to badly needed health care, but also cuts their income.

In fairness, I should add that the bosses of this low-wage/no-benefit educational system are not entirely uncaring about their financially squeezed faculty. Ripping a couple of pages right out of McDonald's playbook (see November 2013 *Lowdown*), college and university executives offer subsidies to assist teachers—though not from the schools, of course.

First is an "income enhancement plan" for adjuncts with gump-tion. It's called: "go get an extra job off campus." Many do... because they must. In Rep. Miller's eForum, one noted that she is working night shifts at—O, the irony!—Walmart to supplement her college teaching habit. Another adjunct delivers pizzas (though this one worried that "I lose the respect of my students when they see me" on pizza runs).

Second is a "benefits subsidy"—from you and me. While America's safety net has been tattered in recent years, it still provides help for people knocked down into poverty, and many adjuncts from multibillion-dollar educational empires qualify. An analysis by the Congressional Research Service found that if a family of three in California relies on the median pay of an adjunct, it is eligible for food stamps, Medicaid, a child tax credit, and an earned income tax credit. Cost to taxpayers: \$13,645 a year.

THE INSECURITY. If you've been to one of those giant builder's supply stores like Home Depot early in the morning, you've probably seen a labor "shape up" around the edges of the parking lot. This is where unemployed construction workers cluster, hoping to snag a job for a day or so from one of the builders who glide into the lot in their pickups, literally to pick up some temporary, cheap labor. It's a detestable system that's inherently exploitative and a symbol of the desperation intentionally built into our jobless economy.

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DoSomething! Info, contacts, and action

- **New Faculty Majority**
www.newfacultymajority.info
- **"The Just-In-Time Professor"**
www.mpsanet.org/Portals/0/1.24.14-AdjunctEforumReport.pdf
- **House Committee on Education and the Workforce.** Democratic Staff Report, January 2014 <http://democrats.edworkforce.house.gov/press-release/committee-democrats-release-findings-eforum-contingent-faculty>
- **Campaign for the Future of Higher Education** <http://futureofhigher.org>
- **Adjunct Action** (a project of SEIU) <http://adjunctaction.org>
- **Adjunct Faculty Association** (a project of United Steelworkers) www.usw.org
- **United Workers Congress** www.unitedworkerscongress.org
- **American Federation of Teachers** www.aft.org
- **United Auto Workers** www.uaw.org/page/uaw-uniting-academic-workers

Well, the adjunct system is the campus version of a labor shape up. Usually in any given city, there are many more of these professors than there are teaching positions, and the higher-ed hierarchy gladly exploits that imbalance by hiring teachers on one-semester contracts (about four months) commonly offered (or denied) only at the last minute. This means that as the hours tick down to the start of each semester, anxious adjuncts are made to stand around, waiting to learn whether any of the several schools they've applied to will "drive up" and hire them.

Insecurity is a constant in their lives, for they're unable to plan on having a certain level of income for the next year, much less five or so years down the road. In Rep. Miller's eForum, this was a huge issue, with 95 percent of participants saying they have no job stability. "I taught four courses in the fall," said one participant, "but was not told until the day before Spring Semester started that I wouldn't have any classes. I was unemployed with no notice." They can't plan a life. Should we buy a house? Where? Do I fix my car, or trade it in? We want to have children, but....

Speaking of unemployed, good luck collecting jobless benefits from this system. Some schools send letters to their current adjuncts indicating an "intention" to rehire them for the next term—then they don't. But several states are interpreting federal labor law to mean that merely receiving an intent letter is a "reasonable assurance" of future employment, so the professors are being denied both a job and unemployment compensation.

THE INSULTS. If rip-off pay and constant insecurity aren't enough to depress a professor, adjuncts also face a slew of intentional institutional slights that mess with their effectiveness and crush morale. For starters, check out their offices. Oh, you can't. The majority of schools provide no office space for them. Hello—across campus in the well-appointed administration building, every Deputy-Assistant Executive Vice President for Paper Shuffling has an office. Yet, the people who actually do the bulk of teaching can't even get a cubicle in the ivory tower.

This office slight is not about a status symbol, but everyday functionality. An important—and required—part of being a professor is providing a set number of office hours to meet with, counsel, mentor, and otherwise help students. Without offices, these "private" consultations are reduced to snatches of time in the hallway, copy room, and other open-air campus spots that are inappropriate for candid, often emotional talks. Also, even a shared office would provide a chance to shut the door and collect your thoughts before

The sad death—and "second life"—of an adjunct professor

UNTIL HER DEATH LAST SUMMER, Margaret Mary Vojtko taught French for 25 years at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, earning high marks from her students. Like most teachers there, Margaret Mary was part of the adjunct faculty, a group that schools like Duquesne can take advantage of—and, boy, does it ever!

As with other adjuncts, Professor Vojtko was unsalaried. Instead of a reliable annual income, she was paid a low flat rate for each course she taught. And she was never told until just before a semester began whether she'd be teaching three classes, one—or none. Even in years with full teaching loads, her pay was below \$25,000—with zero benefits.

In her last year of life, Duquesne cut her back to one class per semester, reducing her yearly income to under \$10,000. Meanwhile, her cancer returned, piling huge medical bills on her back. With no savings or pension, she became a pauper, unable to pay even her electric bill in her last winter. Her stress level was off the charts, yet she never missed a day of class until last spring. That is, until Duquesne fired her.

Last August Margaret Mary was found sprawled in her front yard, victim of a massive heart attack. This proud professional educator died penniless, jobless, and literally heartbroken, thrown away by the university that had used her for 25 years.

Margaret Mary Vojtko had no fame or political clout—she was just another grossly underpaid adjunct teacher. And she would probably still be unknown outside her small circle, if it weren't for Daniel Kovalik. A lawyer with the United Steelworkers (USW), Daniel knew Margaret Mary through his union's drive to help adjunct teachers organize for better pay and treatment. So Kovalik wrote up her story.

Thanks to Kovalik, Margaret Mary's story swiftly spread through the Internet, striking a chord with adjunct teachers everywhere. They can see how their own low-wage, no-benefit, no-clout status could end in the same downward spiral. So Margaret Mary lives on, energizing organizing campaigns to empower and lift up the adjunct faculty.

In a wonderful case of ironic justice, one of the strongest campaigns has been mounted by the adjuncts at Duquesne and their USW allies. The faculty has already voted to join the union, but the masters of this Catholic school are resorting to legalistic ploys to deny democratic participation by the majority of their teachers. Bizarrely, they've even demanded a religious exemption from labor laws, claiming that unionization would interfere with the teaching of Catholic values!

USW's president, Leo Gerard, has appealed that claim—directly to the Pope. Meanwhile, to adjuncts everywhere, Margaret Mary has become a potent symbol of their plight and an emblem of their fight.



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class, as well as providing a couple of file drawers for storing teaching materials.

Instead, adjuncts often convert their car trunks into offices, rushing out to the parking garage between classes to dump one set of materials and grab the textbook, notes, etc. for the next one. This office-in-a-trunk concept can produce frustrating surprises, such as the time a Boston-area adjunct dashed out to exchange class materials, only to find that his office “got towed.”

In addition, off-campus professors often are not allowed to call on the support staff for help, nor given access to faculty copy machines, the library, and other important tools. Particularly grating, though, is that many schools exclude them from participation in department planning sessions and curriculum discussions with their colleagues, don't give them access to professional workshops and career development classes, and consistently fail to consider them when full-time faculty positions open up. Some colleges don't even invite these teachers to the president's Christmas party.

Getting organized

So, why not just walk away from such a mean job and find another field of work?

The great majority of professors stay for one big reason: they have a passion for teaching college students and aren't about to be run off by a screwed up, corporatized hierarchy that thinks it can get away with treating good teachers like trash. “I'm not going to give up my life's work,” they say, “nor am I going to abandon my colleagues and future adjuncts to a system of such rank institutionalized injustice. I'll stay and fight.”

One who rebelled is Maria Maisto. As a fed up adjunct at the University of Akron in 2009, she issued a personal manifesto on www.insidehighered.com: “I really don't have the time, or the courage, to be an activist for adjunct faculty rights,” she began. “But I'm making the time, and I'm summoning the courage, because I'm not only an adjunct; I'm a parent and a citizen who is concerned—indeed afraid—for the future of higher education.” Ms. Maisto helped found and is president of New Faculty Majority, a nationwide advocacy group pushing for such basic rights as equal pay for equal work.

And now, the exploited adjuncts of academia are finding new clout and beginning to win improved treatment through unionizing campaigns backed by American Federation of Teachers, Service Employees International Union, United Auto Workers, and United Steelworkers. From coast to coast—from Tufts University in Boston to Whittier College in Los Angeles—these efforts are succeeding and spreading.

In Washington, DC, for example, SEIU has already unionized

adjuncts at American, Georgetown, and George Washington universities, plus Montgomery College. Likewise, AFT is organizing citywide in Philadelphia, signing up adjuncts at Bryn Mawr, Moore College, Philadelphia Community College, St. Joseph's, Swarthmore, Temple, the University of Pennsylvania, and Villanova.

These campaigns have caused severe Walmartitis in the executive suites of some schools. Northeastern University, for one, rushed to hire a union-busting firm when its adjuncts welcomed SEIU organizers to campus. No need for unions, exclaimed the provost in a letter to the faculty, asserting with a straight face that we have “fostered an extremely collaborative relationship [with you] built upon mutual respect and trust.” This would be ruptured, he warned, by union outsiders who are “unfamiliar with our culture.”

Aha!—“our culture.” There's the rub! With few exceptions, today's college culture bears no relationship to the classic ideal of collegium—i.e., a democratic grouping of colleagues in which each member has roughly equal authority and all are cooperatively engaged in the pursuit of common goals and the Common Good.

That “college of equals” is long gone, displaced by the corporate culture of predatory plutocracy that has attained supremacy in our larger society's workplaces, political institutions, and markets. Far from shared governance by faculty, administrators, and trustees, higher-ed now runs on a strict, chain-of-command corporate model. Even though education is, by nature, a labor intensive service organization, those who are actually providing the service have little or no say-so and are basically viewed by the ruling executives as a bothersome cost to be controlled.

While it surprises most of us to find professors in poverty, once we see how the structure of academe has been contorted to fit the corporate order, it's no surprise that those on the lowest rung of the institutional ladder—the adjunct faculty—are treated as highly educated McDonald's workers.

To see that that even PhDs are being squeezed out of the middle class mocks America's promise of unlimited opportunities for upward mobility. But it also opens the opportunity for college professors, fast-food workers, and all others among the working poor forge powerful worker-professor alliances. In fact, the New Faculty Majority recently joined the United Workers Congress, a national, grassroots-based network of unorganized workers (ranging from day laborers to taxi drivers). Like everyone else, UWC members had always been told that a college degree is the one sure path to the middle class, so when they first learned about the paradox of highly educated, low-paid professors, they were shocked. But then they realized, “Your fight is our fight.” Developing that bond can produce good results for all.