

The Lecturers' Strikes: Why Lecturers Are Fighting Back

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The recent strikes in Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University (UU) across its campuses in Derry, Coleraine and Belfast were the fifth time university staff across the UK have been on strike since 2018. The declared point of strikes by members of the University and Colleges Union (UCU) are to defend the pension scheme and to progress "the Four Fights" against casualisation, impossible workloads, equality pay gaps and for a decent pay increase.

In the course of the strikes, however, it has become clear that university staff are fighting for the soul of higher education in the UK. The attitude of the employer body, Universities UK, to UCU's proposals for reform of the pension scheme—which were rejected in their entirety, even those proposals that would have cost the employers nothing—suggests that the point is to destroy the union and complete the marketisation of higher education (HE). Younger HE staff have seen their pensions cut by 35 per cent as a result, which sends a pretty clear message from the employers.

In the twenty-odd years since Stanley Aronowitz published *The Knowledge Factory*, his analysis of how universities have become profit-driven privatised companies has become a starting point for debates about the intellectual purpose of HE. Today, discussion of the marketisation of HE dominates academic journals, blogs, social media—and picket lines.

What is meant by the marketisation of HE? It refers to the extent to which market values have become the norm in universities, which have seen huge reductions in public funding and increased reliance on fee-paying students. At the same time, the number of academics, especially permanent lecturing staff, has been

massively cut, while the number of managers, especially senior managers and administrators, has rocketed. A huge amount of teaching, almost half in Queen's and UU, is done by people on part-time and/or temporary contracts.

Ginsberg's *Fall of the Faculty* (2011) captured widespread attention among scholars for its sometimes vicious, often hilarious, critique of "administrative imperialists." University presidents became CEOs and their business partner "deans, deanlets, and deanlings" are an ever-growing army of bean counters and conference goers planning endless restructurings that will look good on their CVs, attract capital and justify their own existence.

Ginsberg explained why he is so scathing about these "deanlets and deanlings":

"Deans have an academic background. Years ago, they were part-time and always part of the faculty...[Today] they either have no faculty background or they decided early in their careers that their talents lay elsewhere. To them, what used to be the means is now the end. Instead of an institution serving teaching and scholarship, teaching and scholarship serve the institution."

Ginsberg gives an example of a summer programme he used to run which had one administrator and four hundred students. "It was given over to a professional deanlet. It soon had 400 professional staff members and one student. And no one seemed to care." Unfortunately, academics on this side of the Atlantic have no problem identifying with that anecdote.

Henry Giroux's *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education* (2014) asked *why* neoliberalism is at war with HE. Why have collegiality and cooperation been replaced with competition between colleagues? Why the cutting of funding for the humanities? Why the replacement of critical thinkers with an army of precarious workers? Why the decimation of all things public? Why turn students into consumers? His answer to these questions is that universities are one of the few public spheres left where people can learn the knowledge and skills necessary to allow them to think critically and hold power and authority accountable.

Part of this project includes removing the autonomy that university lecturers have traditionally had over what they teach and how they teach it, as well as what they research and write about. The Research Excellence Framework is part of that, introducing the idea of a hierarchy of researchers—those that produce "REF-able" research and those who are deemed not to have reached that bar. So far, universities in the North have not signed up for the

Teaching Excellence Framework, which must be resisted if the complete McDonalds-isation of HE is to be avoided.

Those who run universities want to turn them into training schools equipping young people with the skills required by a modern economy. In this situation, students are valued as human capital, courses are determined by consumer demand and industrial relations are based on what is called the Walmart model in the USA or “yellow pack” jobs in Ireland.

Central to the neoliberal view of HE is a market-driven model that seeks to eliminate permanent jobs, dismantle unions, turn the humanities into a job-preparation service and transform most faculty into an army of temporary workers. The casualisation of the HE workforce sees many of those teaching in universities able to claim working tax credits and housing benefit. This precarious employment produces more and more early career academics who are unable to achieve many of the markers of adulthood, such as buying a house or having children. This, then, is the model of marketised HE that the UCU strikes are resisting.

The Four Fights

Two of the four fights—reducing workload and ending casualisation—are closely linked. They are linked because increasing use of part-time and temporary staff means that the bulk of administrative tasks and pastoral care falls to the ever-fewer number of permanent staff. The temporary staff are expected to do a lot more teaching than if they were permanent, when they would also be expected to do research. The staff employed under part-time hour contracts have the worst deal of the lot. They are expected to prepare and teach courses, often at very short notice, to set assignments and then to mark those assignments. If they are lucky, they will be paid for preparation and marking, but in poorly organised areas of many universities they are only paid for direct contact hours. Even when they are paid for preparation and marking, it always takes far longer than they’re paid for, with UCU estimating that some are paid less than the minimum wage.

The UCU gives the example of a part-time lecturer contracted and paid for ten hours and bringing in £187 a week, who will have an hourly rate of £18.70. However, if she is in fact working twenty hours a week, she will be paid a real hourly rate of £9.35. This £187 a week is not all year around, however, but for the twelve- or fourteen-week teaching term only. This system discriminates against women, disabled and working-class casualised staff, who are often unable to afford this level of precarity and are forced out of academia.

This discrimination is closely linked to another of the four fights—equality in pay. The pay gaps for women, Black and minority ethnic (BAME) and disabled staff are a scandal in 2022. There is a 15 per cent pay gap between women and men in HE, a 17 per cent pay gap between Black and White staff and a 9 per cent disability pay gap.

UCU emphasises that the lecturing staff’s working conditions are the students’ learning conditions. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the marking of assignments. Marking is probably the part of the job that most academics hate most, possibly because it is so time consuming. For the Deanlings, the problems of marking are solved by the introduction of online marking. Lecturers are advised to use only set, standardised comments as feedback. This way, we are told, we should be able to mark a 1,500-word assignment in ten minutes (fifteen minutes for 2,000 words).

Students are horrified when they are told that their lecturers are expected to spend no more than ten or fifteen minutes on work that they have taken many hours to produce. They deserve the longer time it takes to read the work properly and comment on how they’ve addressed the topic, and more than the kind of generic feedback available via the standardised comments “needs rephrasing,” “Reference?,” “good introduction,” “relate to essay question,” etc. Often it is only when students hear about how we are supposed to mark their work that they understand just how impossible workloads have become and why we are striking.

The average working week in HE is now above fifty hours, with 29 per cent of academics averaging more than fifty-five hours—and the workload increased during the pandemic when everyone had to learn how to make videos and teach online. The answer is to end casualisation and employ a lot more full-time, permanent academics to spread the load. Instead, permanent subject teams are shrinking everywhere; those who are off sick, who leave and even those who retire are not replaced. What happens to the millions saved by universities teaching our young people on the cheap? It is mostly, it seems, being invested in shiny new buildings: often student accommodation rather than classrooms.

With inflation now acknowledged as being over 5 per cent, the employers’ offer of a 1.5 per cent pay rise is clearly unacceptable. But university staff have seen the value of their pay relative to inflation fall by 18 per cent between 2009 and 2019, so a decent pay rise for all is an important fourth part of the four fights.

Attacking academic freedom

Increasingly in the USA, and now in the UK, there are attempts to limit academic freedom. Faculty members are defined less as intellectuals and more as technicians, and are punished for raising their voices against injustice. The sacking of Professor David Miller by Bristol University following complaints of anti-Semitism by the University Jewish Students Society is a very recent example of this trend. The students complained about anti-Zionist comments made in lectures and articles about Islamophobia, comments that were all factually and demonstrably correct. The sacking of a highly respected professor is an example of how academic freedom can be ignored when student complaints chime with government views and institutions' desire to discipline academics.

While funding for HE is increasingly coming from students themselves, mainly through deferred loan schemes, the crisis in funding for universities is used as an ideological weapon to cut funding to some disciplines such as history, English, sociology, anthropology, gender studies and language programmes, as well as being used to attack permanent posts, trade unions and to raise student fees. There is now no modern language course at Ulster University, for example, while history and English are under constant threat. Increasingly, universities want people who can be trained for the workforce, not individuals who have the capacity to think critically and act in order to deepen and strengthen cooperation, collectivity and the fabric of a democratic society.

While critical thinking is discouraged among students, early-career academics are fearful to be seen engaging in critique. They have been expected to be willing to work long hours for very poor pay in the hope that a precious permanent job may open up some day, while keeping their heads down and not criticising the system. One of the best things about the current strikes are the extent to which casualised staff and doctoral students have been among the most militant on the picket lines, determined to no longer go along with such a dystopian system.

The administrators and senior leadership teams in universities now seem to believe that what is taught in a course is not an academic decision but a market consideration. "This is a form of neoliberal or corporatized education... This is the vision of accountants who have no interest in the public good."

Coming soon to a university near you

HE in the Republic is headed in the same direction as that in the UK. The government document *Education for a Changing World* in 1992 made it clear that HE institutions should serve the needs of

the economy. Since then, universities in the South have been expected to fall into line with national economic priorities.

In 2004, the OECD was invited to review HE in Ireland. The review concentrated on HE as being all about the creation of a successful knowledge economy in Ireland, and its recommendations were endorsed in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* published in 2011. Known as the "Hunt Report," this strategy emphasised the need to create rather than apply knowledge and the need to upscale the workforce, and recommended increased student contributions via an upfront fee that would be deferred by the introduction of a loan system.

Since then, the HE sector in the Republic has been pushed to perform more like a business, with "productivity targets to meet, in terms of finance, student enrolment, research income and output." Currently the so-called student contribution in the Republic is close to the level of fees paid by students in the North.

HE unions in the South of Ireland need to organise to resist the creeping marketisation of HE or face the kind of situation of overwork and burnout that many of us working within the UK system have come to know.

Conclusion

The fight to defend HE is one we should all support. If workers who have been as relatively privileged and well organised as HE staff can be defeated, their pensions trashed and their pay and working conditions devastated, then no one, and certainly none of our students, can expect secure jobs with decent pay, conditions and pension rights. HE must be defended also as a public good, one that is indispensable to creating the culture necessary for students to learn how to think critically, to question what the government says and does, and to become social agents rather than uncritical consumers.