

Compulsory downshifting

The landmark case of the Open University v. its part-time staff is grinding its way through the courts towards likely victory for the associate staff on pro-rata full-time employment benefits. Whilst this highlights a particularly bad case of hand-me-down employment conditions in the HE sector (one recent estimate puts pay at £8.00 per hour minus costs of correspondence and use of own premises), it also encapsulates the broader issues facing part-time workers in the education industry and the nature of work in general within the temporal structures of a regime of speeded-up, globalized capital. The current trends of labour/accumulation indicate that the move towards part-time work may not be so much a temporary aberration of restructuring as one of its central characteristics, belying, the conventional sense of a *peripheral* workforce. If this is true then the question becomes not so much how we can live with it whilst it lasts, but how can we humanize, civilize it by contesting it from within.

Current patterns of work indicate an increasing integration of the flexible labour force as an ongoing element of the economy, now comprising 28 per cent of all jobs and 80 per cent of all jobs advertised in HE last year. Whilst the majority are standard 'McJobs', there is an increasing flexibilization of professional work, as readers of this piece will know. A growing sector of workers teach through cross-disciplinary strategies because their access to multiple subject areas allows them to make linkages not otherwise perceptible. Ideally, this allows both a revitalization of content and development of interdisciplinary, transferable skills, but it currently leads to a fragmented multitasking, rather than a genuine fusion of disciplinary elements to produce an interdisciplinary object. A commodified version of inter-disciplinarity is a current feature of rationalization in the academy, despite its peripheral status. It is part and parcel of the 'just in time' curriculum, management's flexible response to rapid change in globalizing markets. Contra Giddens's view of the 'reflexive' individual as presented by 'abstract' (global) systems with a multiplicity of discrete, fragmentary choices (part-time jobs), the peripheral worker comes to embody the background or collective institutional experience as well as the individual's experience of fragmentation. Flexible workers are a concrete evocation of a general tendency in HE and occupy a position of superexploitation in terms of the valorization of their skills and the conditions of their employment. A victory over terms and conditions has a critical symbolic potency against the whole discourse of flexibilization.

This returns us to the 'politics of relief' that accompanied the Labour victory of 1997. The sense of the European Court ruling (now with the House of Lords) needs to be channelled and reinforced via a positive articulation of this politics of relief into the prospect of coordinated collective action. The HE unions must be unequivocal here. Whilst full-timers may feel secure, the existence of an army of deregulated workers gives the lie to that. It poses the prospect of dwindling full-time members and declining bargaining power. The regulation of part-time teaching renders this form of employment a less attractive alternative to full-time status. The social individual as fragmented periphery is close to all of us. It is time to grasp its centrality.

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