

The dispute at LMU

The current unprecedented polarization between lecturers and executive management at London Metropolitan University (LMU) is due to a bullying management style that culminated in the imposition of a new employment contract that is probably the worst in the HE sector. Recent action has included a week-long strike in May, timed to coincide with a QAA visit to achieve maximum impact, and an assessment boycott that in late July was still blocking the award of degrees. The contract stems from the merger of the University of North London and London Guildhall. It has four basic sticking points for staff: no restriction on the number of evenings staff could be asked to work; possible compulsion to work weekends; no allocation of weeks blocked for scholarly activities; and no six-week holiday block (as per one of the merged constituent institutions). A subsidiary point is that management require staff to notify them of their whereabouts during non-teaching time, which carries the insulting implication that colleagues cannot be trusted to do their jobs without invasive supervision.

The dispute can be seen as historically related to the process of incorporation of the polytechnics as new universities in 1992. The absence of effective legitimate channels of communication is a key feature of concern identified by staff, and this can be traced to the internal democratic deficit of the polytechnics, which relied on governance by local authorities to engineer managerial legitimacy. The lack of accountability of the governors to staff representatives created an atmosphere which could only encourage a kind of pork-barrel approach to governance.

The stand-off between management and union at LMU was sparked by the overturning of a promise to adopt the Guildhall contract during the merger, a contract which did not have the four or five contentious clauses highlighted above. The situation was exacerbated when about four hundred Guildhall staff, having refused to move to the new contract, which was mysteriously presented as the UNL contract, were threatened with the sack. Two people were told they had been sacked and to pay back any salary they had received since the beginning of the academic year! The intimidatory atmosphere has gradually built up since the announcement of the new contract in April 2004, with staff being sent increasingly pressuring letters.

From May last year NATFHE has instituted an academic boycott at the same time as attempting to continue negotiations with management over withdrawal of threats to staff and the imposition of the contract which compels 9-to-5, Monday-to-Friday attendance or alternative guarantee of contactability. A further sticking point is the performance appraisal scheme inscribed within it. This has already proved to be racially discriminatory and the university has been reported by NATFHE to the CRE. Under the scheme black and Asian staff are respectively three and two times less likely to get 'outstanding' awards than white staff.

The academic boycott is supported by other unions, including the AUT. Attempts at mediation have included both the TUC and ACAS. The former may yet be an important player in resolution of the dispute as it is a significant source of funding through Trade Union Studies and the TUC archive. ACAS-sponsored talks were begun with management in April but eventually collapsed when management refused to field a full team of negotiators. Management reaction to the strike suggested that the union was 'completely out of control', has 'gone too far' and 'lost contact with reality'. But maybe a new kind of reality is what is needed here.

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