

Coventry in the vanguard

David Ridley

This is an edited version of a talk I gave at the Coventry University UCU 'Alternative Open Day' (9th March 2019). The event was part of a strike campaign against the University's unfair 'CORE/Clear Review' system. Unfortunately, the branch had just received news that they achieved a turnout of 44 per cent, just 6 per cent short of the minimum required by the 2016 Trade Union Act.

Of those who voted, however, 70 per cent were prepared to take strike action and 87.6 per cent action short of a strike. 'This clearly vindicates our campaign about the amount of concern there is about the unfairness and unaccountability of CORE/Clear Review system', the branch explained in a message to members in response to the result.

'We have begun talks with management at which they have expressed the wish to conclude an agreement', the branch continued. 'At a recent meeting we demanded and they agreed to provide several data sets of information, and we expect these to provide the basis for a genuine discussion about the problems that [members] have repeatedly put before us.'

I was asked by the branch to say a bit about marketisation, to give some context to their current dispute. I thought I'd do so by looking at how the branch got here and why their struggle is so important within this wider context.

Coventry University UCU has been for years now battling at the very frontline of marketisation. This is because the university within and against which it struggles is not only at the vanguard of marketisation but has in some sense been leading the neoliberal project of creating a market in British higher education.

As former secretary of the branch, I was part of a remarkable struggle for union recognition in Coventry University's subsidiaries. For years we campaigned to get recognition for pre-sessional English teachers who had been outsourced from the University to a 'wholly owned subsidiary', CU Services, suffering cuts to pay and conditions in the process.

We finally won recognition for these teachers in 2016, but on the way found that a similar fate had befallen many other staff groups, for example those working in the higher education subsidiaries, CU

Coventry, CU Scarborough and CU London.

After winning recognition in one subsidiary, we immediately began campaigning for recognition across the entire 'super subsidiary', the CU Group. However, in response, the University set up a 'sham' union in this subsidiary group to undermine our efforts to establish an *independent* channel for colleagues to exercise their right to collective representation.

Why go to such lengths to avoid union recognition? Because Coventry University's growth strategy depends on an exploitative business model, which relies on what we theorised - drawing on the work of Australian academic Megan Kimber - as a centre/periphery approach to academic outsourcing and deprofessionalisation.

Universities are public institutions and charities, and are therefore not strictly profit-making enterprises. However, under UK law, charities are allowed to set up subsidiary companies to engage in profit-making activities unrelated to their main charitable purposes, as long as these activities do not damage the reputation of the charity.

Coventry University has been testing the limits of this technicality for over a decade, running for-profit universities as subsidiaries and having no regard for the reputational damage caused by union-busting activities aimed at defending this model.

As well as setting up sham unions, many will remember when the University's employment practices were compared to those of Sports Direct by *The Guardian's* Aditya Chakraborty, after it sacked the pre-sessional English teachers mentioned above and tried to force them to re-apply for their jobs through the University's student temping agency, *thefutureworks*.

Not only has the University's perverse use of UK charity law gone unpunished by regulators, it has been given awards for this 'entrepreneurialism'. In 2017, for example, the University picked up the Duke of York Award for University Entrepreneurship at the Lloyds Bank National Business Awards.

While you might think that this behaviour is driven by HE 'marketisation' - the Tory dream of turning universities into R&D and human capital factories serving students-as-consumers - this is only partially true. In my own work I have argued that marketisation truly began in 1992, when polytechnics like Coventry were granted university status.

The condition for this new status was that these 'modern' universities should become corporations with private sector-style governing boards and vice-chancellors as CEOs. These reforms undermined collegiality, had the effect of gradually replacing academic self-governance with top-down managerialism, and introduced a set of behaviours or 'norms' that drove institutions like Coventry to behave as described above.

Essentially, modern universities - whose corporate structures and behaviour were soon imitated by older, civic universities - became vehicles for marketisation 'from below'. When the Tories returned to government in 2010, they merely accelerated this marketisation, responding to a desire for an expansion of business opportunities for status-conscious VCs.

By challenging this logic of corporatisation, then, Coventry University UCU branch has taken the struggle right to the heart of the marketisation project. Winning union recognition in these subsidiaries is not only a significant local victory, boosting the confidence of members to move on to 'core' university issues like pay and performance management, but a line in the sand in relation to the future of British HE.

Coventry University is the future. Universities are becoming multi-campus, multi-national corporations, just like more familiar British mega-corporations like GlaxoSmithKline, Cadburys or, perhaps more

relevantly, Pearson. VC-CEOs no doubt look forward to the day their institution is included on the list of FTSE 100 companies.

Unfortunately, this future is closer than you think. Today there is talk of universities failing as a result of risky investments and uncertain economic conditions, with the Government refusing to 'bail out' universities in the case of such failure, despite spending billions on bailing out the banking sector in 2007/8 in response to a global financial crisis created, in part, by those banks.

Rather than bail universities out, I predict that the Government will instead look for other universities to take on these failing institutions, through mergers or perhaps as the wholly-owned subsidiaries of a new type of super-university conglomerate. Even more likely, the Government will court private sector corporations to take on these institutions as a speculative business opportunity, no doubt for vastly reduced prices.

While the future is bleak, Coventry University UCU has provided a beacon of hope and set an example for trade union branches everywhere, in every part of the public sector, in challenging privatisation, marketisation and corporatisation.

We cannot bury our heads in the sand and just hope that marketisation will go away, or that we can ride out this unfortunate episode by working extra hard on our teaching and research. The fact is that if we are not fighting marketisation we are complicit in its reproduction. The struggle is hard, but what has been achieved at Coventry shows that victories can be won, even in the most difficult conditions.

The result of the recent ballot is no doubt being felt as a heavy loss. But the branch and its members should feel absolutely proud of the struggle that has got them to this point, and feel encouraged by just how close the result was. The war is yet to be won. There will be many more battles at Coventry and elsewhere in the struggle against neoliberal marketisation, privatisation and outsourcing.



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