

Who's exploiting Margaret Mary Vojtko?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Officials at Duquesne University are [disputing some of the facts](#) of the story of Margaret Mary Vojtko, a longtime adjunct professor there who recently died sick, uninsured and impoverished. But they don't dispute labor lawyer Daniel Kovalik's original [account of her poor pay and lack of benefits](#):

I called Adult Protective Services right after talking to Margaret Mary, and I explained the situation. I said that she had just been let go from her job as a professor at Duquesne, that she was given no severance or retirement benefits, and that the reason she was having trouble taking care of herself was because she was living in extreme poverty. The caseworker paused and asked with incredulity, "She was a professor?" I said yes. The caseworker was shocked; this was not the usual type of person for whom she was called in to help.

Of course, what the caseworker didn't understand was that Margaret Mary was an adjunct professor, meaning that, unlike a well-paid tenured professor, Margaret Mary worked on a contract basis from semester to semester, with no job security, no benefits and with a salary of between \$3,000 and just over \$3,500 per three-credit course. Adjuncts now make up well over 50 percent of the faculty at colleges and universities.

While adjuncts at Duquesne overwhelmingly voted to join the United Steelworkers union a year ago, Duquesne has fought unionization, claiming that it should have a religious exemption. Duquesne has claimed that the unionization of adjuncts like Margaret Mary would somehow interfere with its mission to inculcate Catholic values among its students.

Duquesne is [one of three Catholic schools that have appealed](#) the National Labor Relations Board's decision to allow adjuncts to organize. This despite [the church's pro-union teaching](#) (pdf) and the two institutions' [richly intertwined history](#).

There's a whole lot that's wrong with the American university these days, Catholic or otherwise. But this has to be near the top of the list: most of the teachers are paid

crap to work long hours without job security, benefits or academic freedom. It's sadly ironic to hear Duquesne [criticize Kovalik for exploiting Vojtko](#) for his own purposes, as if this would have been a new experience for her. She was exploited for her entire career, and more and more of her colleagues are being treated just as badly.