

UCU and the fight against precarious employment in UK higher education

Jonathan White

Bargaining and Negotiations Official

UCU



Long waves of neoliberal reform in higher education (and Tory shock therapy)

Successive governments have implemented long waves of neo-liberal reform of public services, and higher education:

- greater marketization,
- internal and external privatisation,
- HR practices and the New Public Management

From 2010 onwards, the Tories look to finish the job:

- From grants to fees and loans
- Removing barriers to for-profit providers' market entry
- Removing barriers to universities changing their corporate form

The precarious workforce

The available data is fragmentary but gives a sense of scale:

- There are 195,000 core academic staff in UK HE
- 36% are on fixed-term contracts, many of them hourly-paid contracts of one year or less, heavily concentrated on lower grades.
- 68% of research staff on fixed-term contracts, 1/3 of one year or less
- At least 20,000 academic staff working on 'zero hours' contracts
- 75,000 additional teaching staff employed as highly casual 'Atypical Workers'

Threat and opportunity: the contradictory consequences of marketization:

- Marketization strengthens some of the drivers of 'casualisation' by creating more pressures to lower labour costs and create more 'flexibility', but...
- Market mechanisms and students' consumer consciousness create anxiety among institutions to demonstrate value for money.
- Universities are vulnerable to public accusations that they are cheating their students by maltreating staff
- Their growth as large regional employers, businesses and landowners makes creates new stresses in their wider communities
- These development strengthen the material basis for building alliances between staff and students, and between campuses and communities

UCU's strategy:

Pattern bargaining, leverage campaigns, alliance building

Structural/external challenges:

- Increasingly decentralised collective bargaining
- lack of control over labour supply
- Anti-Trade Union legislation

Organisational/internal challenges for UCU:

- Membership low among casualised staff.
- Branches weighed down with issues and unused to local bargaining
- Weak tradition of working with the wider labour movement in communities.

How do we create leverage?

- Using national level campaigning to create a hostile public and political environment for our employers,
- Target, resource and support locally based organising and campaigning pressure through alliance building
- Use wins to drive wider change and organise and recruit on this basis

Exploiting reputation sensitivity

Linking Universities with the debate over 'zero hours contracts' and precarious labour...

Zero hours in universities: 'You never know if it'll be enough to survive', Harriet Swain, *The Guardian*, 16 November 2013,

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/sep/16/zero-hours-contracts-at-universities>

Academics fight hourly contracts: A day of action on Wednesday will highlight the poor pay and job insecurity of many staff at universities, Anna Fazackerly, *Guardian*, 4 November 2014

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/nov/04/academics-fight-hourly-contracts>

Why can't Britain create decent jobs? Meet the women struggling against low pay and zero-hours contracts, Yvonne Roberts, *Observer*, 14 December 2014 http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/dec/14/why-cant-britain-create-decent-jobs?CMP=twg_gu

'Lecturers struggling on casual contracts, says union', *BBC News*, 21 May 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-32811426>

'Students suffer under culture of casualisation': students miss out on continuity under culture of zero hours contracts at universities, argues Sally Hunt of the UCU', *The Telegraph*, 7 May 2014

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationopinion/10810953/Students-suffer-under-culture-of-casualisation.html>

'University lecturers on the breadline: Is the UK following in America's footsteps?', Mary O'Hara, *The Guardian*, 17 November 2015,

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/nov/17/university-lecturers-uk-us-casual-posts-food-stamps>

'Want to improve teaching in universities? Value those who teach': the government must address the sector's growing problem of insecure working conditions', UCU General Secretary Sally Hunt, *The Guardian*, 11 January 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2016/jan/11/want-to-improve-teaching-in-universities-value-those-who-teach>

Translating public profile into political pressure

Political devolution in the UK means tailored political strategies for each nation and some opportunities for progress:

- Scotland: Nationalist administration keen to put universities at the centre of economic plan and more progressive political environment, helped to pressure Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow.
- Wales: Similar situation has helped produce movement at the Universities of Bangor and Aberystwyth and even more so in the Further Education college sector.
- England: UCU has targeted the Tory administration using the argument that regulating quality means employing people on secure contracts.

Campus and community organising and alliance building

Turning national pressure into change on the ground depends on creating local campaigning pressure that can deliver meaningful negotiations.

This means forging solidarities between:

- permanent faculty
- casualised staff
- Students
- other unions
- communities and other campaigns

Marketization is creating a material basis for these solidarities, but we still need organisation...

Key elements of organisational success:

- Organised groups of casualised members
- Conscious and strategic branch reps
- Unity of all elements of the union – from casual members to officials
- Willingness to work at sustainable alliances based on understanding of common interests and respect for different organisations structures, cultures and objectives
- Understanding of organising, campaigning, negotiating and organising again as moments in a continuing process
- Establishing the bargaining territory around ‘quality’

Examples:

- Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh – agreement to phase out zero hours contracts
- University of Sussex – phasing out zero hours contracts
- University of Warwick - defeating proposals to ‘insource’ hourly paid lecturers

Concluding remarks

- The neoliberal offensive has created a precarious layer of staff, poorly paid, overworked and locked out of the old career path.
- It also presents unions like ours immense, almost existential challenges
- But its contradictions also present opportunities for rebuilding power by creating new weaknesses for employers around quality and the material basis for broad alliances.
- Our ability to adapt ourselves to the new terrain and deliver our strategy will shape our future as a union and it offers the best hope for precarious academic staff in UK higher education.