

Education Fightback forum:UK lecturer speaks on casualisation of Higher Education sector

Our reporters
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Stephen, a lecturer in northern England, told the online forum:

The tens of thousands of workers who comprise the Higher Education teaching and research staff in British institutions are a highly educated and multinational workforce. In that sense, they are a contemporary reflection of the modern working class.

I have 20 years of experience teaching all manner of social science disciplines in a number of Higher Education teaching institutions.

For the first eight years of teaching I was also a post-graduate student studying for an MA and then a doctorate. Many casualised teaching staff are simultaneously post-graduate students too, with the twin financial strains of low wages and insecure employment, while having to pay increasingly extortionate university tuition fees for their postgraduate studies.

Today the majority of the Higher Education academic workforce is casualised. One-third of existing contracts are teaching only, i.e., paid by the hour, and less than two-thirds of British academics have a permanent contract of employment.

Today I am still employed, just as I was 20 years ago, on a term duration fixed contract, paid hourly. I earn less per hour today than I did 20 years ago when I first started teaching undergraduates.

I will be officially unemployed between academic terms, especially at Christmas, New Year and during the summer when I will have to claim Job Seekers Allowance to make ends meet.

This is the lot of tens of thousands of Higher Education workers. They now constitute the most casualised sector of the UK workforce after hotel,

catering & hospitality sector!

To a large degree it is academic staff that have been forced to fund the expansion of Higher Education since the late 1980s, by drastic cuts to their wages, terms and conditions and now pensions. The universities are embarking on huge multi-million-pound expansionary projects and vice chancellors are pocketing salaries close to half a million pounds.

This has been funded by thoroughly proletarianising the academic workforce. Most teaching today is done by a workforce that is casualised, exploited, underpaid and insecure; employed on a variety of fixed-term, hourly paid, fractional and even zero-hours contracts.

In addition, many Higher Education staff are routinely expected to conduct any number of tasks beyond their contractual obligations for which they receive no recompense.

University and College Union General Secretary Sally Hunt previously told a conference of academic workers that they are “a reserve army of precarious and exploited labour.”

That stands as a damning indictment of the union. So does the UCU’s own research of the situation facing its members. “Making ends meet,” produced in 2015, showed that 42 percent of those employed on casual and “atypical” employment contracts struggled to pay bills, 35 percent struggle to pay rent or bills and 21 percent struggled to pay for food. Almost one-third earned less than £1,000 a month.



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