

14 August 2020

University and College Union

To Anti-casualisation committee

From Jo Grady, general secretary

Agenda item 3

For Report

Subject **UCU's anti-casualisation work and the Covid-19 pandemic**

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This report outlines some of the efforts UCU staff have been making since March to support members on casualised contracts. Our focus has primarily been on higher education, given the sheer volume of job cuts announced in that sector so far, but our attention will increasingly shift to further and adult education as the funding situation crystallises and more employers in those sectors start to propose redundancies and other cuts.
- 1.2. A lot of employers have targeted casualised and more securely employed staff at the same time, and a lot of our campaigning has therefore covered all categories of staff, but there have also been specific measures taken to support and foreground the struggles of staff on casualised contracts and that is the focus of this report.
- 1.3. UCU's Fund The Future campaign is both political and industrial. We are trying to put pressure on the devolved and Westminster governments to underwrite post-16 education funding for the duration of the crisis and commit to longer-term reforms of our sectors, and at the same time we are supporting branches to defend all jobs, including casualised ones, wherever employers are proposing them, using a range of measures up to and including industrial action. These two aspects of the campaign are complementary.
- 1.4. Our campaigning has been most successful in the case of Wales, with a decent package of funding already announced there. We are pushing the Welsh government for more, and using this progress to bring

greater pressure on Westminster to follow suit.

- 1.5. What we are saying to the government is that the uncertainty about institutions' future income (for example in the case of HE, from international student fees) is giving employers a pretext for imposing cuts on staff, so they need to step in and promise to underwrite any income which institutions may lose in the coming year and beyond. We have produced a huge range of research and campaign materials demonstrating the importance of our institutions to their local economies, and the ripple effects which redundancies in our institutions will have in the communities that depend on them.
- 1.6. What we are saying to employers is that the jobs they provide in turn support jobs in the surrounding area; that student intake after the crisis is expected to be high, and we need to keep staff on the books to teach those students; that if we are going to be teaching and conducting other work online more and more in the future, there needs to be more investment in the staff who actually do that work (a disproportionate number of whom are on casualised contracts) and less in expensive, eye-catching buildings and other similar capital projects, or in senior management teams. Employers should be working as hard as possible to make savings in other parts of their budget before cutting staff. In any case, even if there is going to be a massive impact on institutions' finances, now is too soon to tell what it will be; while we wait and see what income for 2020-21 will look like, in looking to make savings elsewhere, employers should be working with us to pressure government for a much more comprehensive funding guarantee than it has provided so far, to remove the uncertainty which employers are using as a pretext for cuts.
- 1.7. There is also a student- and public-facing dimension to the campaign, concentrating not just on economic issues but the human cost of our sectors' employment models and the immense systemic damage that will be caused if funding is not secured. We have published polling demonstrating how much voters of all political stripes care about protecting post-16 educational institutions and their motivations for doing so, and we are now working to mobilise those communities to join us in pressuring MPs – particularly those in marginal constituencies with a nearby HE/FE institution – to support a government funding guarantee.

2. Press coverage

- 2.1. A lot of our work in head office has concentrated on generating press coverage for the cuts that have been announced to casualised teaching budgets and contracts. Recent stories in the Financial Times, Times

Higher Education and elsewhere all happened on the back of extensive conversations which our Press team, myself and staff in my office, and colleagues in Bargaining and Negotiations (in particular the ACC secretary) had with reporters about the scale of the cuts happening, where they were taking place, and the nature of the campaigns which UCU members have been leading against them.

- 2.2. Once it was clear that there was considerable press attention on these cuts, we decided to consolidate and establish an overall assessment of the sector-wide scale of the attacks on staff on casualised contracts which we could then use to generate further publicity: about 2,300 jobs in the four HE institutions that have given us firm details, and potentially almost 30,000 in the rest of the HE sector if this pattern continues. We decided to prioritise cuts to casualised jobs rather than redundancies in general because of the urgency and immediacy of the attacks on casualised jobs and the uncertainty and damage they are causing for staff whose income (particularly during the summer months) is already precarious. This wider coverage of the systemic issues took place as part of the launch of our '10 steps' initiative (see below) and led to a further wave of coverage in Times Higher Education and a number of other outlets.

3. Lobbying

- 3.1. As well as mobilising members and putting pressure on employers, this press coverage has helped us concentrate the minds of key political supporters or potential supporters, including MPs. At the same time I and our Public Affairs team have been briefing and lobbying MPs on current and projected job cuts since the crisis began, with a briefing to MPs and parliamentary staff in the first few weeks followed by another joint briefing with London Economics highlighting the key conclusions from the report which they produced for us.
- 3.2. A key priority at the start of the crisis was to make sure that the government's furlough scheme would apply to HE and FE staff and particularly to precariously employed staff in HE. This was far from guaranteed and there was no pressure from employers to make it happen, but following conversations with the Universities Minister, the scheme was extended to those groups of staff. However, as it has been in other cases the government guidance was poor and ambiguous and gave some employers an opening to get away with failing to protect certain groups, in particular precarious teaching staff. Unfortunately, no amount of national or local pressure was able to shift those employers who took this position.
- 3.3. A lot of our other lobbying has been aimed at funding bodies (for

extensions to fixed-term contracts), who for the most part (with some exceptions) have frustratingly fallen in line with the government's failure to take serious action to address the crisis for precarious workers.

- 3.4. At the same time we have also taken part in joint lobbying of government with other unions (via the Trade Union Coordinating Group) for a support package aimed at precarious workers more generally, covering demands such as an increase to Statutory Sick Pay (SSP), welfare reform, and protections for renters from eviction.

4. Advice and research

- 4.1. Our Bargaining & Negotiations team and other colleagues have produced a very wide range of bargaining guidance and campaigning advice for branches, much of it covering or concentrating on precariously employed staff (for instance our 'Know Your Rights' info sheet for PGRs, available at https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/11018/GTAs-know-your-rights/pdf/ucu_gta-rights_jul20.pdf). This guidance can currently be found in the 'Branch guidance' page in the Covid-19 section of our website, but the B&N and Campaigns teams are also developing an accessible interactive introduction to all the guidance available which will go on the Fund The Future website and help branch officers and reps quickly navigate to what they need.
- 4.2. One of the most important pieces of work we have produced during this period was the ACC secretary's report (produced with help from our Research Officer, Rachel Remedios), 'Precarious work in higher education', which we published in May. This goes into more detail than anything we have done previously on trends in particular institutions and on the intersecting relationship between casualisation and race and gender inequality. It has fuelled a lot of the press coverage we have generated and informed a lot of our other campaign materials. The report is currently being updated to reflect the most recently available statistics (which, unfortunately, do not alter its main findings).

5. Events

- 5.1. A key dimension of the Fund The Future campaign has been the programme of online events we have put together: to highlight the campaign's political goals, help branches under attack coordinate and learn from each other's campaigns, and give direct guidance on institutional finances, employment law, health & safety and other matters. This has included events about and involving members of

staff on all types of casualised contracts.

- 5.2. Attendance has been strong and has continued to hold up since the end of term, with the most popular events enjoying an audience of several hundred members at any one moment and thousands more viewers afterwards. We have benefited from advice and support from our comrades in the CWU, who more than any other union have pioneered and perfected the use of online broadcasts to engage with members and support their campaigns.

6. Training

- 6.1. Our formal, accredited training offer has now been moved online and courses have been running for over a month. However, as a specific addition to our normal training offer, we are also partnering with internationally renowned trade union organiser Jane McAlevey to offer UCU members places on a six-part 'Strike School' in September and October. The Strike School is the sequel to a course which Jane ran for a number of unions, including the NEU, earlier this year, and the NEU report that it has paid immense dividends in terms of their workplace organisation, recruitment, and ability to mobilise members on a large scale.
- 6.2. Jane has a strong track record of organising precarious workers in the US and we have already had a lot of expressions of interest and support for the programme from various UCU anti-precarity campaign groups. We hope that members will help us advertise it as widely as possible within their networks and register as many people as they can (there is no limit on the number of participants and details of how to register via UCU will be available soon).
- 6.3. Jane has agreed to take part in a UCU-specific taster event for the School on 2 September, which will also feature casualised members from Cambridge UCU who have been applying her principles in a promising local organising project called 'CUCU Conversations'.
- 6.4. Alongside the Strike School, UCU will be organising a structured programme of supplementary activities that are designed to help members put Jane's methods into practice in a way that will bring immediate benefits to whatever campaigning work is already happening in their institutions.

7. 10 Steps

- 7.1. As mentioned previously, we have recently published 10 steps for more securely employed colleagues to take in solidarity with precarious staff in HE (see <https://fundthefuture.org.uk/10-steps/>). These seek to

embed a number of principles according to which colleagues can self-organise in support of precariously employed staff which escalate in terms of complexity and time required.

- 7.2. As well as the press coverage which we coordinated alongside the publication of the 10 steps (see above), we also stepped up our social media activities, producing a list of anti-precarity groups for members to follow on Twitter and releasing our second campaign video, which focuses on precarity across our sectors and ends with a call to action to take the 10 steps. The video has been watched more across our social media platforms than any previous UCU video (including the campaign launch video) and the Facebook post containing the video is our most-viewed Facebook post ever. This highlights the growing awareness not just amongst our members but even the general public of the insecurity of employment in post-16 education, and their support for a more humane system that puts staff first.

8. Recruitment and membership

- 8.1. One of the 10 steps highlights the issue of recruitment of precarious members. To go alongside it we produced a new summary of our terms of membership for precarious workers, including our year of free membership for members who become unemployed. For unemployed or under-employed staff who are currently not members and are not eligible for Standard Free Membership, we are encouraging them to join on our lowest (£1 per month) subscription band.
- 8.2. As I pointed out in my election manifesto, if we are going to be serious about representing casualised members we need more of them to join the union. At present we have lower density (i.e. a lower proportion of the overall workforce who are members) among casualised staff than we do among those on permanent contracts. It limits our ability to campaign and bargain effectively on behalf of casualised workers when employers can see that not many of them are in UCU. We can give casualised members incentives to join by making structural changes, such as moving towards progressive subscriptions – which we have managed to continue doing this year (despite the extraordinary pressure caused by our record-breaking Fighting Fund expenditure). However, we need to make sure that we are recruiting members not just for the sake of numbers but to increase our bargaining power – which is why recruitment associated with organising activities like the 10 steps is so important.

9. Local campaigns and industrial action

- 9.1. Since the crisis started I have been arranging visits to branches facing

job cuts, including where precarious staff are primarily or exclusively the subject of those cuts (e.g. Essex). We have also been supporting local campaigns via social media, our weekly emails and other channels. This is in addition to all of the support which branches have been receiving, as ever, from their regional and devolved national offices, with negotiations, studying institutional finances, how to formulate campaign plans, legal advice, e-ballots, etc.

- 9.2. A number of branches where casualised staff are among those under attack (e.g. Manchester, SOAS) are now progressing to e-ballots and postal ballots for industrial action. In addition to targeted emails from my office to members in those branches encouraging them to vote, we are also helping those branches use our new peer-to-peer text messaging service, ThruText, to mobilise members. ThruText is an invaluable tool and proved instrumental in helping branches achieve our best ever turnout in a pay & equality dispute in our autumn ballots and winter reballots.

10. Next steps in HE and FE

- 10.1. Our next steps in HE are to continue supporting branches entering into disputes over cuts to precarious contracts, and pressuring the Westminster government for a proper funding guarantee. There will be a Special Higher Education Sector Conference on 30 September to consider a potential sector-wide claim to employers covering issues relating to Covid-19, including job cuts. HEC has met four times since the crisis started but it has not yet taken a view on whether any future industrial negotiations or disputes should be national as opposed to local, as they are at present. In the absence of a HEC decision we have concentrated on encouraging and supporting local campaigns and disputes.
- 10.2. There are advantages and disadvantages to a national dispute on redundancies. A national dispute could unite the sector and highlight the systemic nature of the issue, and if successful, the gains would uplift smaller branches with less bargaining power as well as larger ones. However, there are obvious disadvantages in spreading the union's resources to ballot branches that are not facing significant (or any) redundancies, as well as those that are; in forcing every branch to ballot and take action at the same time, regardless of whether or when job cuts are announced in their institution; and in negotiating a potential sector-wide settlement with employers which would cover every branch and every category of worker equally.
- 10.3. This union has struggled to achieve enough leverage to force an acceptable offer from employers in the national disputes which we

have engaged in this year in higher education. By contrast, branches that have had local disputes in further education (with support from regional/devolved national and head office), with members leading the action from the ground up, have been more successful – most prominently in the case of Nottingham College but also in the case of Tower Hamlets and elsewhere.

- 10.4. In further education, we are already looking at redundancies in a number of institutions (e.g. Blackburn College and Bradford College) and will need to continue supporting branches as much as possible.
- 10.5. We also need to develop more FE-specific campaign materials and continue to hold FE/ACE/Prison Ed events which will build solidarity across branches in those sectors. We need to determine what sort of materials and activities we should be developing with FE members on casualised contracts in mind – for instance, what would an FE-specific version of the 10 steps look like and how would we want it to work in practice on the ground? Conversations about this have already been taking place with relevant colleagues and the President-Elect but I would appreciate the advice of ACC in particular.
- 10.6. Equally, when we are planning our supplementary activities for the September/October Strike School, I would welcome input from ACC on what would be most useful to members in FE and would help encourage and enable FE members to play a full part. This is partly because it is in FE – where branches are smaller and local bargaining has in practice taken over from national bargaining – that the grassroots organising approach favoured by McAlevey arguably has the greatest potential.