

Fractionals for Fair Play

Hourly-paid teaching assistants from SOAS

The 'Fractionals for Fair Play' campaign started off as an informal gathering between approx. 25 temporarily employed teaching assistants – or 'fractional' staff – around January 2014 at SOAS. While supporting the picket lines of permanent members of staff during UCU's national campaign for a pay rise, some of us had found out that we were not included in the official negotiations. The head of SOAS UCU told us that fractional contracts were not up for debate, as these had been negotiated a few years earlier.

We therefore met for the first time with the purpose of an open exchange about working conditions and contracts, pay and individual grievances. It established the need for further meetings, which have since been held on a weekly basis. Two issues became apparent: Firstly, discontent over low pay and high workload was broadly shared, while the range of demanded tasks differed between departments and from individual to individual. Secondly, the obviously un-transparent situation established the need for further investigation, ultimately leading to an online-based survey set up by students from the Economics department.

Contractual issues at stake

Out of the more than 300 teaching assistants the School employed in 2013/14, the survey got 94 replies. Briefly summarised, the survey that compared actual hours worked to contractually fixed hours showed that around 50 per cent of the actual work we do remains unpaid – for Senior Teaching Fellows, who also have to convene courses and give lectures, the rate can be as high as 75%. The remuneration system is divided into payment for the actual teaching and office hours, multiplied by a factor that encompasses tasks such as preparation, student contact and marking assignments. Our contracts have a duration of ten months or less and therefore do not oblige the School to make us permanent at any point (however, practically no one intends to do this job permanently, due to the horrible pay).

Means of communication and mobilisation

We first mobilised friends and colleagues in one department and reached out to other departments through personal contacts. We engaged a constantly growing group through the email accounts the School provides us, before we managed to get a full list of teaching assistants' emails from UCU. Now we use private emails for internal conversations, reserving the encompassing list of work emails for announcements and statements. We also have a regularly updated homepage, a Facebook group and a Twitter account. These electronic means are important to keep everyone in touch, as many cannot make it to the meetings on a regular basis. We have also used rallies in front of SOAS, posters, flyers, badges, T-Shirts and a few public meetings to reach

out to other fractionals and to mobilise support amongst students, permanent staff, admins and other workers at SOAS. Outside SOAS we have had people speaking at other universities, meetings of the UCU anti-casualisation campaign, the UCU Left and other initiatives.

Means of action – “wildcat” marking boycott and negotiations

By the end of February 2014 we had agreed to work to contract: no more office hours, no answers to student emails, no lecture attendance etc. For reason of legal protection all of us decided to join UCU at that point. About a week later we held a public meeting to present the survey results. It took as a few rounds of discussion to come up with concise demands afterwards – which we felt we needed after a short enthusiastic mobilisation period lacking clear direction. The demands for a change of the multiplier, separate payment for marking, an increase in office hours and plain time hours for preparation and an overall increase of the budget for fractional staff were presented in the form of a rather detailed proposal to management on March 27. On the day we presented the survey results we elected three representatives from our midst who would join the UCU Executive.

The parallel UCU campaign had scheduled a marking boycott to commence in late April 2014 – all our marking would have to be finished prior to that date. We felt that we could mobilise enough support to engage in an un-official marking boycott from late March onwards. The “March 27” proposal was therefore supplemented by a pledge signed by 101 fractionals to “engage in further action”. For legal reasons we never used the term “marking boycott”, but instead presented the action as a continuation of our rejection “to perform unpaid labour”, based on the argument that we had already worked way beyond the contractually paid hours throughout the term. Several Departments drafted support statements in the following, students set up a petition, we organised an international solidarity statement signed by ‘illustrious’ academics etc.

Before the official marking boycott of permanent members of staff would have commenced on April 28, UCU held a nation-wide electronic ballot that resulted in calling off the action. On the same day the ballot results were made public – tellingly May 1st... – the UCU negotiation team, consisting of three permanent members of staff and our three representatives (the “Strategy Group”) met with management for a beginning/continuation of negotiations. The School presented a plan to pay us for unpaid training days and to negotiate further if we called off our action and started marking assignments. Without consulting either the campaign or our three UCU representatives, the head of SOAS UCU issued an electronic ballot to all fractional staff on acceptance or rejection of the offer. We managed to mobilise an overwhelming rejection turnout. The feeling was that we could not let go of our only weapon of withholding the grades for the assignments, as later in the term we would have no other leverage at hand.

This event presented a first turning point in the campaign. First of all, internal solidarity of the campaign was put to the test, as we were threatened with 100% pay-docking. Secondly, the adversarial stance of the UCU leadership was now blatantly obvious. Thirdly, management was quick and clever to issue statements in which it presented the campaign as having called off negotiations, being unreasonable. As a consequence, FFFP faced increasing criticism from permanent members of staff, being branded as disruptive, radical etc. etc.

After the rejection of the initial offer, management made the proposal to use the governmental arbitration service ACAS to re-engage negotiations without us having to end our action and them losing face. We had a long sceptical debate on the issue, but ultimately decided to agree. What followed was a round of negotiations in which there was little progress – particularly because both the UCU leadership and management pretended that we had never submitted any concrete demands, despite our constant referral to the March 27 document. ACAS also meant that our three representatives got under immense pressure from UCU and management to agree on something in the negotiation room – while we as a campaign insisted that the decision had to be made in our general meeting. Effectively, ACAS drew the campaign's attention to formal negotiations and away from the movement-oriented organising we had done before.

By the end of May, our reps had been psychologically grinded down through negotiations and the campaign had lost much of its initial momentum. The approaching end of term meant that students needed their final grades, the threat of pay docking became increasingly real, solidarity by permanent members of staff had decreased etc. – and many of us were simply exhausted. An interim agreement was reached, giving us 150,000 pounds to be distributed in three instalments: the first if we agreed to do the marking, the second when another round of negotiations commenced, the third when negotiations ended in an agreement. This deal was hardly better than the one offered on May 1st, and most of us were reluctant to accept it. Considering, however, that most of us would leave the UK over the summer and that there was no support to be expected from UCU if we continued our action, we decided to accept.

Another month of negotiations followed and we received the first two instalments that we distributed amongst all fractional staff. The final offer that management presented us with on July 4th only suggested cosmetic changes, erasing the extreme disadvantages of teachers with few hours, but shifting the burden to those that taught more hours. In the indicative ballot we organised we got a desired 96% vote for rejection on a 63% turnout – we did therefore also not receive the last 50.000 pound instalment.

In an earlier motion passed through the SOAS UCU branch, we had committed UCU to issue a “failure to agree” statement in the case of collapsing negotiations, meaning that it would launch an official dispute over the fractional issue and ballot its members on taking industrial action after the summer break. In August the School announced that it would unilaterally

impose the rejected contracts for the year 2014/15. At the same time the head of HR personally intervened to prevent the re-hiring of our most active rep.

To date, the fractionals that teach this year are hired on the basis of the new contracts. SOAS UCU has not adhered to call for industrial actions over the fractionals issue – instead, the split between permanent and fractional members (and their supporters amongst permanent staff) is now out in the open. Our victimised rep is most likely not going to be reemployed, also due to the passivity of the UCU Executive that for personal and political reasons wanted to see him go anyway. He will most likely also not be able to legally function as our rep anymore then. The campaign has however taken off again with new members coming in. It has resumed its original movement-based form and is currently back to indirect action and mobilising, as well as liaising with other universities. As at present there is an official UCU marking boycott going on over the change of pension schemes, we will see how things unfold...

Strengths:

- The survey was an important tool to mobilise and to skip the stage of managerial denial of the problem, as we not only claimed but proved in numbers that A. pay and working conditions were shit, and B. this was not a minority problem. It also helped to convince permanent members of staff of the legitimacy of our cause.
- Initially the campaign was driven by people with experience on the radical left. However, the openness of the meetings; the considerable effort to keep professionalization limited; and particularly the (not un-contested) insistence that all issues have to be decided in the meetings have allowed a broad range of people to participate.
- In short: the movement-based character provided the necessary dynamism to keep people engaged, informed and politicised.

Problems/weaknesses:

- It took some time get the Trotskyist elements from withholding information and making secret arrangements to accepting that the decisions are made collectively in the meetings. Added by clashes between strong personalities we lost a few participants. However, with time we managed to build a relationship of trust.
- UCU corporatism. Because we usually have a majority in the UCU branch meetings, all our official motions were passed. But it was obvious that the UCU leadership tried to obstruct our work. Also, many of the important motions that obliged the union to take action were simply passed over in silence. Plus, our union leader is simply a corporatist reactionary.

- Getting caught up in bureaucratic procedures. We were seemingly torn between achieving no concrete gains or accepting negotiations through UCU channels and ACAS. I was against both UCU involvement and ACAS, but I think it would have been impossible to maintain the dynamic and support both internally and externally had we opted for a strategy of hoping for concessions without negotiations.
- Solidarity with permanent members of staff. In simple terms: as long as they could voice solidarity without doing anything or being affected by our actions, they were all supportive – but that withered away when it came to practical support.
- Insufficient coordination with other struggles at SOAS. We did not manage to bridge the gaps between the three parallel struggles at the university: cleaners, permanent staff, fractionals. Admittedly, the cleaners' and official UCU struggles were over while our campaign was still on-going – but even if they had continued, I have doubts that the results would have been better.
- Our contractual status. We can be easily dismissed and not rehired. Added by the fact that our contracts end in July and most of us leave for the break, we faced issues of continuing the struggle over the summer.