



## Struggle pays back!

# A victory against casualisation at London University

**Lorenza Monaco**

After more than three years of struggle, casual teaching staff from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of the University of London, organised in the Fractionals for Fair Play (FFFP) campaign, won an impressive victory against precarious working conditions and indecently low pay. The recently signed deal, which represents a significant improvement not only in terms of remuneration but also in the way it promises to overcome an identified mechanism of exploitation, marks a crucial step in the struggle against casualisation in British higher education. The campaign's latest outcome and the way it was organised may indeed provide inspiration for worldwide campaigns against the marketisation of universities and the deterioration of jobs which comes with it. Overall, this case shows how solidarity, collective action, and a consistent focus on struggle demands, even when challenged during dire times, can eventually win.

### 'Fractions' of a decent job

'Fractional' staff at SOAS are teaching staff employed on casual terms, on a 'fraction' of a full time academic job. They represent a significant portion of the School's teaching body, nearly matching the number of permanent staff in the largest departments. They generally assist course conveners by teaching seminars, marking written assignments, and preparing students for their exams. In some cases they also lecture. Usually, fractionals work on seven- to ten-month contracts, with an unpaid gap during summer months. Contracts are often rolled over for years, almost never leading to a permanent position. In the system of hourly paid teaching positions which is more and more common in UK universities, fractional staff are paid per contact hour, which is the time spent in the classroom multiplied by 2.5 or 3, according to their teaching grade. The multiplier is meant to cover the time spent on preparation, marking assignments, and assisting students outside the class. In practice, fractionals find themselves teaching large numbers of students and working almost full time, for monthly pay amounting to a few hundred pounds. In London, one of the world's most expensive cities, this is barely enough to cover half the rent on a room in shared accommodation.

Fractional contracts are mostly assigned to PhD students who need teaching experience to develop a career in academia. However, rather than simply offering an opportunity to gain teaching experience and enrich one's academic CV, fractional contracts often represent one of the only ways for unfunded PhD students to earn an income, given a generalised lack of scholarships for doctoral studies. By presenting such teaching positions as a form of training, the official narrative widely adopted by British academic institutions conceals an actual employment relationship with extremely casual terms.

### Breaking silence and isolation

In December 2013, a day of action organised by the SOAS University and College Union (UCU) within the national Fair Pay campaign provided an opportunity to break the isolation. A few fractionals, feeling the bitter contradictions of a working experience that widely differed from their expectations, met on the picket lines. As they spoke to each other, they realised that the sense of frustration they felt was not unique. Others were also feeling the humiliation of teaching in a world-class university and being committed to excellent students, but struggling to pay the rent. They also realised that very few academic colleagues and students were actually aware of their conditions. Even more worryingly, very few fractionals were aware that there was a union on campus.

In fact, the national Fair Pay campaign addressed colleagues on permanent contracts and had nothing to say about the most precarious members of teaching staff. They felt voiceless, invisible, lonely in their hectic lives combining multiple jobs to make ends meet. But this chance meeting at the picket lines, coupled with real frustration, pushed a movement together. Their willingness to speak was strengthened by the awareness that they could not win alone and had to unite to break the silence.

The SOAS FFFP campaign was launched in January 2014. It was based around the idea of demanding more than a simple wage increase: more than fair pay, a radical reconsideration of contracts in order to improve the precarious conditions of teachers employed on casual terms. The first step was understanding the actual source of the perceived exploitation. This entailed analysing contracts and collecting evidence about the lived experiences of fractionals. An extensive survey<sup>1</sup> revealed that the hours worked by the fractional teaching staff were between 49% and 58% higher than stipulated by contracts, that many fractionals were performing tasks not specified in their contracts, and that up to 50% of the staff employed on fractional contracts were earning less than £8.30 per hour if the extra hours were included, which is below the London Living Wage. The survey also revealed misspecification of contracts, delays in receiving contracts and payments, and frequent differences between contracts issued for similar posts. Building on the survey, FFFP formulated clear demands: payment for all hours worked, no work without a contract, and transparency and standardisation of contracts.

<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://fractionalsforfairplay.webs.com/survey-results>, accessed 4 August 2017.

## Inside and outside the union

Understanding exploitation and extracting political demands was a collective process, as much as designing a strategy to pursue them. Since 2014, FFFP has adopted different tactics, and gone through different phases. What proved successful was combining pressure tools built inside and outside the union.

Outside the union, FFFP grew as a collective space trying to keep an independent voice, counting on self-raised resources and performing a series of unofficial actions. As a campaign, FFFP managed to increase consensus, support the emergence of other anti-casualisation campaigns across UK universities, and build bridges.

In 2014, while committed to building internal consensus (making the School aware of the conditions of this layer of the workforce), FFFP also managed to gain external support. More than 220 academics around the world, including Noam Chomsky and David Harvey, signed a solidarity statement. In the same period, FFFP contributed to launching a national campaign, Fighting Against Casualisation in Education (FACE)<sup>2</sup>, which is now present in many British universities. FFFP also took action outside the official union scope. Besides launching repeated calls to work to contract – that is, for fractionals to stick to hours and tasks specified in their contracts - FFFP also engaged in two wildcat strikes. In 2014 and 2017, fractionals refused to perform unpaid labour. They abstained from marking written assignments and withheld grades. During examination periods, this undoubtedly had a significant impact, considering the anxieties and expectations of both students and course conveners. Ultimately, the success of these relatively risky actions was largely thanks to the solidarity of sympathetic students and permanent colleagues.

However FFFP also built a connection with the academic union operating on campus, UCU. It managed to shift from one to three fractional reps on the union executive committee. Through the union, it was able to engage in official negotiations with management. FFFP contributed to a substantial increase in UCU membership, with an additional 25% of casual members subscribing in 2014 alone.

Through the union, three rounds of negotiations took place. Two led to small improvements (paid training, increasing office hours, a first compensation of £100,000 for fractionals teaching in 2013/14, and paid lecture attendance for those teaching for the first time). The third produced a decisive victory. The deal signed in May 2017 includes a formula to pay for marking, previously identified as making up the bulk of hours worked for free. This not only represents a substantial increase in pay, but a significant acknowledgment by the School of the extensive unpaid labour denounced by FFFP.

FFFP overcame a variety of obstacles. It had to overcome the difficulty of creating a space for politics within the lives of individuals experiencing a very precarious existence and already strained living conditions. It had to build a political subject from scratch, and a shared understanding of the mechanisms of its

exploitation. It faced managerial attacks, a case of explicit victimisation, and periods of fatigue and declining support. But it managed to stay alive and not lose sight of its demands and objectives, until a meaningful victory was finally achieved.

In the end, this is a happy story, a story that teaches how struggle pays back, that inspired and could encourage other anti-casualisation campaigns. It is a story that can prompt reflections on the potential of unofficial action, on the need for unions to engage with casualisation issues, and on the possible combination of union and non-union spaces. While the global anti-casualisation struggle goes on, there are undoubtedly inspiring examples we can draw from.

For more information on the FFFP campaign, you can look at their website, <http://fractionalsforfairplay.webs.com/> and follow their [facebook](https://www.facebook.com/SOASFractionalsForFairPlay/) [page](https://www.facebook.com/SOASFractionalsForFairPlay/) <https://www.facebook.com/SOASFractionalsForFairPlay/> and read <https://rs21.org.uk/2014/03/11/campaign-launched-against-casualised-conditions-for-teaching-staff-at-soas/>; [https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/were-worth-more-casual-teaching-staff-fight-back](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/were-worth-more-casual-teaching-staff-fight-back;); <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/soas-fractionals-reject-final-offer-of-improved-terms/2015570.article>; <http://www.counterfire.org/articles/opinion/18950-if-you-fight-you-can-win-victory-for-fractional-staff-at-soas>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://fightingcasualisation.org/>. Accessed 5 August 2017



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