

UMUCU Hustings 29 Jan 2021 – Sam Morecroft

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Questions Raised in Chat That We Didn't Cover

I would like to hear what their approach would be in assisting the international (migrant) staff on casualized contracts?

This is a really good question – first of all, I think there is a need for joint work between the anti-casualisation committee and the new international/migrant staff committee to bring together our expertise and identify the problems that exist.

Fixed term contracts in particular are horrendously stressful for migrant workers because every time a contract ends they need to go through the visa process again, even if they have more work lined up. Fighting for minimum contract lengths as part of demanding national employment standards would make a big difference here – the very least we can do is demand the scrapping of one year contracts and insist that all contracts are a minimum of two years in length. We also need to initiate campaigns to pro-actively demand that open ended permanent contracts are the norm and that staff engaged on a series of fixed term contracts are transferred to open ended contracts. There is existing legislation that can help with this but often we tend to assume employers will follow the law and make people permanent after four years service – employers don't follow the law unless we force them to!

Ultimately though the key fight is against the Hostile Environment policy and the draconian nature of immigration law and policing in the UK. This is about more than a workplace issue and it requires a radical transformation of society. That's why I want UCU to develop a political as well as an industrial strategy and be part of addressing the crisis of working class political representation. We know that the Tories and Labour (at least under Starmer) will never get rid of the hostile environment and we have a duty to be part of building something different.

It is significant to me that UCU won a huge victory against Tier 4 visa restrictions through our strike action, which highlighted that those on Tier 4 visas are effectively denied the right to strike and led to the scrapping of rules which said that anyone who goes on strike for more than 20 days in a year would lose their visa. Struggle generally gets results – we have to be prepared to withdraw our labour in defence of members threatened with deportation if necessary.

If time I would like to hear from the candidates about how they plan to encourage permanent staff engaged in anti-casualization work, rather than treating it as someone else's problem

The approach I have always used when talking to permanent staff is to explain that the more widespread casualisation becomes, the bigger the negative impact on them. If our union doesn't support casualised members and win concrete improvements in their terms and conditions, then those members won't stay in the union. And if you have large numbers of non-unionised casualised staff, effective industrial action becomes impossible, which means that ultimately collective bargaining becomes meaningless, because you can't negotiate if you don't have leverage to back it up.

It frustrates me sometimes when I hear this issue discussed in purely moral terms. Yes, we can certainly say that morally, permanent staff should engage with anti-casualisation campaigns, but moralising with people rarely builds the level of support you need. Instead we need to explain to members that we all suffer if casualisation goes unchallenged. In many universities now, permanent staff are struggling under higher workloads because casualised staff have lost their jobs. That for me encapsulates how we all suffer if we don't organise to fight for job security.

2 questions for the candidates - can you please outline 3 concrete wins you have secured for casualised workers within a UCU role?

2nd question - the recent round of industrial action failed to secure any significant concessions for casualised staff. What went wrong in terms of the national strategy and how would you change it in the future?

1. I campaigned against, negotiated and won a university wide ban on casual worker agreements. I can't take all the credit for that though, I might have got us over the line but I and others involved were building on over a decade of work.

2. I campaigned for and won backdated marking pay for hourly paid staff in several different departments.

3. I was involved in a successful campaign to extend recognition and gain collective bargaining rights for student support staff, many of whom were on insecure and fixed term contracts

In terms of the Four Fights dispute, I think we did get one significant concession out of it – the employers association agreed to engage with us on casualisation, workload and the gender and race pay gaps. However, that was largely because of the determination of members – the strategy itself was back of a fag packet stuff drawn up at the last minute. We took 5 days of action and then gave employers a month to regroup and to pressurise our members into making up for lost work days. Had the strike been more carefully planned, we could have exerted a lot more leverage given the numbers of members out and the number of days we were on strike.

We have to be prepared to target industrial action to hit the employers at the periods when they are most vulnerable – for example in Intro/Freshers weeks or during assessment periods. One of the most important roles a national leadership should play is to develop a perspective and strategy for strike action that maximises disruption and the shut down of workplaces. This would have helped a lot with morale on picket lines too, and with building support. Most people are far less reluctant to strike and lose pay when they can see a clear plan to win.

We shouldn't forget either that we effectively abandoned the dispute at the start of the pandemic. The leadership even cancelled some strike days! We could have told employers that we wouldn't move teaching online until they met our demands and even run an online 'ballot' of members to continue the dispute given that we were told it was not possible to ballot postally. It was one of the best opportunities we will ever have to build support for challenging the anti-union laws.