Education Worker #8

Bulletin of the Education Workers' Network - Solidarity Federation

Free/Donation

Special Higher education Issue



Cut THIS!!!

Cuts in public services? Here's one cut which needs your urgent support.

The fact that Labour has been systematically attacking workers' pay and jobs while encouraging top bosses (including themselves) to take obscene pay rises is not news – they have after all been doing it since 1997. The fact that they have imposed widespread cuts across the Higher Education sector while lying and generally trying to conceal the truth is also very much yesterday's news and every day's harsh reality.

Budget spins, Government hacks and the bad news just keeps on leaking out under cover of terrorism and the carpet bombing of the poorest most defenceless people on earth. Meanwhile, the problem of low pay within the University sector just goes from bad to worse. Manual workers at Universities are expected to live on levels of pay that would make a Victorian mill owner blush. This year's pay rise with it's £560 lump sum aimed at alleviating the problem of low pay, was nothing short of a joke. For instance, a Manual grade one worker saw their pay increase from £8493 to a massive £9053 per year, giving a take-home of around £140 per week. Given that the pay rise covered a period of 18 months, the pay rise works out at £7 per week. Matters are made worse by the fact many low paid workers within university are part time, mainly women, who take home as little as £80 for a twenty hour week - poverty pay by any standards.

We have of course heard much talk and buckets of crocodile tears from vice chancellors and alike about the need to end the problem of low pay in Universities. No one should be fooled by such talk. The reality is that these people care very little about the interests of low paid workers. For proof, look no further than wages, conditions and above all else, their attitudes. Universities must rank as one of the most hierarchical sectors within British industry. The attitude shown towards manual workers is at best patronizing and at worst insulting. We are an invisible workforce within Universities, expected to quietly go about doing all the dirty, boring work for a pittance; constantly under the threat of privatisation.

Things need not be this way. Low paid workers have gained the confidence to confront management and now is the time to do it again. Such confidence will only come through collective organization. We can come together to discuss our mutual problems and begin to set our own agenda, instead of merely reacting to what management dictates. We need to reach out to each other across union lines. Currently, workers within Universities are isolated and compartmentalized within their department. The way unions are currently organised does nothing to break down these divisions.

There is a crying need for us to unite against the ongoing onslaught on state education. Education Worker is set up to help us do this, without support from bosses, politicians or party builders. We as education workers have our agenda – they have theirs. Let us get on with getting the one big cut we need in Higher Education – the cut in low pay.

Education Worker is produced by the Education Workers' Network, part of the Solidarity Federation.
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Private(tised) Education

The Univeristy Council of University of Sheffield has approved the appointment of Unite PLC, "who have shown best value", for the "operation and development of student accommodation". Among the reasons given for approval by University Council are the following: "the transfer of employment to Unite" "The improvement in the efficiency of the University's operation and facilities management..." "The creation of real reserves for the University" "The improvement of the University's balance sheet" "Sympathetic treatment of staff in all outcomes" ...sympathetic? "transfer risk associated with student demand; "generate a financial payment for the business" "Transfer to the preferred bidder of the risks associated with meeting the long-term future demand for residential accommodation" So student accommodation (that is accommodation largely for 18 year olds living on their own for the first time) is top be run to improve the balance sheet – that is to make money – rather than to provide a reasonably priced and relatively secure place for students to live. Over the Pennines at Salford the nursery has been privatised, via an extended and ridiculous process by which the in house Nursery staff were encouraged to bid for their own jobs. If the rumours are true this was only after the in house staff had initially been asked to detail the day to day (hour by hour) minimum standards required for nursery provision which was then used by management to form the basis of the what outsiders where asked to bid to. Next in line its catering, or is it accommodation. Through out the university sector managers are looking at flogging off services. Those in what may seem key academic posts should not rest too easy thinking its not going to affect them, you just have to look at the further education colleges where vast amounts of teaching is not only provided by staff on temporary (often hourly) contracts, these staff are employed by specialist recruitment agencies. They are no longer seen by managers as part of an educational institution, they are units hired in on mass to deliver a service and forgotten about.

Why privatise, well from the manager's point of view it means a lot of the messy bits of having to deal with low paid manual workers can be passed on to a third party. If terms and conditions plummet, temporary contracts increase, health and safety gets overlooked its not their problem. If demand for services goes down, it's not them that is laying off staff is it?

Minding' the Gap

A huge disparity between men's and women's wages continues to be the rule rather than the exception in the HE sector. Almost three decades after the Sex Discrimination Act (1975), the very Universities that hosted campaigns for sexual equality continue to discriminate against their female employees by routinely paying them less than men doing the same or equivalent work.

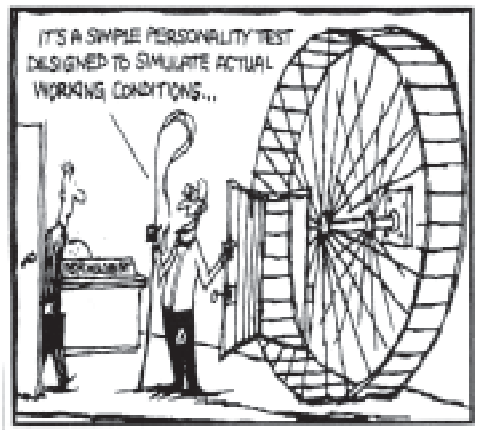
Pay gaps between male and female academics, according to the latest Natfhe figures, run at as much as 14%, with women who stay in the profession longer getting the worst deals. Deliberately obscure pay systems, varied rates of pay at appointment, discriminatory 'promotions' schemes and holding women in lower-paid service-teaching and pastoral roles, all militate against equal pay. Judging by latest research data, and anecdotal evidence, whilst the reasons for the pay gap vary in their particulars, they can all be summed up in one way; blatant sexual discrimination.

The Universities have known of the problem of the pay gap for some years and have simply ignored it. In spite of the popular notion of HE as the over-earnest bastion of Equal Opps and 'political correctness' the present evidence of sexual discrimination in the Universities contradicts this notion. As the Universities have turned, in the last decade, towards the cut-throat ethics of running a business and making a profit, the principles that fuelled the protests of the sixties and seventies, and the Equal Opportunities drive of the eighties have dissolved entirely. Arguably, the rhetoric of sexual equality so loudly vaunted in the sector in the late sixties were never really any more than that; now there is no longer even the pretence of them.

Just as the various causes of the academic pay gap are down to a variety of sharp practices, so the failure of challenges to it are not merely the result of an employer refusing to play ball: a large part of the problem resides within attitudes found in the HE unions. Dr. Lorna Chessum, paid £6,000 less than a male colleague doing an equivalent job with equivalent qualifications, had a clear case against her employer, De Montfort University. However, Dr. Chessum, like so many female academics, found it difficult to get her union to support her. Grassroots evidence shows that, although the unions make the appropriate noises and fund research into the gender pay gap, they are rather more reticent in supporting women in equal pay claims, even when the evidence points to glaring and blatant discrimination. In my own case, strikingly similar to Dr. Chessum's, officers in my Natfhe branch took the position that, to pursue a case on the grounds of equal pay for equal work would effectively undermine the principle of annual increments. This approach was particularly surprising, given that I had been appointed at the same time as the male colleague with whom I was making comparison. When I persisted in my attempts to win union support, (in spite, it has to be said, of active discouragement), my union rep confided that that the initial resistance was to test my resolve in pursuing the case.

This curious method for 'supporting' female colleagues is reminiscent of the hard-line interviews that rape victims once routinely had to face at the hands of police who were 'testing' their word and seeing if they would hold up in a witness box. Hardly the appropriate tack for a union that claims to be championing the cause of sexual equality.

Universities UK, which represents University Heads, claims to be working with government, vice-chancellors and HE Unions in order to modernise pay structures. With a government leeching money away from the sector, business-driven Universities keen to hold onto their diminishing funds and unions which have managers as union reps, and who continue to shore up the privileges of some of their members at the expense of others, action to close the pay gap seems the least likely outcome. In fact, you may have to watch this space for a very long time.



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50% Magic? 100% Spun

The recent much vaunted U-turn on fees is hardly such a thing … Basically, according to Estelle Morris, the Government think too much of the higher education budget is spent on student support.

As Government obsesses with getting 50% of 18-30 year olds in to HE[1] it eventually got into their minds that up front fees were putting off people, especially working class students who they need to get in to get the magic 50%. So Tony and Gordon announce its time to abolish fees (important that Gordon was on side otherwise leaks would abound embarrassing Tony), then the minor figures such as Estelle get to fill in the blanks. Basically whilst adding a few "Opportunity Bursaries", and we mean a very few, students will still be expected to pay for their educational experience, but just not up front. In exchange for this generosity the slightly less expensive cost of student loan interest could be on the way out as will any idea of a standard fee (though not they won't be called fees anymore). Top up fees? Not over Blunkett's dead body, but he's gone to great plaudits for not legalising cannabis and for banging up innocent people and the grounds they are foreign (but at least they won't need vouchers). The Russell Group universities still want to charge as much as they can get away with, the think tanks think they are a wonderful idea and the awkwardness of that name 'fees' has gone by proclamation - super.

The present government has been doing one thing for education; keeping us all up to date in changes in the use of the English language:

Excellence (as in Cities and Challenge) = trying to paper over the chasms created by years of neglect and abuse. Everyone is excellent, except the people who totally fail and we don't ever, ever talk about them

Opportunity (as in Bursary) = a pittance available to a very few of those who fit the criteria which goes a small way to make up for the fact you are poor anyway and we have taken away your benefits, grants, housing allowance etc.

Bursary (as in Opportunity) = a grant, but smaller and available to far fewer people

Education, (as in Education, Education) = do a bit of window dressing, change the colour scheme and centralise, centralise, centralise

Foundation (as in degree) = 1. a strange constructed beast of indeterminate origin, design and destination (thought to be a Trojan Horse aimed at getting to the magic 50%) not a foundation (nor actually a degree). 2. An ill thought idea rushed through with no sign consultation or thought aimed at a specific purpose never officially admitted to.

Degree (as in Foundation) = something that is not what it is called, but which uses the name as a method of attracting some vague interest from potential students and employers.

Funnily enough, terms that don't pop up are casualisation, privatisation and poverty pay. Manual workers in Universities are now some of the lowest paid workers in the country working long shifts for measly hourly rates and appalling conditions. How many bosses out there would be willing to accept contracts offering them all of twelve days leave? Then again if they kick up a fuss they can always be privatised off to the lowest bidder. Meanwhile a quarter of the 400,000 staff employed in HE are employed on a temporary basis 21% on fixed term contracts - 11% of all fixed term contracts in the UK, higher than any other industry. 42% of academic staff are on fixed term contracts, including 73% of all new appointments in 1999/2000. Its not just new workers, 70% on fixed term contracts are over 30, the majority were previously on a fixed term contract. Whilst it is increasingly common amongst all grades of staff only 6% of contract research staff are not on temporary contracts. An appalling 94% contract researchers are on temporary contract; 45% have been on them for between 3 and 10 years and 12% for over 10 years. This cannot be blamed on the lack of money in higher education, the sector has had massive increases in levels of work with nothing even in the same scale in terms of changes in funding, but the problem is management short termism, incompetence and disregard for workers. Decentralised budgets means petty feuds between different departments chasing tiny amounts of money, penalties for over spending mean that long term commitments are avoided and employees suffer. The next stage in casualisation is privatisation. Don't think it can't happen to teaching staff, just look at FE colleges where vast numbers of teaching staff have been effectively sacked and re-employed through agencies on diminished conditions.

We know we don't live in an ideal world, but unlike the some unions (hello AUT) we don't think that is an excuse for not organising and fighting for decent terms and conditions for all education workers. There is no point in sitting waiting for promised government legislation with it attendant loop holes, university management can with a bit of foresight and do away with low pay, inequalities in pay and casualisation with the resources it has now. It is up to those of us working in education, across the campus, regardless of official union affiliation, to work to force them to do this. After all it's our lives we are talking about.

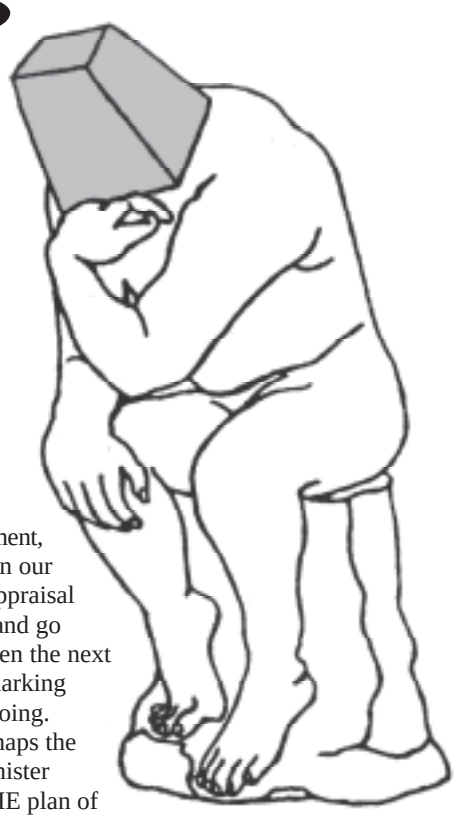
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NATFHE's New Knowledge



Recently, NATFHE has been spending a lot of members money on research and, in so doing, they have established some amazing facts.

Firstly, it would cost relatively very little to end the obvious pay discrimination for HE staff. Secondly, a year-long study led by NATFHE has found out that "while part-time lecturers are an integral and valuable resource for higher education, they do not get access to the facilities, training and development opportunities that they need". Wow. And to find this out they had to spend a year doing questionnaires and institutional, departmental and individual interviews at three HE institutions. Er, why not just look around you? (Unless that is, you are not a part time lecturer but on such a cushy number you have forgotten what a real lecturer's job is like).

In detail, the cost of equalising pay for equal work across genders for full time staff in universities would add only 2.3% to the total pay bill. Apparently, the main reason why women earn, on average, 16% less than men is because universities are not promoting women to higher grades, rather than because of local labour market conditions as universities have claimed. Furthermore, national pay scales can help to reduce discrimination, whereas local pay decisions and fixed term contracts make it worse. Hence, we must at all costs resist the efforts of those right wing/New Labour Chancellors who would like nothing more than to smash all national pay and conditions agreements.

However, the single biggest pay gap within the lecturer job market is between the have's and the have not's (proper contract, that is). Hourly paid work is still rife at many places, with the move towards at least reasonable fractional contract conditions painfully slow or at a standstill. Proof, if it were needed, of New Labour's complete lack of commitment to HE staff. The most that is likely to happen is that we all get sick of the constant spinning from the government, vomit on our Staff Appraisal forms, and go sick when the next lot of marking needs doing.

Perhaps the most sinister NATFHE plan of late is their decision to participate in job evaluation trials. HERA (Higher Education Role Analysis) is a job evaluation scheme developed by and for HE employers. The clear implications were there – not least a move towards formalising a 'reward' system – and it is not the carrots we are all worried about. In the past, NATFHE boycotted the HERA pilots in 1997 and 1998, and to date HERA has not yet been fully implemented in any UK institution, although a number have piloted the scheme for non academic staff. Now, however, NATFHE has agreed to participating in a revision of HERA, fresh trials and…training and facilities to enable trade union representatives to familiarise themselves with data collection and analysis.

Meanwhile, at Edge Hill College, part time hourly staff preparing teaching for the new year were told at the last minute that they had been secretly made redundant in June, when their last teaching ended last academic year. Consequently, their last day of employment was in June, and the three month period during they can apply a for redundancy settlement passed without their even knowing that their post had been made redundant. We must at all costs resist the efforts of those right wing/New Labour bosses who like nothing more than to treat us like dirt. Déjà vu?

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