

The university casualisation crisis must end

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Fourteen years ago, while I was studying law as an undergraduate, I worked at Sports Direct in order to make ends meet. It was precarious and thankless work, but I just about earned the minimum wage. Today, I am an associate lecturer at the University of Northampton, and my pay and job security hasn't gotten any better - if anything, the situation is worse.

Despite working in education for over a decade and having been at Northampton for four years, I am still employed on a zero hours contract, just as I was at that notorious sports retail giant.

There are many indignities and difficult things associated with being precariously employed like this, but perhaps worst of all is the denial of basic protections meaning that even life's greatest joys can be turned into further reminders of the miseries of casualisation.

The starkest example of this is that when I was pregnant and then gave birth to a baby boy last year, sporadic work continued to dominate my life. Why? My employment conditions mean that I have no contractual entitlement to paid maternity leave. In order to pay the bills, I had to return to work whilst my son was just six weeks old.

I am only offered work between the months of October and February, so I have to take as

many hours as possible in this period in order to get by for the rest of the year. Having become a mother in August, then, I had no choice but to accept hours with just one week's notice.

Supposedly, I am paid to teach - something I love. But it is hard to sustain passion and enthusiasm for a vocation when your time is parcelled up and your work life degraded by the whims of your employer.

Impossible

When the time taken by all the extra-contractual tasks - meeting students, pastoral care, various forms of admin, and jumping through endless bureaucratic hoops - I am expected to perform is tallied up, my pay comes in significantly below the minimum wage. And finding out my timetable the week before, of course, makes it impossible to plan childcare and family life.

Precariously employed teaching academic staff are also denied any opportunities to advance to more secure roles with paid research time. Often, we don't even have access to professional development services from our employers, meaning career progression just isn't a possibility. Needless to say, all this takes a huge toll, mentally and physically.

Sadly, my experience is far from unique. On the contrary, it's ever

more emblematic of a sector in which low pay and precarity are increasingly the norm for hard-working staff, while managers continue to enjoy eye-watering salaries and splash tens of millions on vanity projects.

At the University of Northampton alone, 25 per cent of all academic staff are, like me, on hourly paid and zero hours contracts, while the vice chancellor enjoys annual remuneration of £256,000. Across the sector, more than 100,000 staff are on some form of fixed term, precarious contract.

Universities are often depicted as privileged spaces, insulated from the pressures of wider society. And in some ways they are. But as I have sharply felt, the experience of workers who keep higher education running is often just as insecure and poorly paid as in sectors of the gig economy.

That's why, despite really struggling to afford it, I'm on strike. Standing on the picket lines in Northampton is part of the struggle for a future of secure, well-paid and dignified work not only in universities but across society.

