

Who will survive the university?

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We write as organisers of #CoronaContract, a campaign we co-founded shortly after the UK's first COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, demanding a two-year contract extension for all casualised university staff (academic and non-academic). In the early days of COVID-19, when previously unthinkable forms of economic rescue took place, this demand functioned as a 'transitional demand' in the sense both Leon Trotsky and Slavoj Žižek have elaborated: a 'reasonable' goal that workers can agree on, yet which is unlikely to be accommodated by the existing constraints of the situation, pointing towards structural flaws around which a transformative movement can be built.

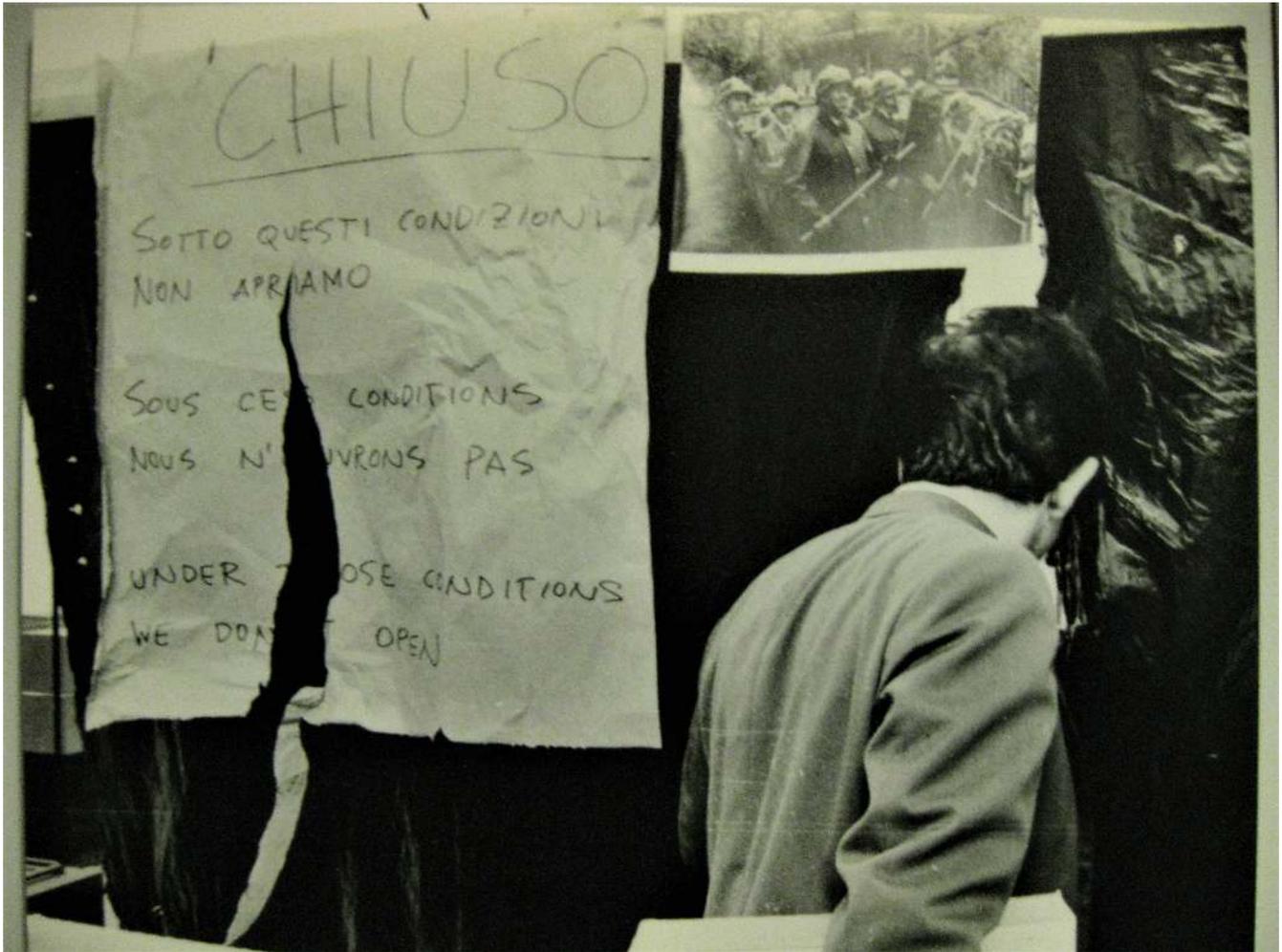
#CoronaContract emerged under particular circumstances. As COVID-19 hit the UK, we were on the picket lines for the University and College Union (UCU)'s second period of national strike action in higher education over casualisation, inequality, cuts to pensions, and workloads during the 2019-20 academic year. In response to the pandemic, the leadership of our union looked to make gestures of goodwill towards management: calling us off the picket line without proposing a viable alternative and essentially abandoning action short of a strike ('ASOS', or working to contract). While the argument of UCU leaders was that we needed to shore up universities in an 'unprecedented crisis', our own sense was that staff as a whole needed to seize this opportunity to show management that they depend on us to function and to refuse the additional labour involved in transitioning to online working as a bargaining tool. That we didn't do this has emboldened universities to impose more punitive conditions on staff, and to press for redundancies at unprecedented rates.

While the general mood shifted towards collective sacrifice, which many staff presumed would be recognised by their university management, we and other casualised staff, acutely aware of our employment's 'ticking clock', turned in the opposite direction, launching

campaigns and mass online meetings to take action, strategise and share tactics immediately while the national union and many local branches were unwilling to meet. This led to a successful vote to carry on our official dispute with our employers (despite resistance from conservative forces in our union), giving us the basis to reballoon for further industrial action. UCU also eventually launched a jobs campaign which, although belated and focused on parliamentary lobbying, was spurred by casualised staff's momentum from below. Perhaps most significantly, two-year minimum contracts were incorporated into our national negotiators' pay claim, meaning that #CoronaContract's 'transitional demand' on casualisation has now become official union policy.

This demand was not without its critics. For example, during our union's last leadership election, anti-casualisation candidate Ben Pope and others opposed the demand for minimum contract lengths, proposing instead that employers offer casualised staff 'internships' and 'fellowships' that will assist in our 'professional development', in keeping with a portrayal of union members as 'educational professionals'.¹ Yet, for reasons that we set out below, we do not believe we can afford to put our hopes in technocratic visions of 'progress' that ultimately hinge on maintaining or securing professional status.

UCU estimates that between 25-30% of teaching in universities is done by casualised staff, while around 70% of researchers in the sector are casualised.² However, the economic structure which has introduced this 'flexible' labour force represents a dynamic that affects all university workers, precarious and 'permanent' alike (the latter of whose work conditions have become notably less secure in the UK due to the removal of protections against redundancy). In what follows, we want to consider how, in this context, university professionals experience tensions around demands stemming from contradictory class interests, and to raise a question – already posed more



generally during the Corbyn project – about the role of ‘professionals’ in bringing about political and economic change for the working class as a whole.

Are we professionals?

While universities also employ workers in ‘traditional’ working class occupations (such as cleaners and catering staff), by far the largest layer of university staff is ‘professional’ academic and academic-related staff.³ Although these have historically been drawn from the privileged elite, recent years have seen some degree of demographic change and diversification, concomitant with deteriorating working conditions. Unsurprisingly, the most insecure staff are more likely to be female and non-white.⁴

When Barbara and John Ehrenreich first coined the term ‘professional-managerial class’ in the journal *Radical America* in 1977, it was meant to encompass precisely these workers in the professions.⁵ The ‘PMC’, the Ehrenreichs wrote, consisted of:

salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production, and whose major function in the social division of labour may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations ... scientists, engineers, teachers, social workers, writers, accountants, lower- and middle-level managers and administrators, etc.⁶

The Ehrenreichs’ analysis was particularly concentrated on the university setting, to account for the cultural differences between student radicals and the traditional working class. These radicals were ‘professionals in training’, who, while exposed to capitalist greed and irrationality, in their potential future roles as rationalisers and managers of capitalist systems simultaneously had an interest in suppressing the working class. The Ehrenreichs mapped out two paths for those who wanted to escape this destiny: either actively working against their own class background through joining the new Communist parties and disavowing their PMC origins, or becoming ‘radicals in the professions’ whose attempts to popularise

and politicise (to say nothing of ‘proletarianise’) their white-collar work largely failed despite their best efforts.

The idea of the PMC as a separate class was, and remains, controversial. Debates around the term have re-emerged on the left today in relation to growing militancy among members of the professions, such as nurses, journalists, tech workers and teachers, alongside a renewed scepticism about how professional status conditions workers ideologically and differentiates them from those who are most exploited.⁷ These debates re-pose the question of whether these workers compose a separate class or are in essence still part of the expropriated working class in the traditional Marxist two-tier system. The most compelling analysis in our view is that the PMC is not a full class in itself but a contradictory ‘class fraction’, composed of simultaneous yet divergent imperatives which divide members between the interests of labour and capital.⁸ Groupings within the PMC, therefore, can take positions that align with bourgeois or working-class interests. One recent example in this vein is the battle over returns to in-person work in the Chicago Public Schools system, where teachers’ refusals of unsafe working conditions were most forcefully opposed by other professionals working from home.

While most university workers form part of this contradictory grouping, conflicts deriving from differences within this group can create tensions in terms of formulating demands and priorities, and can introduce intra-group battles between the interests of labourers and reactionary positions that support the interests of capital. In addition, the potential for some members of this group to slip out of the professions entirely – to not obtain or retain positions as ‘salaried mental workers’ – must be included as part of the progression of downward mobility. One provocative argument, for instance, suggests that university labour functions as a two-tier system: secure staff with managerial roles vs. all insecure staff, including staff in ‘professional’ roles alongside e.g. cleaners and maintenance workers (so emphasising solidarity between these groups). Nevertheless, the likelihood that unemployed professional workers will find other work within the professions – and the persistence of a layer of elites who hold university jobs while not needing to make a living from them – suggests that an emphasis on shared precarity in university work has its limits.

Moreover, while university workers experience

widening precarity across a range of uneven axes, it is not inevitable that these workers will become more radical or allied with working-class movements. Those who can afford to continue working in the sector may cling on to whatever vestiges of professional status remain available, perhaps buttressed by pre-existing privilege/wealth. The worse these conditions get, the more relevant the analysis of workers’ contradictory positioning becomes.

Paid in pleasure

The conditions of casualised work in the sector (which both precarious and permanent staff increasingly experience) impact us psychologically, and this in turn affects our ability to collectively organise. On the one hand, we enjoy a high degree of autonomy and pleasure in our labour compared to most other forms of work, but we are downwardly mobile, insecurely employed, and undergoing deskilling (for example through the division of research and teaching). Consequently, and in keeping with larger trends under neoliberalism and the gig economy, we must spend a large amount of time marketing ourselves, managing our own social reproduction along the lines of the market, and competing with a reserve army of labour (including our own students, on whom universities are currently capitalising to further erode our pay, such as by getting undergraduates to do our administrative work during online seminars for free as ‘virtual assistants’). These processes of self-management are all supposedly voluntary, which has pernicious effects on our sense of freedom, agency, (professional) identity, and intellectual life.

Accordingly, we find ourselves both driven to narcissism in order to self-promote and make ourselves employable (witness the dramatic rise in ‘academic Twitter’), and inhibited in our ability to work, ridden with guilt and anxiety. We convince ourselves that our excessive working hours are either a result of personal insufficiency/inexpediency, or in service of personal development and therefore uncompensatable. Our actual vulnerability as workers on the market receives its inverse mirror image in superegoic fantasies of mastery and self-sufficiency, which inhibit our participation in egalitarian exchange. As Aimie Purser writes for the Nottingham UCU Mental Health campaign group, ‘I (and my PhD) only have meaning inside the system. And inside that intensely

demanding relationship, we are constantly told that however much we give of ourselves ... we are not enough'.⁹ Moreover, the persecutory nature of capitalism inhibits our efficiency as we attempt to 'steal our time back' from the university, sometimes unconsciously and in a self-defeating way. Perhaps procrastination and writer's block (to say nothing of the more serious mental health crises and even suicides in the sector) are so endemic in part because, in the absence of a militant left, they are a form of protest towards the Other of capitalist time, redirected towards the self.

The university provides us with wages and to some extent with the fixed capital necessary to produce research outputs, degrees and services. While there is some mystification here, it is also true that we require facilities and accreditation to perform much of this work. Nevertheless, there is another side to our labour, our autonomous intellectual activity, which is not inherently confined to or dependent on the employer to operate. We lose sight of this when we understand our activity as something the university *gives us*, or makes possible, through its training, verification processes, library access, academic community, and most crucially, the university brand, rather than viewing our labour as something the university *purchases from us* for its own ends, and as power which we might be able to retain outside of its walls (for example, in public 'strike universities').

It is sometimes said that the enjoyable and enviable part of being an academic is that our work is not fully alienated. But it is precisely this promise of utopian unalienated labour within the traditional wage relation that prevents us from sufficiently opposing our employers, instead harbouring the fantasy that we are getting something uncompensatable out of the extra time worked, or that we should wait for a secure and rewarding job, when our time will be valued finally as full-time. The latter is, in Lacanian terms, an expression of obsessional neurosis wherein, rather than confronting the reality of our lack and charting our own path accordingly, we insist on the illusion that somebody *else* possesses wholeness (perhaps a senior permanent academic) and, stultified, hope for their death.¹⁰

For connected reasons, we also see the current debate over online education as really about the issue of compensation and recognition, rather than pedagogy. Arguments which raise the value of face-to-face teaching

are terrorised by the potential of automation to intervene in the market value of the university and the role of the instructor as someone who artisanally sells his or her educational labour. We could alternately view automation as a labour-saving process with immense liberatory and pedagogical potential, from which we are barred under capitalism because it would also make our drudgery, and therefore us, obsolete. The reactionary but understandable impulse therefore emerges to protect even archaic forms of work as long as it preserves our jobs.

We should be suspicious of the pleasure we receive from our work, given that the university offers it instead of payment (even if this pleasure also points towards the potential of a socialist society where we may enjoy the free sharing of knowledge without worrying about payment). Thus while we are being paid in pleasure, we should firmly demand that we are paid for our hours.

Contradictory realignment

Despite all of these inhibiting dynamics, casualised staff have been at the forefront of recent university struggles internationally, in many cases in a dual capacity as post-graduate student teachers.¹¹ The two main features of our work that disempower and impoverish us – disposability and quantified time – also encourage our militant perspective. Universities are particularly dependent on us as among the most exploited workers relative to the value we produce, and this means we have the potential to be extremely disruptive if we act collectively.

First, if we withdraw our labour *en masse* this will have an immediate and decisive impact, since the number of hours we are contracted to work is flagrantly and systematically under-estimated (and this even before management used the pandemic to enforce massive increases in uncompensated workload). Some of the more dramatic and successful forms of industrial action have involved forms of working to contract or ASOS, led by casualised staff refusing to work beyond the meagre hours they are contracted for.¹² When casualised staff refuse marking in particular, as in recent boycotts, an entire course can collapse. As universities further stretch workloads and slash staffing budgets, this need for staff to plug the gaps will only increase. Second, as a disposable workforce, we are particularly sensitive to how shifts in the global economy directly affect our working condi-

tions and future, because we are constantly on the labour market. Our awareness of how radically our lives could be reshaped even by modest improvements, and how little we have to lose, means that we can be determined fighters for our demands.

However, we also see a professional discourse emerging in our union, and in the broader political sphere, which no doubt resonates with what many workers believe. The idea is that we can come up with more rational management solutions, and that 'smart policy' is the solution to our economic problems. Inherent in these proposals is the idea that the contradictions of labour and capital can be held at arm's length, or even that university workers and management, despite conflicts over working conditions, may have an ultimately shared interest in keeping universities afloat. But as we have suggested already, this approach is fraught with significant contradictions, the most severe of which are practical ones.

One obvious line of critique is that a return to more professional autonomy and control by the most secure workers would not necessarily benefit anyone else. Professional autonomy is essentially a nostalgic fantasy unless it is tethered to a political project which would universalise this autonomy and not limit it to the professions. Intellectuals need to advocate for those aspects of our work that *are* important – namely, what autonomy remains in our work – to be generalised: the ability to decide what research projects we think are meaningful to pursue, for example, is equally something that workers in general deserve as part of the process of democratic ownership of the workplace. Similarly the participation of the public in knowledge-production is crucial. Sabbaticals, flexible hours, access to information and technology: we should not treat these as rewards that compensate for how hard we work but as rights that all people should fight for.

More saliently, as a group, professionals are unable to seize power because society as a whole does not depend on us; the more marketised and purely empty the education and research we pursue, the more this is true. In a capitalist society we cannot realistically fight for a set of specific professional interests and expect to win against the relentless incentives of profit-making. The impossibility of withstanding that onslaught suggests that university activism alone, however inspiring, cannot

deliver us past our current state. Without an alliance with the broader working class, of which we are a (contradictory) part, through organisations and coalitions that extend beyond our own workplaces, we will not succeed at turning the tide.

This does not mean that we should write off the university as such, despite its obvious limitations. Our professional training is valuable, which is why it extends beyond a commodity into concrete values in people's lives – for example, in the university-led scientific discovery of mRNA vaccines – and points towards what we could achieve under a planned economy.¹³ Nevertheless, those 'abolitionist' currents which suggest that our objective interests as workers lie with the broader working class and not within the university, while questionable as regards their economic determinism, are essentially correct on the subjective level, in that struggle around our working conditions can enable a working-class realignment. Intellectuals and professional workers can, and should, see their ultimate interests as only being truly realisable through a struggle for the emancipation of society as a whole, which would inevitably transform universities.¹⁴ Without awareness of our own contradictory position, we will remain a poorly defined set of peripheral actors within the university, though paradoxically essential to its functioning, on a pathway towards professionalisation that is constantly eroded. Yet we can observe some recent signs of heightened consciousness from the 'declassified fragments',¹⁵ not least workers' willingness to put pressure on our workplaces, formulate demands, and operate under a collective banner.¹⁶ The negative space we occupy within the university now has a name: casualised staff.¹⁷

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Notes

1. Pope won the election over our own candidate Sam Morecroft, although he retracted his proposal following significant outcry.

2. University College Union, 'Counting the Costs of Casualisation in Higher Education', June 2019. https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10336/Counting-the-costs-of-casualisation-in-higher-education-Jun-19/pdf/ucu_casualisation_in_HE_survey_report_Jun19.pdf. We do not know how many staff have lost their jobs during the current crisis, although our anecdotal experience (based on the auto-replies we receive from the CoronaContract mailing list) suggests the number is high; we have helped pass a motion for UCU to research this.
3. HESA, 'Higher Education Staff Statistics: UK, 2019/20', Accessed 15 April 2021, <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/19-01-2021/sb259-higher-education-staff-statistics>.
4. Trade Union Coalition, 'BME Women and Work', October 2020. <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/BMEwomenandwork.pdf>.
5. Barbara and John Ehrenreich, 'The Professional-Managerial Class'. *Radical America* 11: 2 (April 1977): 7–32 and 'The New Left and the Professional-Managerial Class'. *Radical America* 11: 3 (June 1977): 7–24.
6. Barbara and John Ehrenreich, 'The New Left and the Professional-Managerial Class', 8.
7. See, for example, Catherine Liu, *Virtue Hoarders: The Case against the Professional Managerial Class*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021); Amber A'Lee Frost, 'The Characterless Opportunism of the Managerial Class', *American Affairs* 3:4 (20 November 2019), <https://americanaffairs-journal.org/2019/11/the-characterless-opportunism-of-the-managerial-class/>.
8. See Gabriel Winant, 'Professional-Managerial Chasm', *N+1*, 10 October 2019, <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/professional-managerial-chasm/>.
9. 'Solidarity: Journal of the UCU Mental Health Campaign Group' 4 (Autumn 2020), http://uonucu.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Solidarity_UoN-UCU-Mental-Health-group_issue1.pdf
10. Of course, this same problem has been in place long before such widespread insecurity in the sector. In a marketised education system, even academics on permanent contracts – particularly those at the junior end of the spectrum – are not free to pursue their own interests, but are induced to offer ever more surplus value to the institution via the sentiment that their work, and the university they work for, is 'special'.
11. These include the 2020 Cost of Living ('COLA') graduate student struggle at the University of California; 2020 Michigan graduate students strike; 2021 Columbia University strike; 2020 Goldsmiths wildcat marking boycott; SOAS's Fractionals for Fair Play campaign; and the 2020 National Higher Education Action Network wildcat strike action across Australia.
12. See, for example, Carrie Benjamin, 'If You Fight You Can Win: Victory for Fractional Staff at SOAS'. *Counterfire*, 11 May 2017. <https://www.counterfire.org/articles/opinion/18950-if-you-fight-you-can-win-victory-for-fractional-staff-at-soas>
13. In this regard, Boris Johnson's recent claim, subsequently retracted, that 'greed' and 'capitalism' were responsible for the success of the UK's vaccination programme might be read as an anxious attempt to prevent popular awareness of the public planning and investment that underwrote the vaccines' discovery and distribution.
14. See Jordan Osserman and Aimée Lê, 'Waiting for Other People: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of the Time for Action', *Wellcome Open Research* 5 (10 June 2020), 133.
15. Winant, 'Professional-Managerial Chasm'.
16. Salient examples of this consciousness among tech workers can be seen in the 2018 Google walkout and the 2019 Wayfair walkout. In both cases, these were not walkouts tied to the workers' direct economic demands but solidaristic protests of employers' complicity in sexual harassment and migrant detention camps, respectively. Workers in the professions might be especially sensitive to the realisation that the work one's company does is not socially beneficial (a recent Facebook internal survey showed that 49 percent of its employees thought that the company does not have a positive impact on the world). See Manik Berry, '49% Facebook Employees Don't Believe It Had Positive Impact On World', *Fossbytes*, 4 November 2020. <https://fossbytes.com/49-facebook-employees-disagree-that-it-has-positive-impact-on-world/>
17. Here we are drawing on ideas articulated in Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* trans. Oliver Feltham, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). We can see the significance of this in the leaked minutes of the Russell Group (the employer body representing the UK's most prestigious universities) during our national strike action, which spoke of the need to address universities' 'reputational damage'. The Group placed the term casualisation in quotation marks, seeking to undermine its validity as a category, and referring to the various forms of casualised labour that universities employ (temporary research contracts, fixed-term, freelance, etc.) as reflecting the 'appropriate use of different contract types' that fulfil mutually beneficial needs. The reason for this is clear: by fragmenting us under spurious justifications, our employers attempt to undermine our ability to organise ourselves around shared demands.