Building an Anti-Cas Network and Campaign: A university workers' guide

This short guide is the result of a series of reflections on the process of collectively organising a rank and file network of casual workers in a UK university. It is not intended as a definitive "how to", or as a recipe for a successful anti-cas campaign. Instead, it documents a number of practices, principles, and information gleaned through the process of self-organisation that we believe to be effective and useful. Some of these points may seem intuitive, others less so, some of them we have experience of executing successfully, others we have struggled to get right. However, every point listed below is the product of the collective experience of casual workers' attempts at rank and file organisation.

Talk to your co-workers

This is a vital first step towards any form of collective organisation. Whether it's with the people who share your office space, coffee room, or corridor. Find out who your colleagues are, what kind of work they do, and what their experiences of work are. These initial conversations are the building blocks to mapping casualisation more broadly, understanding what needs to be done in order to combat it, and making the connections necessary to do so.

Join your union branch and get (critically) involved

Getting involved in the local union branch is often the first point of call for casual workers looking to improve their working conditions. For teaching, research and academic staff, as well as some administrative, professional and managerial staff, UCU will be the locally and nationally recognised union. The union can be a vital source of information, support and resources when it comes to developing a campaign. You may find that your branch already has an active anti-casualisation officer or group that you can speak to and join. However, you might find that the interests of casual staff are rarely discussed by the local branch, this can be something which is also reflected in the composition of the branch executive committee. It is important to remember that the local branch officers and committee, no matter how supportive they might be, cannot alone address the issues casualised staff face. Ultimately, this depends on the level of collective self-organisation among casual workers

themselves. There are a few practical first steps that can be taken in that direction within the union branch.

Find out if there is someone responsible for representing casualised staff within your branch and reach out to them. If you have an active rep in your department or school, speak to them too. Are issues facing casualised staff currently being addressed within the union? If so, how, and who by? Are there ways you can get involved in this, and can this existing campaign be meaningfully built on or expanded?

You may find that other casualised workers are not particularly engaged with the local branch, this is especially the case where the local branch does not appear to represent casual workers' interests. Either way, building a network of casualised staff will always require going beyond the structures of the existing union branch.

Explore pre-existing groups, communities and campaigns in and around the university

In many instances, pre-existing (although often disparate) groups already exist within the university. These pre-existing groups could be formal or informal, and need not be directly affiliated with your trade union at all. It could just be a group of colleagues who regularly meet, or spaces where critical conversations about the university are likely to take place. These informal networks can often represent an incipient form of collective organisation themselves. Examples can range from lunch clubs and other social activities within departments, to Postgraduate Researcher groups (e.g PGR representative meetings or 'learning forums') and reading groups, as well as research groups or clusters within a department or school. You may find that particular research groups host regular seminars which cover relevant themes (especially those events where critical studies on politics and work might be a topic of discussion). More formal campaign groups may also exist, such as a Living Wage campaign group, migrant worker and student rights groups, or demilitarise campaigns. There may also be external local community groups which have existing networks within the university, examples might include a local Citizens organisation or renters union. It can also be useful to speak to members and organisers in other campus unions. In fact, casualised teaching and research staff in UCU often find that their conditions overlap far more with administrative and facilities staff outside of UCU membership, than those senior academics within it. These connections help to build a cross union network.

The various channels and spaces detailed above can provide multiple opportunities to discuss the issues of precarity and casual work within the university and build connections with other casual workers, supportive colleagues and overlapping university campaigns. These conversations can also help to build up a picture of the various issues facing different groups of casualised workers, and can provide a starting point for discussions on how they might be addressed collectively.

Build networks and map casualisation

There are multiple other ways you might reach out to co-workers and find out what their issues are. Below are just two examples of such efforts:

1. A Workplace Bulletin

   A rank and file workplace bulletin can be an effective way of reaching out to workers beyond your immediate networks, and can help inform and develop further organisation. The bulletin itself can be relatively simple - a two sided single sheet of A4 or A5 would be sufficient. This can be utilised as a way of highlighting and summarising an emergent workplace grievance or issue which has affected you, your colleagues, or other workers you have spoken to. It is worth considering how these very particular issues are situated in broader processes occurring across the university and the sector. It is important that the bulletin links this analysis to practical steps people can take to address the situation. This should always involve encouraging others to get in touch and contribute. In this way, the bulletin can help to build and extend a rank and file network of workers, bringing in different perspectives and highlighting issues across the university. Once printed up, bulletins can be distributed in as many places as possible (libraries, coffee rooms, campus cafes, as well as via social media). Here is a useful archive of various workplace Bulletins hosted by Notes From Below.

2. A Workplace Survey

   A workplace survey can fulfill multiple functions. Firstly, it gathers information on how casual work is organised; secondly, it can help to indicate the leverage required to challenge and combat those conditions; and thirdly, it provides another means to reach out to people. There are of course various things to consider before conducting such a survey, not least what you will ask and how you will securely store that data, but also who will do the work of sharing the survey, gathering responses, and

analysing the information gathered. This can be a time consuming endeavour and one which is best conducted collectively. It is worth thinking about what the outcomes and outputs of the survey will be. Is the intention to compile a report? Who is it best to aim this at and why? Sometimes, the process of conducting a survey can be an end in itself, in terms of its function as a collective project which provides further information, expands networks, and pinpoints new potential avenues for organising.

Establish clear independent communications channels and a visible presence

Once you have a group of people interested in working together to address the issues faced by casual workers, it is vital to establish a series of independent communication channels. This can initially be by starting a whatsapp group and inviting interested co-workers to join, and can then extend to developing a list of email contacts, setting up a collective casual worker email address, as well as social media accounts. While focusing on making in-person connections is always a priority, building a visible physical and digital presence (via a workplace bulletin, leaflets or social media) can help extend the reach of the network and engage other workers, signposting ways in which they can get in contact and get involved. At this stage, having a small group of people who are willing to concentrate on these activities (email, social media etc.) is ideal, as this helps to evenly distribute the work of organising, and establishes a level of accountability.

While encouraging people to join and work within the union is a major part of tackling casualisation, developing these independent communication channels can be essential to building collective organisation from the bottom up. Importantly, you may find that casual workers are reluctant to share their experiences in a UCU meeting where senior managerial staff are present. Independent communication channels guarantee a space where all casualised staff, including PhD candidates, are more likely to feel safe and able to contribute. It also means that you are not entirely dependent on union officials when it comes to communicating with each other, organising meetings, or planning actions. While many permanently employed and senior colleagues in your union branch can and will be supportive of efforts to organise casual workers, you may find that others are sceptical about its efficacy or reticent to support concrete action on the matter. In some instances, you may find some branch officers believe that any such action among casual workers requires senior union official approval and sign-off - this is definitely not the case. By maintaining independent channels, while also taking an active role in the local branch, it is possible not just to avoid these kinds of bureaucratic constraints, but build the collective power necessary

to significantly move the position of the local union. Over time, you may find that rather than seeking support for casual workers from your branch, you are in fact collectively setting the agenda on casualisation in the local union.

Host regular meetings

A big part of these independent communication channels are regular casualised staff meetings. Encouraging as many attendees as possible to share their experiences in these meetings is hugely beneficial. This not only facilitates engagement and builds a supportive space, but it also helps the network, as a collective, to gather fine grained detail on what's going on across the university, while enabling similarities and differences to be identified. Beyond sharing grievances, allowing adequate time and space in these meetings to discuss the ways in which potential issues could be addressed, is vital. This helps to move from the important process of collective grievance sharing, to the process of proactively organising around those grievances.

Lead with the issues

The point of exploring our colleague's specific and detailed issues is not to present them with a ready made solution. As a network of casual staff, we did not go to our co-workers with a political program, but sought to facilitate and galvanise their self-organisation, while developing a set of shared collective aims. The point of seeking to understand the experiences of our casualised co-workers then, is to better understand how casual work is orchestrated across the university, help to identify the ways in which these conditions might be challenged and changed, and proactively facilitate this process. In doing so, links between the conditions of different groups of casual workers can be drawn, and the broader processes within the workplace and sector which underpin them can be located.

The nature of casualised work across universities often means that there will be multiple contractual variations, in different jobs roles, with different responsibilities, all of which affect different people in different ways. Even in the same job role pay-rates and workloads for casual staff can vary massively across faculties, departments and schools. What are the most pressing issues to the people you speak to? How do these relate to issues other colleagues are facing? How could your network of casual workers support them and facilitate their organisation?

This is not about offering an alternative form of union casework, although sometimes you will end up helping out individual co-workers. Instead, it is about offering mutual support and making use of the resources you have built up to enable a collective response. For example, could the channels of communication and presence you and your co-workers have established be used to address a particular localised issue? Could the network support the writing of a demand letter, host a petition, publicise a collective grievance, open up channels with management and in doing so force a response? A rank and file casualised staff network can be the avenue through which the various localised grievances of casual staff are articulated, and provide collective cover for staff who are often the most vulnerable. In our experience, the casual workers' network has been utilised to facilitate a range of worker-led interventions on issues from PGR office conditions, to lecture attendance pay, and coercive management. You will often find that seemingly isolated cases concerning a few members of staff will unveil deep-seated and structural forms of exploitation at the university. This has a vital role in informing the content of collective demands. In our experience, uncovering and challenging the deep-seated structural racism, gendered exploitation, and ableist use of casual contracts, has all been dependent on being responsive to issues initially raised at a school or department level.

Supporting and challenging localised issues or individual grievances as and when they arise is important, but identifying the common threads is central to building a broader response. In order to facilitate effective self-organisation among groups of casual workers, who are often dispersed, it requires us to collectivise our efforts as much as possible. The question then arises: can we formulate a general set of shared aims and demands? How might we reflect on group meetings, emergent grievances, and any survey data to draft these? It is important to make the formulation of these overarching aims and demands, a collective and participative process.

Collectively develop demands, material and strategies

The process of collectively discussing, drafting and redrafting a set of aims and demands helps to share the campaign work and enables genuine participation. This applies to every element of organisation and can often involve organising smaller groups of people involved in the broader network, who volunteer to focus on certain activities, be that drafting material, designing leaflets, or planning actions. This process not only empowers the individuals involved, but enhances the network as an expression of collective agency.

Develop a strategy to escalate your demands

Along with identifying the issues, working out what leverage you have and how you can collectively exercise it, is an important task. Some people will be nervous about taking action. Developing a strategy that recognises this and builds in a way that brings everyone along is not always easy.

What are the first steps you might take? These might need to be low commitment asks initially, such as gathering a petition or asking people to sign a collective letter. It is always important to establish a timeline for these kinds of actions. It's good practice to give management a time by which you expect a reply to any such letter, and have a plan for escalating should this reply not be forthcoming or sufficient. The next step towards escalating the issue could take many forms, it might be to organise a group of casualised staff to deliver a letter directly to the Vice Chancellor, perhaps this could be combined with a protest? Think about how you could make these actions most effective, visible, and disruptive. How might you raise awareness, and make it impossible for the university to ignore? For example, could a particular event or open day be targeted? If possible, you should seek support and representation from the union branch at every stage. For example, request that casualisation is a standing agenda item in branch meetings, get notifications of planned meetings sent to all members and submit motions in support of your demands.

There are also routes which involve leveraging your collective strength more directly. Starting with a collective grievance is one way to do this. Universities typically have their own grievance and disciplinary procedures, which broadly reflect those found on the ACAS website. Management will nearly always try to individualise these grievances, and HR grievance procedures are typically designed to slow down, frustrate, and dampen any effort to collectively force change. Nevertheless, it is a form of escalation which can, when used collectively, be the basis of an official dispute. Where the university fails to address a collective grievance, a dispute can be raised and, with the support of the union branch, proceed to a local ballot for industrial action (more info on this procedure can be found here).

Achieving local industrial action on casualisation is rare, but not impossible. We know that in many universities casual staff make up a sizable chunk, if not the majority, of the academic workforce. However, in recent years we have seen multiple rounds of national, rather than local, industrial action. While casualisation has been central to these recent national disputes

(the four fights) in higher education, it is rarely meaningfully discussed, and often completely misunderstood (hence the recent national UCU position on addressing “voluntary” casual contracts). In times of national disputes then, it is up to us to force casualisation onto the agenda, and put into practical terms what addressing it looks like. This could involve ending ‘casual worker’ status engagements, outsourcing, and other precarious forms of non-employment. What other forms of contract need to be restricted and how at your workplace and why? An active anti-casualisation network needs to drive this onto the agenda and into the conversations around national action.

Beyond this, particular contractual forms mean certain groups of casual workers are less contained by restrictive trade union legislation and can be more willing and able to take unofficial action (often referred to as wildcat strikes). While any member of staff can engage in wildcat action, casual ‘worker status’ engagements mean that many colleagues have no employment rights at all, which can therefore enable them to refuse work without breaching their contract of employment (as they don’t have one). Of course this can be a high risk strategy, as it could compromise access to future employment, but in our experience we have seen significant concessions gained this way. Where informal and unofficial action like this is not endorsed by the union, a self-organised network of casualised staff can provide the basis for such action. In fact, it is an important feature of building these kinds of rank and file networks in general, where the informality of organisation means that those involved are not bound by the same legal and organisational restraints that the locally recognised union branch is. This can make any such network well placed to advance the more creative, combative and disruptive forms of collective action necessary to force concessions for our employers.

Think about the structure of the network and relationship with the union(s)

So far, the notion of a casualised staff network or anti-cas group has been referred to in fairly loose terms. That is because initially, it will likely be a very informal grouping of people, many of whom, but not all, will also be union members. As the network grows, it may be that more official elected representative functions become necessary. However, this is always balanced with the ability to retain the agility of an informal network, and not simply reproduce another level of union officialdom. In our experience, the size and nature of the network meant that it soon acted as a form of caucus for the selection of our UCU branch casual staff officers (there is no reason to suggest this could not be the case for other campus unions if this was reflected in the composition of the network). These casual staff officers' were then expected

to take a role in helping to run the network. This meant that there was a direct representative link between the network and our UCU branch structures, which importantly, was established from the bottom-up. It also meant that these casual staff union officers' could enter our union committee with a clear set of collective aims and backing from casual workers, and in turn could be held regularly accountable by the broader network. It is important that this process runs both ways, as there is always the danger that elected branch officers become dislocated from the network and incorporated into union and HR procedures and structures. In turn, this can facilitate a process whereby branch committee officers start to view the network as an extension of the branch, and will seek to organise from the top-down, this not only contains the network's autonomy, but can restrict other activities too. Keeping up with regular casual staff meetings ensures that those elected to the branch committee remain a tributary of the network, and relay the contents of union meetings with management back to casual staff. This leads to the question of engagement with management.

Engaging with management as a network

There will often be various opportunities to engage in management led groups, or HR and union channels set up to discuss issues facing casual staff. Often, the existence of these meetings and groups is a direct response to, and result of, combative organisation on the ground among casual staff, as management feel forced to address the grievances raised. There will also be other avenues that are more regular channels of "worker voice" set up at different levels of university HR and management. There is no hard and fast rule on how and when to engage with these initiatives, as they can be incredibly varied. While they may be an avenue via which leverage can be exercised and material concessions gained, it is important to remember that the central aim of management and their representatives in these spaces will nearly always be to dampen conflict and secure casual workers' compliance. As a result, they will often tie these meetings up in bureaucratic procedures, and might even attempt to pressurise representatives of casual staff to quell the networks' more combative actions and activities for very little in return.

Here are a few practical considerations for any such meetings between casual staff representatives and management. Firstly, try to broaden participation in these types of meetings. Management will often only want to talk to one or two elected UCU branch members, if possible, insist that more casually employed workers need to be in the room for these meetings. This makes it difficult for management to ignore casual staff, and helps bridge the gap between union representatives and rank and file casual workers. Secondly,

try to avoid getting co-opted into fulfilling a management function - in these meetings, managers will often talk about financial pressures, limited funding, and will ask casual worker representatives how *you* would deal with the situation (within strict financial confines). Remember, casual workers are not there to help senior management develop their austere staffing budget. Casual worker representatives are there to represent the interests of casual workers on their own terms, not to accept the incredibly restrictive rules of the game set by neoliberal university management. Similarly, if and when any local deal on casualisation is offered, great pressure can be exercised on casual workers' representatives (both from management and the union) to "sell" the deal to workers. Again, this should be resisted, any deal must be collectively discussed in the network on its own terms. Thirdly, any casual staff representatives and workers who are about to enter a meeting with management should have a clear line of argument, and strategy for engaging, established well in advance and rooted in the collective demands of the network. Managers will typically try to derail the agenda and filibuster by picking out the most insignificant detail of a particular contractual form. By having an established line of engagement decided on beforehand, you can work to prevent that from happening. Finally, if you are a casual worker and a union representative, and you find yourself gradually spending more time face to face with HR and management than with your casualised co-workers, there is likely a clear reason. It is important to ask why this is the case? Why is so much of your time in these meetings, and who are they currently best serving? Are they still fulfilling a function in terms of building leverage and forcing concessions? Engaging with management can be necessary, working within the union is useful, but working within the network of rank and file casual workers is nearly always the top priority.

Social(ise) struggles

This is often an overlooked element of organising any rank and file network. Outside of gathering information and developing a collective strategy, it is important to enjoy yourself! This doesn't just mean going to the pub after a meeting. Where possible, various other organising activities can be an opportunity for social gathering. Collective banner making, t-shirt printing, leaflet designing sessions can all serve as opportunities to host a broader social space and get people involved.