

How IFUT helped me achieve a COID – Member's Story

I've been teaching on an hourly paid basis for the last 12 years in 3rd level education. This year, following the intervention of Joan Donegan of IFUT, I have a Contract of Indefinite Duration as a Teaching Fellow on a half-time basis. What this means is that from now until retirement I will have guaranteed work and salary all year round.

In the last dozen years I have given tutorials, seminars and lectures as and when – and perhaps most significantly – when **not** required. In practice that means that in some years I've been employed for many hours – and in some terms as little as one hour a week. Of course the actual number of paid hours over the year is extremely meagre, as hourly paid staff are only employed in teaching weeks in term-time; so no payments during reading week, Bank Holidays or the many weeks in the year when there is no teaching at all.

Nor do hourly paid staff get paid when they are sick, so unless the class can be rescheduled, then sickness leads to a drop in what is anyway a pretty lowly income. A teaching year is now 24 (two twelve-week semesters) weeks – at best – many classes (like tutorials) take place for only some weeks of the teaching term, typically just over half.

So the money is woeful. And yet there are a significant number of TAs and adjunct staff of one kind or another who undertake this work – mostly because the opportunity to teach something that they love is worth it. Or because as post-grads and post-docs they need the money, the experience and the references.

From time to time TAs have tried to get some better treatment, usually by invoking union help, but never really very successfully; this is my story, of what this litany of poor pay and ill-treatment is like as a lived experience.

Last year I was asked if I would set up a course which was compulsory for second year students: I was to choose everything that it covered, co-ordinate it and give most of the lectures and at least one group of tutorials. I checked with other TAs who were responsible for courses and discovered that the payment for a one-term option was still 3,000 euros (a sum which it has remained at for some years).

I agreed to undertake this task and spent much of the summer preparing for it: it involved a **lot** of reading, getting together the bibliography, writing lectures, meeting the TAs who would teach on it – a lot of work.

I did not think to ask – nor was I told – what the remuneration would be for this. It came, then, as somewhere between a shock and a complete failure of belief to me when I was told, some way into the term, that I was to be paid at the rate of 137.00 per lecture and 38.00 for tutorials: there was to be no payment for the organization and overseeing of this course, nor for the time I spent with the TAs or indeed any element of bureaucracy, other than a small payment for marking each written submission completed

by students. The sum I was to be paid – what in fact I was paid – added up to 1,300 euros – before tax.

I am still shocked by this. How can anyone be asked to do that much work for that little money? Even if I hadn't got 3 degrees and years of experience, it would be a miserly payment – at best. What this kind of treatment does is to make the sap (me) feel a whole range of emotions which range from insulted, through worthless, to absolute shite.

Do people with secure jobs and annual increments and pensions and money in the holidays just stop adding up when it comes to arranging for others to fill in all the gaps that occur in any academic timetable? Do they think that those who cling to academic life and get by on a range of resources involving family, spouses, three jobs, social security payments, frugality – should recognize that they must be in some way inferior, otherwise they'd have got a proper job and proper money and as they haven't, they clearly are worth less so they can be paid less? Or that they are young and this is going to get them the Holy Grail of a permanent job, so suck it up?

While I'm still shocked at the value that was put on the work - that I was asked to do - I'm even more shocked at what it says about the sorry state of academic employment at the bottom.

Colleagues fortunate enough to have permanent, salaried, pensionable, jobs should be mindful that many privileges of their work, such as teaching buy-outs and sabbaticals, can only be sustained through the use of part-time/temporary/hourly paid staff: and any institution, asking anyone they judge to be suitably qualified to undertake professional responsibilities, should both pay and treat their staff fairly.

My story has a happy ending because I went to IFUT with my case and the institution accepted that I had accrued rights and should get a COID.

Recently the papers have been full, again, as they are from time to time, with accounts of TAs, postgrads, part-timers, adjuncts of all stripes, being underpaid and undervalued. 'Undervalued' is just a word and it does not begin to tell the real pain that such treatment gives rise to: as someone who has lived through that, I want everyone to know that it needs full-time, permanent, salaried staff to come out of the woodwork and campaign for proper treatment for their colleagues: I urge all colleagues in 3rd level institutions to support them.