

The ELT Worker

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TEFL teachers unite against exploitation
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ENGLISH language schools have been "wracked by UK Covid crisis" the Financial Times [reported](#) recently, but with an estimated 50 percent redundancy rate across the industry it was ordinary TEFL teachers who were hit hardest.

Twenty IWW members met recently to exchange experiences with organising their workplaces and strategies for supporting TEFL teachers, globally.

Here's a rundown of teachers' struggles and victories, the companies that felt their wrath, and opportunities for the future.

Crap Kaplan

"Invest in your ambition," reads Kaplan's visionary statement. The company is "dedicated to helping people like you achieve their dreams."

Does any of this actually apply to Kaplan's teachers?

As part of its business model, Kaplan imposes fixed-term contracts during peak seasons on teachers. Every two years, teachers are forced to begin a new contract, which doesn't bode well for "investing in personal ambitions" or "achieving future dreams".

So, when the pandemic hit and the firm laid off its staff, Kaplan only calculated its teachers' redundancy payments back to their last contract signing — this even applied to those who had dedicated 20 years to the company.

Many teachers were unaware of their rights, so the IWW provided redundancy presentations and support at numerous branches.

Several big wins ensued, which included long-term teachers gaining recognition for higher redundancy payments. Altogether, Kaplan paid out an estimated £100,000 more in redundancy payments than it had initially intended.

But, as Kaplan still refused to recognise the genuine length of service for a number of redundant staff, six teachers have filed for an employment tribunal claim with the backing of the IWW.

For the teachers, this is about more than money. They are determined to set a precedent ending fixed-term contracts, to which the company has at least temporarily conceded, but not guaranteed on paper.

Shame on Shane

On the Shane English School [website](#), the founder is praised for having "patiently and dotingly restored Nanteos, a Gregorian mansion" with a strong sense of "responsibility to do what he can in protecting British heritage for the next generation."

Unfortunately, Shane seems to lack the same sense of responsibility for the current generation of teachers at the schools that bear his name. While undoubtedly helping Shane afford his lavish lifestyle, teachers from the Shane English School Japan were informed that they must work for free.

In violation of Japanese law, the school expected teachers to make up the hours they spent furloughed during the pandemic. It even demanded money back from receptionists.

Membership in the Shane Workers Union grew significantly, allowing for multiple strikes and protests, which ultimately forced the school to concede.

The company is now trying to cut holidays and overtime pay, which only serves to increase worker solidarity and determination.

Dodgy Delfin

Looking for a steady full-time position in the heart of London? You're in luck! Delfin is advertising "an exciting opportunity to learn about how a successful and growing language school company runs" as an unpaid intern.

In addition to this use of unpaid labour, Delfin's business model for success and growth apparently relies on firing and then rehiring teachers at lower pay.

Just five days before Christmas 2020, the company made its entire teaching staff redundant, then later quietly moved offices to British Study Centres, where subcontracted teachers began working.

As many of the wronged teachers were members of IWW, they quickly organised and picketed the landlord, who ultimately pressured Delfin. Although particularly challenging in the midst of a pandemic, their direct actions resulted in redundancy payments above and beyond the required minimum.

This victory helped establish the IWW's TEFL Workers' Union as a legitimate vehicle to challenge dodgy TEFL bosses and set the union in good stead for the massive rounds of redundancies that were to follow.

The Overseas Teacher (TOT) throws teachers overboard

"Whether you have existing teaching experience or are looking to teach for the first time, here at TOT we aim to support you throughout your journey."

During the pandemic, this promising offer lured around 300 people in the UK, and across the globe, into online teaching. What could possibly go wrong?

After a month's worth of poor communications and delay in commencing work, these new hires found themselves exploited by their subcontractor, DaDa.

The huge fines for missing class (due to health or IT issues) often outweighed their pay. One of the affected teachers [said](#): "It was really demoralising to see almost \$100 deducted from my pay for 2 days of illness, that's significantly more than I earn in that amount of time, so it seems very unfair."

Although many workers were young graduates, they organised and contacted the IWW, which arranged a meeting with a TOT representative.

One night, right before the Christmas holidays, they all received an email terminating their contracts, so the IWW provided a month's pay through several Twitter campaigns.

Legal claims are still underway, with a strong case for recognising teachers as employees, rather than self-employed contractors, and therefore entitled to consultation, redundancy and holiday/sick pay.

Thanks to these organisers, TOT no longer uses self-employment contracts, recognising teachers as employees with higher pay.

Continuing and Expanding the Fight for Dignity

We have been on the defensive for far too long, fighting only for our basic workers' rights in a multi-billion-pound industry. Not surprisingly, this industry is largely non-unionised, but membership has increased significantly during the pandemic, with several schools even reaching majority membership.

We have also learned not to shy away from challenging large employers because they can lead to our biggest victories. Time, commitment and planning are key and the IWW is eager to support organising efforts for more wins within the TEFL world.

In addition to providing organiser training and resources, the IWW is considering an online radical education conference, where we can raise issues like the shift to a new and unregulated remote working world, which has only accelerated with Covid.

Rather than constantly being on the defensive, we need to build confidence in putting forward demands and taking actions with an eye towards the future.

Whether you're a TEFL teacher, remote educator, union member, and/or part of an IWW branch, feel free to get in contact if you'd like to be involved with any of these efforts.

The TEFL Workers' Union can be reached at tefl@iww.org.uk

If you live outside of the UK, still drop us a line. We'll do our best to support you and if possible put you in contact with a local union or TEFL workers' organisation where you live.

Remember: We like our students. We like our jobs. We like our workmates. We don't like struggling to pay the bills. We don't like insecure employment.

Join us!

THE ADVENTURES OF **TEFL TONY** ---THE TEACHING TORSO---

