

THE ELT WORKER

Jingle all the way ... to the job centre by Aileen Bowe

Why the festive season isn't a winter wonderland for English language teachers



It's Christmas—the season for screwing your hardworking employees! If you are the owner of a school, you're probably saving tens of pounds by cutting your worker's hours, shoving students into tiny 'classrooms' and forcing teachers to do work on their own time and not paying them. Congratulations, you're a blessing to society at a time of economic hardship and rising inequality!

Ebenezer Scrooge at least gave his workers a full day's work. Workers in ELT are often expected to survive on as little as two to four hours work a day. And some contracts state that workers aren't allowed to work in other schools or take on private students.

The degree of success the marketing team has in working with agents to bring students to schools impacts hourly-paid teachers. However, it's often the case that administration staff, marketing, sales and management have contracts and salaries that allow them to weather the seasonal dips with

ease. Not so for zero-hour contracted workers.

The state of ELT

The ELT industry has been described as "what every industry would do to its workers if they could get away with it" by union officials. It's a frightening reality. Teachers are working themselves into poverty in a race to the bottom. Conditions vary from school to school but the one constant is that things are getting worse. Basic facilities like a staff room with windows and a functioning kitchen area, adequate computers and printers, resources needed to do the job are always lacking in these schools. The knock-on effect for teachers range from mental health problems, getting a second job, having to sign on the dole, or leaving the industry entirely. This paves the way for a new batch of naive CELTA grads who accept the appalling conditions all for the sake of 'getting a foot in the door' and 'making connections'.

How ELT affects workers

'I was so ashamed and so embarrassed,' says Keith Murdiff, a former ELT teacher from Ireland, speaking about not being sure if he could buy his kids Christmas presents in a recent [piece](#) in *The Irish Times*.

And this isn't an isolated case. Hundreds of us have been let go for the quiet winter months, to be rehired again when trade picks up in the new year.

Would it be more ethical to keep these teachers on in a reduced capacity, paying them for admin, or other teaching related activities? Of course it would. But ten pounds per hour saved here or twenty pounds saved there matters far, far more to the greedy, lecherous language school directors and owners than their employees' well-being.

It's not the season to be merry. It's the season to stand up, fight back and win fair treatment against the tyrant few running this industry.

Aileen Bowe is an English teacher and activist.

Organize ELT! by Blair Matthews

What characterises the ELT sector and how to change it

Right now, language schools in Central London are advertising a rate of £14.50 an hour for teachers, which includes lesson planning, marking, and other duties—halve that to get the real hourly rate. All this while the ELT sector generates massive profits, with an estimated worth of over £2.4 billion, a figure which stands in stark contrast to the low pay, low status and precarity of teachers, workers, and admin staff.

What's going on in ELT?

The ELT industry consists of large privately-owned schools, commercial for-profit wings of universities, and smaller language schools. Firms also often double up as landlords, buying up accommodation to extract more money from students. Educational agents - the powerful intermediaries that direct the flow of students to language schools - also take their slice of the pie. And if agents are unhappy with a school in Bristol, they just send the next 30 Italian teenagers somewhere else, whether York, or Edinburgh, or Dublin.

An ELT teacher therefore negotiates precarity in a number of ways.

- *Low pay.* We are typically outside nationally agreed collective bargaining agreements for teachers.
- *Short-term contracts.* Zero-hours or fixed term contracts are common, even if a teacher has worked in the same workplace for a long time.

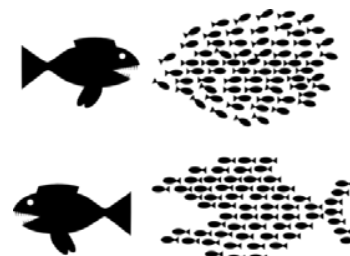
- *Holidays/sick pay.* These are often the statutory minimum only.
- *Low or no bargaining power.* If we complain, we're not offered work again.
- *Low status.* Despite teaching being a skilled profession, we're undermined by low- or no-skilled 'backpacker teachers' armed with nothing more than a four-week CELTA.

What can be done?

There are things YOU can do.

Join a union. Large UK unions like the NEU and UNITE will represent teachers in private language schools, though if you work in a small school, you may be better served by the [IWGB](#), the 'leading union for precarious workers', or the [IWW](#). Workers may also work in public sector colleges where there are collective bargaining agreements in place. One useful strategy is *dual carding*, where workers in a recognised workplace join an established union while holding membership of a more active union.

Organise. We need chapters within unions in which to organise and be a point of contact for other precarious ELT workers. Nobody should have to feel isolated. By organising we send a message that we will support each other and stick up for ourselves. We can share success stories, provide advice when in trouble, warn others about poor employers and push for change.



Cooperate. We work hard to enrich the bosses, while they give little back in return. The current system is inefficient, expensive and prone to corruption. We can do away with a model which pushes student fees up and teachers' pay down. Think how much a student pays for a single lesson? How much of that must go to the greedy bosses who run language schools, and the rapacious agents who control the flow of students? Instead, workers can form cooperatives, where we keep the value of our labour and return education to democratic principles. One example is [SLB](#) in Barcelona, up and running since 2014, a teacher-led cooperative that gives teachers control, and gives learners a better deal. When you remove the bosses, students pay less, and there's more for us.

DO SOMETHING TO CHANGE ELT TODAY!

Blair Matthews is an English language and EAP teacher in Fife, Scotland.

BREAKING NEWS: Grafton College, Dublin

The cold winter of English language teaching in Ireland, 2018

The snap closure of Grafton College three weeks before Christmas has hit 30 staff and 470 students hard. Teachers don't have money to see them through Christmas, and students aren't getting the education they paid for. Welcome to the cold winter of the English language teaching industry in Ireland, in 2018.

As reported in *The Irish Times*, on the night of 3rd December two people came to the Grafton College site with a mission. They put up a hand-written notice "officially" announcing the closure of the school while teachers were still inside, having occupied the building in protest. These teachers had not been paid for the previous five weeks, money amounting to approximately €75,000. Though there is legislation to protect students, staff were left with nothing but their outrage.

"Welcome to the cold winter of the English language teaching industry in Ireland, in 2018."

Hearing the news

Grafton College staff had been told they'd be moving premises in February, and not to worry. But on 1st December when news of the closure broke, one of the teachers was getting married. He walked down the aisle knowing he was out of a job, and fearing for the future. His wife is due to give birth at the end of this month.

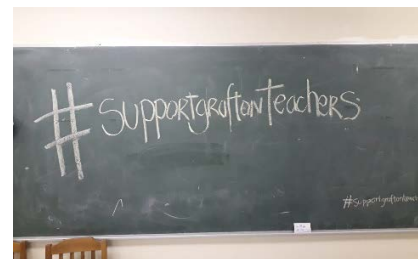
In a way it was good timing. The lower house of the Irish parliament was to debate the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Bill on 5th December. The Unite union, having worked with English language

teachers since 2016, submitted a seven-page document outlining the concerns of teachers and why this legislation must include a tightening of existing employment legislation, including a Teacher Protection Fund, and also that schools should adhere to the Fair Employment Mark. What should have been an uncontroversial piece of legislation was followed eagerly by English language teachers, and politicians were lobbied fiercely to pass the proposed amendments.

The road to parliament

In 2017, then Education Minister Richard Bruton met with language school lobbying group MEI to listen to their submissions on the Bill. Unite contacted the Department for a meeting with the Minister, but were repeatedly refused. They were told that as they were workers in a private industry, they could not be considered as teachers in the same sense as public sector teachers. But MEI got a hearing.

The ELT industry is worth over 700 million euros to the Irish economy, and the International Education sector as a whole over €2 billion. The ruling Fine Gael party are so friendly to Big Business and the *Ireland Inc.* brand that workers don't warrant a blip on their radar. In response to questions from People Before Profit party members, the Minister for Justice side-stepped the plight of Grafton College teachers, merely repeating that fact that students would be protected under the Learner Protection Fund, established after the 'college closure crisis' of 2014/2015 where almost 20 schools closed overnight.



Advocating change

[ELT Advocacy](#), a teacher-led group set up in response to this very crisis has been growing steadily in the last few years thanks to the efforts of dedicated ELT professionals who continue to give their time, energy and support to the professionalisation of this industry. ELT Advocacy knew that the best way to achieve the aims was to involve the unions and take direction from them, and now their primary aim is to advocate for teachers to join the union, and to be a voice for teachers who feel powerless.

The group has no overheads, no office, no funds. Just Facebook, Twitter and a blog. And yet this group has been instrumental in bringing about a sea-change in the perception of ELT as an 'industry', and in engaging people who would otherwise be apathetic to unions or politics.

The group pulled together against the odds, with meetings, poster drops, talking with teachers, advocating in staffrooms, with fundraisers, social events, and a simple consistent message: we *can* organise and we *can* improve our conditions. With a bit of energy you could organise something similar in your context too.

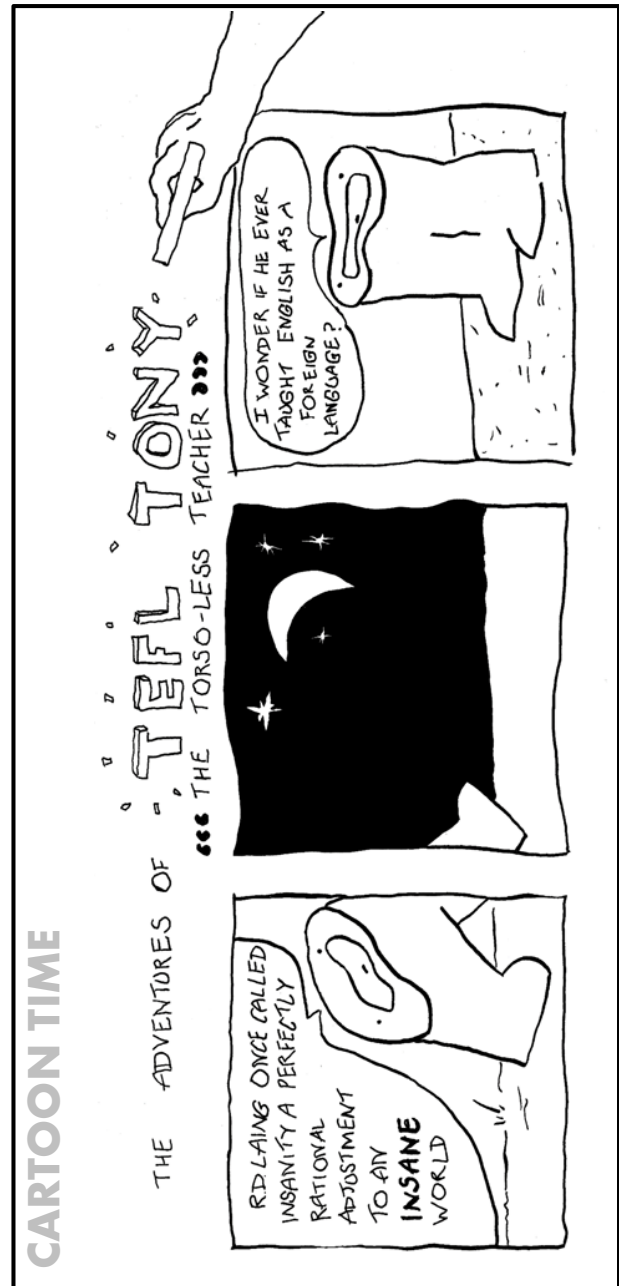
Admitting the need for change

We don't know what will happen to the Grafton College teachers, but a [GoFundMe](#) campaign has been launched to raise funds for teachers affected and has raised over €3500.

“the private, for-profit English language teaching industry directly contributes to and benefits from precarity”

However, much like the thousands of Americans having to raise money online to pay their medical bills, this is government shirking its responsibilities. One teacher suggested that MEL member schools might make a donation to help these teachers through Christmas. But to do so would involve a change of heart, and of mind. The industry would have to admit that teachers aren't the all-smiling, ever-enthusiastic puppets you see in the adverts. To do this would be to recognise that many, if not most English language teachers, live precarious lives. To do so would be to admit that the private, for-profit English language teaching industry directly contributes to and benefits from precarity.

And we just can't have that now, can we?



THE ELT WORKER

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