

Policy Proposal: The Union should bring all outsourced support staff at UCL in-house

What would you like the Union to do?

The Union should bring all outsourced support staff at UCL in-house in line with the University of London by (i) acting on the Board of Trustees' recommendation to bring cleaning staff in-house, (ii) revisiting the decision to continue the outsourcing of security staff at the Union, (iii) lobbying UCL to follow suit by supporting industrial action by trade unions seeking to end outsourcing at UCL.

Why would you like to do this?

Currently, outsourced support staff at UCL and at the Union are scattered across a number of outsourcing agencies: Sodexo, Bidvest Noonan, CH&CO at UCL, and BBCS and AP Services at the Union. This university could not function without them, and yet we put them on casualised, zero-hour contracts where they are constantly overworked and understaffed, with many experiencing bullying from management at their respective agencies. Bringing support staff in-house would grant them extra legal protections against discrimination and labour abuses, as well as protect them against precarity by offering the job security that is desperately needed amidst the cost-of-living crisis.

The University of London has already brought its support staff in-house in November 2020, demonstrating that it is affordable, realistic, and imminently doable. In fact, bringing support staff in-house is likely to save money since UCL and the Union currently pay VAT on top of the payments made to outsourcing agencies. In particular, the Union's Board of Trustees heard in June 2021 that 'savings can be generated by moving the Union's cleaning service in-house' and resolved to approve the recommendation to bring cleaning services in-house. This has not been followed through so far as the Union's contract with BBCS, which has a no-break clause, does not end until April 2023.

Outsourcing is often assumed to be an effective strategy to increase efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity. Speaking to the Board of Trustees, the Union's Head of Operations has taken a similar view in arguing that continuing to outsource security services would be 'more cost-effective and will ensure more effective management of key risks'. But a recent study by Lee and Lee (2020) has noted that the assumption that these 'market-oriented mechanisms are entirely beneficial to public organisations for economic reasons [...] do not discuss [the] potential costs – in particular, diminished human resources – to public organisations.' It follows Pollitt (2000, p. 192), who noted that 'efficiency gains may be achieved at the cost of others,' such as quality or effectiveness. Further, it highlights the 'abundant evidence of outsourcing related [to] less job security [...] an

increase in occupational stress, [...] tensions and distrust between people, as well as alienation, fear, and resentment' (Cunningham & James, 2009; Dube & Kaplan, 2010; Engstrom & Axelsson, 2010; Ferrie et al., 2001; Hebdon, 2006; Park, 2004; Zuberi, 2011; Diefenbach, 2005; Hoggett, 1996; Morley, 2005; Parker & Bradley, 2000).

But ending outsourcing is not simply a cold, economic calculation. It is, above all, the ethical thing to do: outsourcing is an exploitative practice that is infamous for enabling the systematic mistreatment of workers by creating a workplace in which workers are not treated as equals. As the spokesperson for the UVW Union said, 'the exploitative practice of outsourcing means that universities operate a two-tier system, whereby some workers are valued and represented, while others work all hours for poverty wages, can't afford to take breaks and are often forced to work while ill or injured due to the measly statutory sick pay offered by their direct employer.' In October 2019, UCL made a commitment to offer equal pay and benefits to its outsourced support staff following a number of campaigns by the trade unions, but this has so far not been honoured as of July 2022, as noted by the UCU. The unions also note how support staff have already suffered a massive pay cut in virtue of being outsourced: 15 years ago, cleaning and security staff were paid between £16-18/hour; this has been reduced to a top rate of £13 for security staff and £12 for cleaning staff today. As a Students' Union that boasts itself to be inclusive and caring, we can no longer tolerate these injustices against essential support staff committed by the university through outsourcing agencies happening every day right before our eyes. At the same time, it would be hypocritical for the Union to retain its outsourcing provisions for security and cleaning services. Ultimately, this is a moral imperative: following Kant, Scanlon, Rawls, and others, we have a duty to treat each other with mutual respect. To put simply, we owe this to them.

How will this affect students?

Public administration literature offers abundant evidence linking outsourcing with lower employee job satisfaction (Lee & Lee, 2020). At the same time, trade unions have noted 'unsafe and unhealthy working environments [...] created by chronic understaffing' as subcontractors attempt to cut costs. But we are reminded by Pollitt's (2000, p. 192) observation that 'efficiency gains [of outsourcing] may be achieved at the cost of others' such as quality of service, and when that happens, students are the ones paying the price. Ultimately, their working conditions are our learning conditions, and in halls of accommodation, our living conditions. Bringing support staff in-house would mean that workers receive the same welfare and safeguarding training as directly

employed staff and would be better equipped to deal with situations if and when they arise. This is particularly important in halls, where safeguarding responsibilities are currently burdened solely on Student Resident Advisors (SRA) and the hall warden, who may not be accessible during out-of-office hours. Consequently, bringing support staff in-house would see better working conditions and better safeguarding training. In doing so, support staff are also likely to be more involved in the communities that they serve. Ending outsourcing across UCL is paramount to improving student welfare.

Works Cited

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