

THE ELT WORKER

The whistleblower
TEFL workers' union
TEFL tony

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The Whistleblower



1. The Receptionist

We blow the whistle on crap bosses, bad working conditions, and the daily humiliations of ELT.

Want to blow the whistle on your workplace? Email your story to theeltworker@gmail.com

I was a receptionist at the front desk of this language school. I took the job because friends of mine had worked there. 'Definitely not awesome, but not too terrible. The management is a bit odd, but the students are lovely,' they said. The job was not well paid, but it was a real employed position that included benefits and was also part time. That alone was a win-win for me.

The scam

Things started out alright, but it soon became apparent that this place was run as little more than a huge scam. Prospective students would walk in off the street and we were told not to speak to them too much. Instead, we were told to pick up the

phone and say a 'codeword' to the sales person. Then very quickly the sales person would appear, greet the person, and whisk them away. They would be taken to a back office in the hopes of getting them to sign a non-refundable contract equivalent to over €1000. Once the person had signed away their money, *there was no getting it back.*

The sales person needed to get that signature on the dotted line there and then, not tomorrow or next week. So they would say almost anything to get them to sign. Unfortunately, I don't have any concrete examples of what these sales people actually *said*, because I was never around for these private meetings, but I can only imagine.

What I can say is that time and time again, I saw people walk out having signed up - only to see them a week later, disappointed, disillusioned and unable to get their money back.

Ancient learning

The system for learning was truly bizarre too. It was on these old rickety computers that had this ancient software on them. The software contained a language learning program that went up through every level, it was sort of like A1-C2, but differently named and copyrighted. The learning courses had some kind of old-fashioned sexist storyline and the characters also used ancient computers and devices that aren't around anymore, thus allowing the student to practice obsolete vocabulary. The course material felt super dated, and the only people the students could really talk to were

other students who'd seen the same materials!

Elderly learners

On top of that, most of the students and prospective students were elderly, and not very skilled at using a computer, nor did they have spectacular vision. Many of them struggled with both using the machines and being able to view the courses. The software also only worked on some devices - and barely worked at all! - meaning most people could not study from home and needed to come to the school and use the computers to do their work. Which consisted of sitting alone at a computer!

Nonsense learning

Once a student had finished a level, they needed to sit down with a teacher in a small group of people at the same 'level'. The teacher showed them a few flash cards, and tested a couple of major grammar points. The student then either passed and moved to the next level, or had to repeat. Despite the nonsense of this learning model, most of the teachers at the school were truly lovely and wanted the best for the students, and did what they could with what they were given. Many of the students had favorite teachers, and that was nice to see.

It was also really important for those in reception to keep track of people who had once signed up for a course, and to call them on their home phone numbers to entice them to come back in.

For example, someone who was signed up but reaching the end of their contract, or someone who had not been seen in the school for awhile. It felt super invasive and cultish to call these people up like this, but we had to do it.

Nothing new

I found this job a mixed bag. My friends had been right - the students were indeed lovely. I really enjoyed getting to know them, learning about their goals, and watching their triumphs. (When they had them...)

I felt conflicted, however, about working in an environment that supported a system I did not believe in. This job ended for me when I was ready to move on. I gave my job to a friend. She stayed for a bit before she moved away and kept me up to date on the shenanigans that continued. Hint: *nothing new, just the same old, same old.*

The school later ended up shutting down, and that was the end of that.

This article is a first-hand account submitted by a former ELT worker.

We distribute this account for the public interest of the entire ELT community, with the aim of raising awareness and combatting unfair employment and trade practices.

THE WHITEBOARD STRIKES BACK

The ELT Worker speaks to Ben, a union activist involved in setting up the all new TEFL Workers' Union!

Check out the union here: <https://iww.org.uk/news/tefl-union-launched-in-london/>

EW: How did the TEFL Workers' Union start?

Ben: The origins go back a year ago when teachers at Delfin in London started organising against an unfair pay review. One of those teachers was an *International Workers of the World* (IWW) member who had been active in the Angry Language Brigade. In the process of organising and taking direct action, the majority of teachers joined the IWW. Those teachers won an end to zero hours contracts, 5 days of sick pay, a pay policy, paid meetings, and paid CPDs.

Around February, Delfin teachers and IWW members in other TEFL schools in London then decided to make a leaflet to spread news of these victories to other workplaces. We specifically targeted schools in central London which are concentrated around Holborn and Oxford Street.

At the same time, we began holding events specifically aimed at TEFL workers. So far we've held a union rep training, a 'know your rights' training on zero-hour contracts which we are repeating, and an organiser training for individual workers who wanted to organise their schools.

We are holding these events on a monthly basis, and we're planning on having skype link-ups with ELT workers organising in other areas, and a rights workshop for non-native English teachers.

EW: You say these teachers 'specifically targeted' other schools – how did this work?

Ben: At this point the Delfin workers had already gone public to their employer as a union, so they had nothing to lose by standing outside schools giving out leaflets. But most of the work was actually done by IWW members who work in other industries. Sometimes it's difficult to distinguish workers from students, but many students have been happy to take a bunch of leaflets to give to their teachers, just as workers have given them to their workmates. We also set up a table with a banner, and covered the street in stickers.

The concentration of schools in these areas was a massive advantage for us, as well as the fact that there's a high turnover of workers between these same schools, who retain relationships with each other and can spread news of the victories and events.

EW: You mention zero hours contracts. What's the situation for teachers in London? How do poor working conditions affect their day to day lives?

Ben: Speaking to fellow teachers and IWW members in Dublin was actually quite revealing to me on how bad conditions in London actually are. Those workers told me of starting wages of €18-19 an hour for teachers, which equates to maybe £16-17. *My wage is £13 an hour*, which is an insult when you consider London prices, particularly rent, where £600-800 a month for a room is common. At my school we earn just enough to get by and come back to work next month. Also, this wage is only for in-class time, so the real wage is dismal. To add insult to injury, breaks, meetings and trainings are almost never paid. This is what makes the Delfin victories inspiring.

To be fair, my school is particularly bad. Many places offer £14-15 per hour as a starting wage. But even this, when compared to London prices is difficult to live on. The fact is, that when you factor in prep-time and all the rest, teachers' wages don't differ much from receptionists, admin staff and cleaners who also keep these schools running. The fact that we're all on zero-hours contracts also makes us equally disposable. Something that the TEFL Workers' Union is stressing is industrial unionism - as opposed to professional or craft unionism. This means we believe all workers in the same workplace should join the same union, no matter their profession.

EW: What do you think are some of the barriers to teachers joining a union in your context?

Ben: To be honest, in our experience so far inside and outside of the schools, we have found teachers to be largely receptive to the idea of joining a union. The issue lies more in getting people together to take action and defend their interests. In our union we stress the importance of training every member, and ideally every

worker, to be a workplace organiser. This means being able to talk to your workmates, getting them to meet together and agree on a series of tactics and a strategy that will be effective and safe for everyone. Joining and recruiting people to the union is just one part of this wider organising process, and often not the first step.

EW: So in the cases you know of, like the Delphin case, how have employers reacted to workers forming a union?

Ben: I don't know the exact details of everything that's happened, as I have neither worked nor acted as a rep there. However, from what the workers have told me, incompetence and powerlessness are some ways to describe it.

You should also know that Delfin has another branch in Dublin. By pure chance, teachers there started organising in Unite ELT shortly after the London teachers. As soon as the connection was made, the two groups started coordinating with each other.

One response of the bosses to workers' demands in London was to bring in a weekly shop of free food and drinks for the teachers. Apart from this being far from the decent contract that was being demanded, the teachers could easily ridicule this as they knew the Dublin workers already had such "perks".

EW: What are the goals of the TEFL Workers' Union?

Ben: While we have individual members in several schools, this summer we hope to establish a number of active workplace groups. If we achieve this before 2020, we hope to establish a TEFL Workers' Charter outlining the minimum requirements we demand from employers. This can form the basis for further organising in the future,

including actions co-ordinated across different workplaces.

In the medium term we hope to expand the union beyond London and establish branches in other areas. We are already in contact with workers in a number of cities in sight of this.

In the long-term, we also dream of launching some kind of mutual aid project for immigrant workers who wish to improve their English. This would require organisational structure as well as a curriculum with relevant content - Labour English, or something like that.

EW: Final question. What advice would you give to teachers reading this that are fed up and want to improve their working conditions?

Ben: If you are working in TEFL, and you want to improve your conditions, get in touch with the IWW and we will give you the training you need to do so, even if you're not a member. As for practical advice: *organise around a concrete material issue* and not ideas about politics or unions. Invite workmates to talk with you individually about this issue outside of work, and build towards a group meeting where you can establish a plan of action. The basic cell of a union is when two or more workers meet together to improve their conditions. Without this basic cell, we have no power. Get in touch and stay updated on our facebook page. Solidarity!

Names have been changed to protect identities

Check out the TEFL Workers' Union (London) FB page: www.facebook.com/teflworkers

THE ADVENTURES OF TEFL TONY

THE TORSO-LESS TEACHER

Swowski Mr
To TeFlTony@bitmail.com ▾ 7:52

Dear Tony,

Well done - you have job! At our Big Ben English we offer you:

- o attractive celery
- o comforting accomodations
- o legal (yes it is!) contract

Please reply with yes asap,
Mr. Swowski



contact: theeltworker@gmail.com