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Why won't UCL treat us cleaners like its other staff?

Leia Maia Donda

We are on strike today because the university refuses to give outsourced workers the same rights as direct employees

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I clean the hallways of one of the richest universities in the world. But last year, when I was recovering from surgery, my family was the only thing standing between me and homelessness.

I've been at University College London for seven years and worked hard to become a cleaner supervisor. Despite my promotion, I haven't had a single day off for two years. I've undergone two major surgeries and had to use up all my holiday time on recovery because I can't afford to be off sick.

As an outsourced worker, I am not entitled to the sick pay granted to the university's direct employees. Instead, I get statutory sick pay, which means I am paid nothing the first three days I am sick and then after that I only get £94.25 a week. My pension contributions from the university are far below those of direct employees and we are entitled to only the legal minimum maternity leave.

When I was recovering from surgery, the other members of my family had to pick up the slack with rent and bills. The problem is my whole family works for UCL under those same terms and conditions, so sacrifices have had to be made: credit card payments missed, smaller meals eaten, overtime worked. We live in fear of not making ends meet.

Earlier this year, we decided we had had enough. We started organising through our union, the [Independent Workers Union of Great Britain](#), to fight back. This culminated on 19 November when more than 300 of us - cleaners, porters and security officers - went on [the biggest strike](#) of outsourced workers in UK higher education history. For the first time in our lives, we weren't invisible.

Today we are back on the picket line, but this time we are being joined by hundreds of academics and other direct employees that are [striking through their union](#), the University and College Union, over their own [terms and conditions](#). They are fighting to protect their pensions and to stop the growing casualisation of their work.

By standing together we are sending a clear message: even though the system may try to divide us, through arrangements such as outsourcing, we know the real division isn't between teachers and cleaners, but between the workers that keep the university running and the vice-chancellors who get rich off our work.

It is clear to me that until we tackle the scourge of outsourcing that allows UCL and many other universities to ignore outsource workers, the direct employees will never win their fight against casualisation. That's because the university and its contractors are deeply committed to maintaining this arrangement. Our last strike happened in defiance of [tactics by UCL's contractors](#) trying to stop us. I was called by someone from Sodexo, asking about my role in the strike and who else was involved. They hung up when I asked for their name.

Afterwards, they tried to shame me for giving a TV interview about our campaign. This is my job, my life. My family is being exploited and treated

like second-class citizens, so yes I will speak to the press and I'll go out on strike as many times as it takes, because things need to change.

Our pressure has resulted in some concessions. Last week UCL said it will make improvements to our sick pay, wages and other conditions over the next two years, without giving any details or indicating whether we will achieve parity with directly employed staff. In any case, I'll believe it when I hold the contract in my hands. It has known about these issues for years, and did nothing until we started fighting back.

Even with the concessions it is starting to give, it is not willing to agree to our main demand: to end outsourcing and make us direct employees. After years of arranging its classrooms, cleaning its offices and keeping its students safe, we think we've earned the right to be treated as equals.

Leia Maia Donda is a 42-year-old mother of three, janitor and janitorial supervisor from Brazil

On the day this article was published, UCL contacted the Guardian to say that the university had committed to equalising pay and benefits for its outsourced staff

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