

THE ELT WORKER



An Injury To One... John Whipple

'An injury to one is an injury to all'—a motto familiar even to non-union people. The phrase originates from the IWW union, or Industrial Workers of the World (also called the 'Wobblies'), words that have inspired millions to fight racism, overcome fascism, and organise against workplace injustice.

As a grassroots union the IWW holds to this principle today. In recent years it has seen a resurgence in membership due to the lack of workplace democracy worldwide and the precarious conditions millions of workers suffer under. Their direct, grassroots approach also appeals to workers tired of the piecemeal methods of traditional unions. This article reports on a training session the IWW gave recently in Ireland.

Wobblies in Ireland

ELT Advocacy Ireland planned a training event with the London IWW. We wanted their trainers to bring the principles, workplace strategies and direct action tactics successful in London to the IWW's newest Ireland branch and help us build better,

stronger ties *between* workers and bigger wins *against* ELT bosses.

The organisers came to Dublin and gave us an ELT version of their famous Organising Training 101 (OT101) which is worth the membership fee alone. The training took place in a community centre on Dublin's northside on 26th January with the IWW paying for flights and expenses and attendees covering the venue.

Ireland's IWW had the place festooned with banners and stickers and the trainers brought presentations, stories, four structured activities and role-plays to inspire us.

'Direct Action gets the Goods'

Both the London-based *Angry Language Brigade* (2012-14) and the organisers in *ELT Advocacy Ireland* (2014-Present) were deeply inspired by the IWW's approach. The event taught us how to build solidarity and union membership in a workplace, how to go from a chat with a colleague, or a complaint about workplace procedures, to a march on the bosses' office and shut down the school if required.

Unlike the more bureaucratic 'business' unions, this training event taught us how to *communicate directly* with power structures and how to confront that power and win. That's something we need to do more: discover what it means to fight ...and learn what it means to win.

Because it's time unscrupulous owners sheltering under the sham regime of 'self-regulation' and the

silence of mainstream ELT institutions are confronted. To this end, workplaces which intimidate and belittle their staff, and schools which don't pay a living wage, need a physical and uncompromising union presence. The Grafton College closure, just one of many Irish school closures that intermittently explode to the detriment of students and teachers alike, is proof of why we need militant occupation-ready people who know how to bang on doors and close down classrooms when bosses steal, cheat or 'forget' to pay.

We need direct action in schools and outside of them as part of a long-term strategy of *change*. Schools are vulnerable to direct action because of the reputational damage it causes. Direct action also brings teachers, 'customers' and other stakeholders together in a way that's hard for school owners to 'divide and rule'. It's also a process of learning—only by taking direct action will we learn how an ELT business really works! (And it's not a pretty sight...)

Legendary IWW activist and singer Joe Hill said it best. When the next school closes we need to be ready to get up off the floor and demand what's rightfully ours.

'Don't Mourn, Organise!'

Credit: logo from [IWW Ireland website](http://www.iwwireland.org)

2. Are you currently ...

- Employed full-time (30+ hours per week)
- Employed part-time (< 30 hours per week)
- Unemployed

ELT working conditions survey 2019

Aileen Bowe

We know how much money the ELT industry brings into the economy, but we don't have statistics on teacher working conditions. The industry benefits from this invisibility and individual teachers often feel they're on their own.

*How many of us are hourly paid?
How many of us do extra unpaid work every day?
What's the average ELT wage?*

These are all questions this survey set out to answer.

Preliminary results

I knew my own bad experiences in language schools, and knew I was not alone, but I wanted to claim with some certainty and backed by hard data that the ELT industry *systematically abuses teachers* and state *how*. So I launched this survey on January 25. So far I've received 92 responses—ideally I'd like over a hundred. It is my hope that teachers will read the survey results (still ongoing), understand the full extent of the problem, and *act*.

Let me share a few of the comments I've received so far:

On ELT as a career

—It's a not a long-term career, no one with kids sticks around. We're treated as expendable by the industry.

—There is lots of job satisfaction but very little security. I would not have been able to do it without another breadwinner in the household.

On pay and remuneration

—I usually work 40 hours plus every week but I'm only paid for 24 hours contact time; if I teach more than that I'm paid overtime. I appreciate that my hourly rate is higher than most but this isn't offset by the amount of work I end up doing. Schools need to stop buckling to the demands of agents and paying ridiculous rates of commissions and invest this in their teachers!

—I don't do it for the money but for love of teaching and love of English. But I do wish compulsory weekly CPD sessions were paid.

On working conditions

—Working in language schools is based on exploitation. No wonder being an ELT teacher is generally not considered a proper career.

—Worked to the bone in summer (30-35 hours a week, despite pleading for less) and left home without work in winter months struggling to pay rent.

What I want the research to do

First, I want teachers to be aware that what's happening to them is not normal, nor is it their fault.

Second, I want teachers to start a simple conversation with their colleagues about what they *want* and what they can do to *enact change*.

Third, I want teachers to accept the reality of the situation, take on the responsibility for changing things, and get inspired by what has been happening in other places such as in Ireland (see issues 1 and 2).

My own personal breaking point

For years, I tried to 'make it work' and I allowed myself to be treated like dirt in schools in the hope of finding a good job. Eventually, I was able to make the decision that I wasn't going to put up with abusive employment any longer and once I started questioning things, I couldn't stop. A few years ago I was lucky to get involved with the activist teachers in *ELT Advocacy Ireland* working to improve the industry. Their example inspired me to bring the movement to the UK.

We're treated as expendable by the industry.

Exploitation is built into the foundation of the ELT industry. Schools pretend that they are providing education and insist on teachers being highly qualified and completing mountains of paperwork, while not paying us for these hours. We're treated like disposable puppets to peddle a dictated way of learning from coursebooks with a CELTA that commodifies teacher education into a lucrative 4-week course. It is the debasement of education for profit; an industry in which a good job will always be out of reach and you'll never be a 'real teacher'. You will have the qualifications and duties, but you won't be able to get a mortgage or start a family.

We're treated like disposable puppets ...

We're the Deliveroo drivers of the education sector

We have more in common with Deliveroo drivers than we do with public sector teachers. English language teachers are part of the precariat class. Your boss knows it, the school owner knows it and they believe you're not going to ruffle any feathers by asking awkward questions about pay because if you do you'll get no more classes.

What can I do?

Ruffle. If you truly care about ELT as a career, forget about updating your teaching blog, commenting on the latest research on Twitter or upskilling in your own time. Working conditions are, in my opinion, the only issue worth talking about in ELT. Until we have security and decency in our working lives, it is unconscionable to take part in the bastardised sham that is continuous professional development (CPD).

Instead, get talking to your colleagues about working conditions, salaries, holiday and sick pay, unpaid working time, zero hours contracts, discrimination against 'non-native' teachers, etc. Go talk to a union with a couple of colleagues. Write about your experiences. Contact your local politician to make them aware. If you're in middle management, question the things you're being asked to do. Whatever you do – don't sit back and let other teachers do all the heavy lifting for you. Now is the time to get involved.

Finally, thanks to all the teachers who have contributed so far. For teachers reading this – please fill in [the survey](#) (closing on 25 March) so we can move one step closer to better working conditions for all!



Blasts from the past

In this column we ask 'veterans' to tell us how ELT used to be. We start with Geoff Jordan on teaching in Spain in the early 80s.

I began my ELT career in 1981 in Barcelona. I'd visited a few times in the 1970s and loved it. Perfect weather, tremendous hustle and bustle, and a fine anarchist tradition stood alongside an outdoor, socially vibrant culture where people sat in plazas or bars, had three-hour dinners in crowded restaurants, and went to bed at 2am. The streets weren't clogged with cars. There wasn't a mobile phone or computer in sight. The centre had yet to be conquered by tourists, and everybody seemed to be having fun.

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Landing on my feet

After a few crap gigs, I got a position at the prestigious *ESADE Idiomas*, located where the rich people lived. The car park was full of Mercedes and BMWs; their houses full of domestic servants to look after their immaculately coiffured miniature dogs.

The language school was housed in a comfortable but quirky five-floor building with twenty-two classrooms and a well-stocked bar on the top floor. There were around forty teachers, all relatively young

teachers from UK, USA, Canada and Australia using an extraordinarily diverse range of methods. There was the 'official' Direct Method, as well as Community Language Learning, Silent Way, Natural Approach, and Total Physical Response among others.

How we worked

The place was run an Australian oddball who drank like a fish, dressed in fifteen-year-old suits and faded ties, and ran the place with a mixture of total tolerance towards the staff and exacting standards of organisation and admin. In the ELT world of the time, *ESADE Idiomas* was considered to be in a class of its own—with the best premises, the best facilities, the best courses and the keenest teachers in Barcelona ... who were paid the best salaries.

...teachers could
do what they
liked.

We did courses at all levels with syllabuses and tests, but providing both teachers and students thought that good progress was being made, teachers could do what they liked. There were no student evaluations, no class observations apart from the ones we organised ourselves, and no formal assessments of our work.

The only thing we had to do was have a long lunch with the director before the summer break, where we'd talk about how we'd done and our plans for next year.

Teaching situation

In today's world, where teachers are told what and how to teach, carefully monitored and

routinely evaluated, it's hard to explain just how positive the freedom we were given *felt*. We felt not just respected and safe, but inspired to do our very best. I've never been in a teachers' room that had anywhere near the same level of energy, enthusiasm, and commitment.

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We were all on permanent contracts, paid a monthly salary depending on the hours we worked, and had union representation.

After two years, I got a twenty-five-hours a week contract (the maximum allowed) and was paid roughly €35,000 a year in today's money. I had eighteen weeks paid holiday a year, so could make extra money doing summer intensives. I had a work permit, pension, and full social security and health coverage.

Life in Spain

Remember that back in 1982, Spain wasn't expensive, and restaurants were absurdly cheap. A typical *Menu Del Dia* – salad, macaroni cheese, steak and chips, flan, coffee and as much wine as you could drink – would cost less than €2 in today's money. We were rich! Well, not as rich as the doctors and lawyers we taught, but richer than the plumbers and electricians who today earn more than teachers. My wife, two kids and I lived in a beautiful flat in the old town; we went to good restaurants and took holidays all over Spain.

In the evenings ... *I mean after 10pm* ... we went to bars either side of the Ramblas—there were dozens of them, all offering tapas, small glasses of brandy, a glass of wine, or a *caña* (draft beer) for 10 cents,

and mixed drinks like gin and tonic with measures you could hardly believe for 20 cents! Once in a while we'd go to *Boadas*, Barcelona's famous cocktail bar, where the barmen threw bottles around with extraordinary skill and daring.

It may sound like the nostalgic ramblings of an old man, but I remember vividly how enthusiastic we all were: swapping ideas, making materials, visiting each other's classes, talking shop in the teachers' room, in bars, or in our homes till way after midnight.

There were about twenty of us determined to replace grammar teaching and testing with 'learning by doing'. Spurred on by Krashen and Tarrell, Stevick and Fanselow, we zoomed in on the nuts and bolts of classroom practice: how to get the students really engaged; how to coax long speaking turns out of them; how and when to offer feedback; how to convey the message that there was more to learning than grammar instruction.

The teachers' room buzzed with excitement; honestly it did.

New times

But how suddenly and catastrophically things changed! Spain was hit by the economic recession of the early nineties and by 1995, *ESADE Idiomas* had gone from one of the most innovative language schools in Spain to a burnt out shell; from a school fiercely dedicated to liberal, humanistic education in the tradition of John Dewey, Paul Goodman, and Colin Ward, to just another business dedicated to profit.

The spark, the energy, and the creativity disappeared. Students became clients. Teachers were ordered to use a coursebook and follow prescribed, client-oriented procedures under a new regime.

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A new environment emerged, and talk of placement incentives, drop-out avoidance measures, and customer satisfaction feedback loops seeped into the staffroom. Relentless teacher 'evaluation' involved managers in suits telling teachers in jeans that 'We need to dialogue around your choice of work attire.'

Not surprisingly, the old guard quickly left, to be replaced by more managers and self-employed teachers on zero hour contracts.

By 2004 it was all over. *ESADE Idiomas* closed.

We left Barcelona, and headed for the hills.

If you're an ELT veteran and you'd like to write a column about how things 'used to be' for you – then drop us a line at theeltworker@gmail.com

THE ADVENTURES OF TEFL TONY "THE TORSO-LESS TEACHER"

