

Joint Union Statement on agency workers and workers on construction sites

We write as the four campus unions on behalf of and in solidarity with agency workers and construction workers working at Durham, many of whom have no formal union recognition. Durham University was one of the first universities to stop business as usual and move to online teaching. However, for two groups of workers at Durham University, the University's response has not been clear or adequate, these are agency staff (particularly those working in security and admin) and subcontracted construction workers involved in new buildings or repair work

Workers on construction sites at Durham University - #ShutTheSites #PayTheWorkers

Instructions from the government that work should continue on building sites with 'safe' practices has seen calls to #ShutTheSites trending on twitter. Many workers have shared photos showing the impossibility of two meter social distancing, insanitary and overcrowded conditions, a lack of hand sanitizer and overcrowded canteens or changing areas. The university was ahead of the curve in responding faster than the government in calling for a suspension of business as usual. This was the right decision. However, it is not clear that the same decision was taken with subcontractors for construction workers working at Durham.

Durham University currently has three major building sites (the new maths/computer science building, the business school and the new colleges) as well as several locations where repair or modification work has been ongoing. We have received information that the maths building has now been paused. We would like to seek the following clarifications:

1. What decisions have been made regarding suspending construction work on campus?
2. What health and safety inspections have taken place for construction workers on Durham University construction sites?
3. If work is suspended, will the university seek assurances that contractors and subcontractors will continue to pay their workers?

The four campus unions believe work should stop on all construction sites with workers continuing to be paid.

Agency workers on campus – protect security guards and admin staff

Our colleagues in security who work for Mitie and those who work in professional services roles for gems, will qualify only for statutory sick pay.

For our colleagues working for agencies, and for Mitie in particular, we are very concerned that statutory sick pay is inadequate to meet their basic living costs. Moreover, staff are only eligible to claim when working, which may force staff to attend work sick. It is also not clear if they will be paid for longer periods or if they lose their shifts.

Both of these issues are the result of the decision of university management to outsource core services and particularly security. Even at the best of times, our colleagues in security can still face difficulties making ends meet, with limits on the benefits they can claim whilst being 'employed' on zero hour contracts. These problems and the risk of these workers being particularly badly affected financially during any coronavirus illness are a direct result of management outsourcing. We note that outsourcing will continue on campus with the new colleges' cleaning and porters being employed through Global Campus Villages.

Given these problems which are well known and the poor reputation of Mitie nationally in their treatment of staff, we are very disappointed that the new colleges will see staff outsourced to campus living, with the potential risk of similar poor employment terms and conditions.

So we ask the following questions:

1. Will the university work with agencies that employ staff on campus to ensure all agency staff can claim statutory sick pay from day one and that they can do this without having to be in work?
2. What additional financial support will the university offer to agency staff that have to take sick leave if statutory sick pay is insufficient to meet basic living costs and rent? If not why not?
3. Does the university take responsibility for the low pay and poor working conditions of agency staff like security guards? If not why not?
4. Will the university commit to end outsourcing and the use of agency staff in all future contracts?

5. Will the university commit to bring existing agency staff back in house?

Signed collectively,

Durham University GMB, Durham University University and Colleges Union, Durham University Unison Branch, Durham University Unite Branch.