

Time's Up! Get ready for Action!

CAO agreement

In the last collective labour agreement (CAO) between university managers (VSNU) and the unions, a series of agreements were made to address the growing crisis of precarious working conditions in the sector. While the agreement was a tacit acknowledgement of the structural dependence of Dutch Universities on temporary staff, it failed to address the issues of the (by far) largest group of them: Docenten. Universities simply refused!

At the time, many were outraged by the refusal of the VSNU to acknowledge the severity and urgency of the situation. In fact, 45% of AOB members voted to reject the CAO altogether. The decision to allow thousands of colleagues to continue to work in insecure conditions, moving around every few months in search of a new contract, without enough time to carry out research, offer proper support to their students, or have a healthy separation between their work and their personal lives, is symptomatic of the wider problem in the sector. Universities see their casual staff members as expendable, cheap alternatives to permanent employees that can be hired, fired, and replaced at will. Whatever the human cost or the consequences for the quality of education.

Doomsday clock

In an attempt to pour oil on troubled waters, the VSNU and the unions promised that each university management (CvB) would engage with the unions in local negotiations (lokaal overleg) in order to come up with specific solutions for docenten and other early career academics. However, 0.7 and Casual Academy were no longer willing to be passive recipients of policy from up high, and decided to publicly hold the universities and unions to their promise. We demanded that the spirit of the CAO be applied. This means that the outcome of the LO negotiations should be adequate working conditions for all employees.

In September of this year we launched a '[Doomsday Clock](#)', calling on CvBs across the country to make good on their promise and make concrete proposals to address the massive and growing numbers of temporary docenten, on which universities have become so reliant. If universities failed to do so, the call made clear that in the next semester we would escalate the pressure and organise direct and industrial action to force the CvBs to make good on their word. The call was supported by WOinActie, as well as by the unions. Responses to the call have been mixed.

Responses from CvBs

Across the country - in Leiden, Maastricht, Utrecht, Nijmegen, Amsterdam and Groningen - CvBs agreed to meet with casual staff and action groups to 'hear the concerns' (see for example [this account](#) of the meeting in Leiden). While Maastricht University, Groningen University and the UvA have not yet responded to the demands of their casual campaigns, Utrecht University has presented [a plan as well as significant funding](#). Local 0.7 activists said:

The university has taken major steps towards addressing our concerns, which are workload and temporary contracts, in addition to [a longer running project](#) and ongoing efforts to improve social safety. Although we will continue to critically follow the implementation of these plans as well as further pressure Utrecht University to fight for ample financing of higher education, we are satisfied with the results and want to thank them for their efforts.

Radboud University has been welcoming to engage in conversation, and talks on social safety are ongoing, but there has been little additional action with regards to the implementation of the CAO. Their official response is also still due. Activists at the university said:

As a follow-up we want Radboud University to publicly respond to the efforts of Utrecht University and explain why they don't implement the same plan. If Utrecht can compose a plan to reduce the out-of-control workload and temporary contracts for structural work, why not Radboud? This response should come sooner rather than later, since we expect Radboud University to have a more concrete plan of action by the end of the semester.

In Leiden, the university released a [statement](#) on Friday, in which they state that all lecturers performing structural work should get a permanent position; that temporary contracts should be extended to periods of 4 to 6 years; and the university should provide better career counseling. Casual Leiden activists said:

While this sounds promising, in the same memo it is stated that shorter term contracts are still possible under ill-defined circumstances. Moreover, it is true that the promise to make structural positions permanent is in line with Casual Leiden's demands, it is also simply a restating of the current legal obligations of the institution. In the absence of clear guidelines, which detail how exactly the university plans to make this a reality, these promises remain just that. We therefore welcome the university acknowledging our concerns, but we are also clear that more pressure will be necessary to transform labour relations in the university. [It is time for action.](#)

More action

The fact that these meetings happened in response to our call, and that at least three universities have felt it was necessary to be seen to take action, demonstrates that pressure and action work! It is the only language that our managers understand. In fact, it is striking that the most complete responses to our demands came from the CvBs in those institutions where casual staff have been organised for the longest time. However, the limited scale of these outcomes also demonstrates that more action and more pressure will be necessary to solve the problems faced by all casual staff in Dutch higher education. The struggle, therefore, continues.

In the months ahead local and national groups will move to organise demonstrations, sit ins, and industrial action across the country, starting with our national day of action on the 14th February, held under the title: [The University Won't Love Us Back](#). We will need the support of all staff and students across the sector, and we will be calling on our colleagues and students in the months ahead, both online and offline. **For now, supporters can:**

- Sign the petition [Academia does not love us back - Petities.nl](https://www.petities.nl) it will continue until the end of the semester.
- Make their support visible by printing these posters [Petitie \(zeropointseven.nl\)](https://www.zeropointseven.nl) and spreading them around offices.
- Take pictures of themselves, their colleagues, and their friends, holding up [these signs](#), and post them on all social media outlets using these hashtags: #staffshouldstay, #casualacademy, #academiawontloveusback, #casual[name of your institution]. You can download a template from [the website of Casual Leiden](#)
- Free the 14th of February in your agenda to demonstrate with us. Convince your colleagues and students to join as well.
- Enroll in your local 'casual group' (see [here](#) and [here](#)) or contact us to raise a new one.
- Support local action. For example, in Leiden activists are getting ready for action in the next semester. They said:

It is only through visible and sustained campaigning that the CvBs have even been prepared to acknowledge us and issue statements of intent. It is clear that only more action will deliver real, structural, and meaningful change. Only when we stop the normal running of the university, will management be forced to change its ways. It is time for a real new normal. This is why CasualLeiden will continue to mobilize and why we are asking for your support. [Pledge your support](#) for further action and join the fight for a better, fairer, and more inclusive university. All information will remain completely confidential and no action will be called without an open, democratic assembly that will collectively decide on the way forward. By signing this pledge you are indicating your support to the campaign as well as the actions you are prepared, in principle, to participate in.

Time's up! Get ready for action.

Across the country, our goal is a simple one: we believe all staff in our universities deserve fair, respectful, and dignified working conditions. As long as our universities fail to meet these basic expectations, and continue to rely on casualisation, we will bring the action to them. While the failure of successive governments to adequately fund higher education is undoubtedly an issue - and one which the recent government agreement once again replicates - we refuse to be the casualties of a conflict that our managers are avoiding to take on. We continue to hope that the CvBs will hear our message and acknowledge the crucial work done by thousands of colleagues on temporary contracts, who carry out key, vital, and structural work in our institutions. And we continue to hope that they will realise that it is urgent time to treat these colleagues with the basic respect and dignity that they deserve. But since our doomsday clock has come to an end, we also tell them: Time's Up! Get Ready For Action!