

UCU 2019 strike bulletin #1

SOLIDARITY WITH THE UCU

ALL OUT ON NOVEMBER 25TH



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Socialist Party members in the UCU (University and Colleges Union) strongly support the call for eight days of consecutive strike action taking place at 60 institutions on two separate ballots. The decisive 79% and 74% yes votes for strike action over pensions and over pay and conditions respectively shows the determination of members to fight over pay, casualisation, equality and workloads.

Like many workers we've had enough of the unacceptable attacks on our pay and working conditions. Workloads are through the roof, with UCU research suggesting that HE (Higher Education) staff are working an average two days unpaid overtime a week. Yet despite the huge workload, a large proportion of university staff aren't in secure employment: up to 30% of teaching is done by hourly-paid workers, 46% of universities use zero-hour contracts

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for teaching and 68% of research staff are on fixed-term contracts. On top of this, even on employers' own calculations, real-term pay has been reduced by 17% since 2010, they won't address the gender and ethnic pay gaps and some university staff are being paid less than £10 per hour. While at the same time, senior pay has soared, the average university vice chancellor earns a 'basic' salary of over £250-thousand pounds and attends the meeting that sets their own pay. We think it should be university staff, students and the wider community who help make decisions on pay and ensure decent working conditions for all.

On pensions, since the momentous 14 days of strike action last year, which successfully halted proposed changes to USS which would have seen members over £10,000 a year worse off, we have seen our contributions rising. The scheme managers have opted to ignore the recommendations in favour of making staff pay more, with member pension contributions rising from 8% before the last strikes to 9.6% of their salary now. This shows that management can't be trusted, and that sustained struggle is needed, especially as further increases are currently on the cards from 2021.

The successful ballot for action on these issues represents a massive step forward in the fight back against the marketisation of higher education and a growing confidence in our membership. (UCU has made huge progress since the 2-hour strike of 2014!) Victory in this dispute could have a massive effect, not only for current and future workers in higher education but for other sectors facing attacks on pay and working conditions.

United struggle

The timing of both the ballot and the strike action has been subject to much discussion within the union. We support the swift call for 8 days of action which shows that the union is serious about fighting back. Last year our determined struggle to defend

our pensions helped revitalise UCU with increased militancy, activists and attracting huge numbers of new members.

We understand of course in the run up to Christmas the action is going to cause financial hardship – we encourage all UCU branches to work with their local Trades Council and the National Shop Stewards Network to call on other unions for donation to a local strike fund as well as building support from the public.

We support the UCU HE NEC (National Executive Committee) decision to combine the two ballots into joint strike action, which means that more universities can participate in the action, with a greater overall impact. It is also the best way of bringing together the wide range of HE staff affected by different issues together, building a stronger and united campaign capable of pushing the bosses back.

However, we must be prepared for potential threats to solidarity. There is a danger that one of the issues we're fighting for becomes dominant. If, for example, the union wins concessions on pensions, this could dampen the mood to continue to fight on workload. The best way of avoiding this is for members to be clear on what it is we are fighting for. A lack of clarity about this represents a weakness in the UCU's national strategy currently. As a starting point, we support UCU's positions demands of no detriment in pensions, a manageable 35 hour working week, a paid overtime scheme and the scrapping of zero hours contracts. But we think UCU should be clear that we will not capitulate on any of these issues. If current management cannot provide solutions to these problems, they need replacing, but not just with more of the same.

We raise the need for an anti-austerity government to support us, to invest in our education system to provide enough staffing levels to enable a 35-hour week for all, with guaranteed hours, no need

for regular overtime and to ensure sickness and holiday rights for all workers. We call for a £12 per hour minimum wage without exemptions, as a step towards a real living wage of at least £15 an hour and an annual increase in the minimum wage linked to average earnings. We also call for the government to underwrite the pension fund to ensure no detriment permanently, this will only be possible with the nationalisation of the banking system.

Democratic control of the strike

It's especially important during strike action that our locally elected union officers show strong leadership. Democratically elected strike committees are needed in every branch, we should have picket line about how to run the dispute and members meetings to discuss report-back from national talks. If we don't win concessions early, elected representatives from all branches should meet to discuss and determine the strategy and tactics going forward, including the possibility of further action.

The fact that the strike coincides with the general election campaign must be seen as an opportunity to expose the cut imposed on higher education by the Tories over the last decade. It is vital that we link up with students and do not allow management to divide us. Our fight against the increasing marketisation of HE is also one way of ensuring that students can have the education they deserve. The Socialist Party supports students and staff including the students' fight for the scrapping of fees, the cancelation of debts and for the return to full maintenance grants.

Last year UCU strikes were emboldened by support from the students including Socialist Students - we call on all students, trade union activists and local campaigners to support our fight against attacks on our pay and working conditions and on the increasing austerity imposed on the education sector.