

# UCU HE STRIKE:



# MOBILISE TO WIN!

The first wave of strike action, involving 48,000 members, saw some of our strongest ever picket lines across the institutions which took part. Combining the two disputes – pay/conditions and pensions – maximised the impact of the action and brought members affected by different aspects of marketisation together under one banner. The strength of this action is reflected by the additional 14 institutions that met the anti-union 50% voting turnout threshold in re-ballots, meaning that they can also now join in this round of action.

The bold and fighting strategy displayed in last term's eight-days of action (as well as the 2018 pensions strike) has attracted new members to the union, particularly those most exploited by management, including postgraduates and casualised staff. A new layer of activists has come to fore, leading the action in many areas. The action, which highlights different aspects of exploitation at Universities, has also received wide support from students – many also affected by poor pay and working condition – with many student unions voting to endorse and support the strikes.



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As a result of the action, the University and College Employers Association (UCEA) were forced to the negotiating table and have now accepted that pay inequality, workload and casualisation are national as well as local issues: this sets a new precedent and means that rather we can negotiate on these issues nationally. But we still have a long way to go. The recent offer made by UCEA fell woefully short of any meaningful change from the point of view of the employer. We need concrete, time-specific commitments to addressing these issues, including serious consequences if these are not met. Meanwhile, the talk of “flexible” pensions in the second “Joint Expert Panel” (JEP) report on pensions is a warning that employers may attempt to sneak in a break-up of the single pension scheme.

Management claim it is unaffordable to increase pay, but university income, surpluses and reserves have all increased. The increased workload, reliance on casualised staff and below-inflation pay rises are all part of the bosses’ deliberate strategy to slash staffing costs while increasing productivity or “outputs”, with no regard for the human damage suffered as a result. They are choosing to prioritise profit making and shiny buildings over staff wellbeing and favourable student learning conditions. A victory on pay is the most concrete way of ensuring the university management conceded to improving staff conditions and our share of income. This is the most concrete of the “four fights” demand and is the one where the least progress has been made.

The general election results put an increased urgency for an industrial strategy to win. We do not have the back-up option of a government that will legislate for improved working conditions or industrial relations. Instead, the election of a Conservative majority under Boris Johnson poses a real threat to the right to strike as outlined in the Queen’s speech. We also know that this parliament will implement changes to adult education funding which could bring further cuts and redundancies across HE and FE.

Building a fighting union, linked with other trade unions and student groups is the best preparation for future struggles which could open up in the sector.

Activists in all the education unions should now start advocating such a strategy and the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) could be an important vehicle for building this campaign and solidarity.

Our union has shown its potential to stand alongside other fighting trade unions and lead the fightback. We have already begun to win concessions as a result of our strike action so far - but we must persist and be prepared to reject any offer which falls short. This included re-balloting if necessary to keep up the momentum of the dispute.

There is of course some anxiety related to the pressure that strike action puts on members. However, it is vital that we maintain the pressure in order for negotiations to be successful. We have the employers on the back foot, but if they think that we can be bullied back into work then they will not feel forced into making concessions. It is ironic that the very issues at stake - low pay, insecure work and excessive working conditions - are what can make strike action difficult. That’s why it’s vital that we stay strong and united, so that we can ensure these issues are addressed.

Local branches should call on support from other unions in their areas and link up with their local Trades Councils to appeal for donations to the local strike pay fund.

The UCU leadership should show the unions the power of collective action and name a day before the end of the next period of strike action for a national protest where all the strikers can be brought together. This can help lift the confidence of members.

We are at a crucial juncture and the strength of this action will determine not only victory in the dispute but also the ongoing strategy for the transformation of the union. UCU is becoming a more fighting union, and in this process, we are developing a new activist layer which now must be organised to facilitate the transformation of the union to rank and file, member-led union capable of uniting with other trade unions to defend against attacks and transform society.

**The rank and file activists must be armed with the confidence and strategy to win on the two HE disputes as a starting point for a fightback across both further and higher education destroyed by decades of marketisation and austerity.**

- **The UCU should call for a summit of all the education unions including those representing support staff and students.**
- **The UCU should propose they launch a joint campaign in defence of Education to demand more funding.**
- **This campaign should name the date for a national demonstration in preparation for joint action.**

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