

Briefing for Referendum on Industrial Action

November 2022

Audience: Union Executive

Introduction

On Monday 24 October, [University and College Union \(UCU\) members confirmed that industrial action will take place in the 2022-23 academic year](#). This is a national dispute between UCU members and university employers. Industrial action is likely to take two forms, strikes by UCU members and 'action short of a strike' which is likely to include a marking boycott in 2023, potentially affecting examinations and assessments.

UCU recently held two votes of its members across the country, one on pay and conditions and one on pensions. In the pay and working condition ballot, the turnout was 57.8% and the yes vote for strike action was 81.1%. In the pension ballot, the turnout was 60.2% and the yes vote for strike action was 84.9%.

Three days of strike action have already been announced in November and it is expected that more strikes will take place in February and beyond in what UCU describe as 'escalating' action. At this stage it is not known how many strike days there will be. However, there is unlikely to be a quick end to this dispute as there is a significant difference between UCU's goals and the current offer from employers.

UCU had around 2,800 members at UCL in 2021 out of total staff of more than 13,000. Their members are mainly academic staff, but also include some professional services staff in areas such as libraries, ISD, estates and facilities, etc. Not all of these staff will go on strike, however UCU will be encouraging as many of its members as it can to take action.

During strike days, teaching for some students will be disrupted. Academics staff may also remove online materials linked to the topics that were due to be covered on those days. There are also likely to be picket lines – groups of staff protesting – outside a number of UCL buildings, encouraging other staff and students not to enter. These picket lines cannot prevent anyone entering, but will be trying to inform people about the reasons for the strike and discouraging other staff from attending work.

A number of UCL staff are members of other Trade Unions such as Unison and Unite. These Unions are not taking part in this strike action.

Following a meeting of the Union Executive on Thursday 10 November, the Union Executive have called a referendum to decide whether the UCU industrial action in the 2022-23 academic year should be supported by the Students' Union.

Why has industrial action been called by UCU?

Over the past few years, the pay of staff in universities has not risen as quickly as some other sections of the economy and has been below the rate of inflation. This year the national pay rise for university staff was 3% for most staff, with many also receiving additional pay progression of around 3%, meaning a total rise of in the region of 6%, whilst inflation has been running at closer to 12%.

Over the past twenty years there has also been a gradual increase in academic workload as student numbers and expectations have increased. Across the sector, there are also some pay disparities, where women, Black & Minority Ethnic (BME) and disabled staff are on average paid less than those who are male, white and non-disabled.

On the issue of pay and conditions, UCU are therefore asking for:

- » An increase in pay for all staff of at least inflation + 2% or 12%, whichever is the higher.
- » A nationally-agreed action across all universities, to close gender, ethnic and disability pay gaps.
- » An agreed framework to eliminate precarious employment practices by universities, which is a common means of employing staff working on research in particular due to the often short term funding associated with research grants.
- » Nationally agreed action to address staff workloads.
- » For the standard weekly, full-time contract of employment to be reduced to 35 hours, with no loss of pay.

There is also a disagreement between UCU and universities over staff pensions. Most UCU members are part of the national university pension scheme. This is one of the few remaining 'defined benefit' pension, where staff receive a pension based on their earnings over their career and their total years of employment with universities. This is a relatively generous scheme compared to many others, but is considerably less generous than in the past. Defined benefit pension schemes are still common in the UK public sector but have largely disappeared from the private and charity sectors due to their high costs for employers.

The value of the pension scheme is measured every few years to check that enough money is being paid in to meet the future costs of pensions that will need to be paid. At the time of the last formal valuation, the pension scheme was reported to be in a deficit of £14.1bn. This is because its total assets (money paid in by staff and the universities) was not enough to meet the scheme's total liabilities (the amount it is due to pay out in the future to pay for staff pensions). As a result, universities decided to reduce the pension benefits that staff will get in future and increase the payments that both the universities and staff make to the scheme.

This change together with a rise in the value of the scheme's investments has now brought the scheme back into balance. In February, the pension scheme valuation reported that assets had recovered to pre-pandemic levels and, as of January 2022, were valued at £89.3bn. In August, the [Financial Times](#) reported that the scheme now had a £1.8bn surplus. [UCU have always disputed](#) the previous valuation of the scheme and are now saying that the changes made last year were unnecessary. They are now asking universities to:

- » Reverse changes in the pension scheme made last year by reducing staff pension contributions and increasing the amount that staff will receive in pension payments.

- » Ensure that future valuations of the scheme's assets take a less risk adverse view of the likely pension costs the scheme will have to meet in the future.

What are the reasons why students may wish to support Industrial Action?

1. Staff in higher education have faced a reduction in their pay relative to other sectors of the economy and have also had to work longer hours with more staff on short term contracts. This has been a gradual change over many years, eroding their terms and conditions.
2. In the past year the national pay settlement was a long way below inflation – a real terms pay cut for staff at a time of high inflation.
3. The average pay of women, BME staff and those with disabilities is less than the average for men, white and non-disabled staff. This is unfair and action to address this has so far not been enough to address this issue.
4. Many university staff are employed on short term contracts, creating insecurity and making it especially challenging for early career staff.
5. The value of university staff pensions have reduced over time, with those retiring today and in the future receiving a less generous pension and having to make larger pension contributions.
6. Student support for the industrial action could increase the pressure on universities to address these issues, and may help UCU and universities to resolve the dispute sooner.
7. UCU argued that staff working conditions are student learning conditions – well motivated and fairly paid staff are more likely to deliver a great learning experience for students.
8. Postgraduate research students who are teaching assistants can be both members of the Students' Union and members of UCU. Some may be striking along with other staff. As their representative body, we should support them.

What are the reasons why students may wish to oppose Industrial Action?

1. The strikes will be damaging for students' education with cancelled lectures, seminars, tutorials and laboratories. Education at UCL has now been disrupted by industrial action for five consecutive academic years. Strikes have led to lost learning, delayed teaching, and increased assignment stress for many students. Students may feel that whilst they support UCU's aims, they do not wish for additional disruption to the student learning and wider experience.
2. We do not yet know how many strikes there will be and therefore the potential impact on students is unclear. But it appears likely to be a long dispute with significant impact for students affected.
3. The proposed marking boycott could be very damaging for students and could affect some students' progress on their degrees and even their final degree classifications which might impact on their employment and further study prospects.

4. Strikes means that students will not receive the full education experience that they have paid for through their fees.
5. Whilst staff have had a real-terms reduction in pay, many universities across the country cannot afford to pay staff more without cuts in services for students, staff redundancies or increases in student fees.
6. Whilst the university pension scheme has been reduced, it remains one of the most generous in the country, with universities contributing around 20% of staff salaries to the scheme – a very high level of employer pension contributions compared to other sectors of the economy.
7. The pension scheme must legally balance its assets and liabilities, any increase in benefits will be likely to increase university contributions to the scheme which may have to be funded by reductions in other spending that may affect students or increases in fees.
8. UCU's desire for a 35 hour working week for staff is out of line with the norms in wider society. In many organisations a working week of 37 hours or more is the norm.
9. UCU could have potentially used other tactics to impact universities, such as stopping work on research or in other areas of activity, which do not affect students so negatively.

What could the Union do to support the strikes?

The Students' Union can only take action on issues that fall directly under its charitable purpose. This means that it cannot use its resources to get involved in a dispute between university staff and their employer. Any support would therefore largely be symbolic. However, the Students' Union could:

- » Publish a statement in support of the UCU strikes.
- » Lobby UCL to encourage universities nationally to meet the UCU's demands.
- » Encourage students not to cross picket lines.
- » Sabbatical Officers could visit picket lines to demonstrate support.
- » Educate students about the reasons for the strike.
- » Inform students about protests, rallies, 'teach outs' and other events organised by UCU to support the strike.