



UCU Strike Bulletin

Produced by members of Workers' Liberty active in the University and College Union

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- ➔ **Maximise picketing**
- ➔ **For rank-and-file scrutiny over negotiations**
- ➔ **Reballot for action to hit marking**



As the strike enters its fourth week, increasing the size and effectiveness of picket lines is vital.

Although pickets are still smaller compared to the 2018 strikes, or the first round of the current action late last year, organising efforts led to many workplaces seeing larger pickets in week three. This is good news, and must be continued into week four.

Effective picketing means making an active effort to persuade workmates coming into work to turn round. As we said in our last bulletin: "In the 2018 strike, the union leadership wanted to call off action to ballot on an extremely shoddy offer. A big factor in what stopped them was that lively and well-attended picket lines acted as spaces for collective discussion, and a strong rank-and-file pushback to the leadership's strategy developed, which eventually forced them to change course and prevented the demobilisation of the strike at that point.

"Without something similar now, it becomes much easier for the union leadership to construct an unsatisfactory exit strategy from the dispute. That's not to suggest they're consciously looking to engineer a sell out, but seeing the dispute through requires continual pressure from below, even on leaders whose hearts may be in the right place."

We must also push for transparency in negotiations. The decision by UCU negotiators to respect the "confidentiality" of negotiations has had a negative impact

on democracy within the dispute. Without rank-and-file scrutiny over negotiations we've got no means of collectively assessing their progress and making decisions about the future direction of the dispute based on a clear understanding of how much we've pushed management back so far. Our ultimate aspiration should be for negotiations to be conducted in the open, but short of that we need regular (as close to "real time" as possible), comprehensive reports from our negotiators. It may be that there are concessions on offer that are worth taking; it may be that the bosses have hardly budged. Without transparency and scrutiny, we can't judge. The only significant public discussion has been around the 3% figure, which a "Statement from the Four Fights Negotiators" said had been put forward from the union side as part of a "potential path to resolving the dispute".

With our ballot mandate due to expire, there'll be a discussion about next steps. With strike fatigue beginning to set in, there'll be pressure to press pause for now, and possibly regroup and re-ballot at the start of the new term in September 2020. We believe this would be a mistake. Although hitting ballot thresholds again will be a challenge, putting off any further action for six months would mean a huge sacrifice of the momentum we've built up. Some of that will inevitably dissipate as a result of the Easter holidays, but a new ballot campaign - including balloting for strikes and ASOS aimed at disrupting marking - and potential action in the third term could help us regain it.

Disrupting exam processes is now our main form of leverage, so we must begin building towards that. Other direct actions that don't require a ballot, such as local demos and rallies, can also be organised to maintain momentum throughout exam periods.

In some places, it might make sense to call local strikes targeting particular events, such as open days.

Coronavirus and our dispute

The financial impact of the coronavirus, which is delaying language tests and visa processes for overseas applicants, is likely to lead to pressure on UCU to settle quickly and for a worse offer.

But Vice Chancellors have known for a long time that reliance on high fees from overseas students comes with big risks (and why should those students be charged more for the same education in the first place?). VCs' massive salaries are often justified by the need for smart thinking to deal with these "strategic challenges".

If their response to an international health crisis is to make staff pay for it, perhaps they should think again about whether they're in the right job.

Reflecting on strategy

The previous issue of this bulletin included a headline calling for strikes to disrupt exams, including via picketing exam halls.

Following discussion amongst UCU members in Workers' Liberty which reflected on this proposal, we've concluded it was a mistake.

Although we maintain our view that disrupting exams remains a key form of leverage, targeting the marking process rather than exam attendance is the main and most effective means of achieving that.

While local strikes during the third term may make sense in some areas, a generalised strategy of trying to use strikes and pickets to stop exams from taking place is likely to be counterproductive.

About Workers' Liberty

This bulletin is produced by members of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty active in the UCU.

We are a socialist group active in the labour and student movements in Britain, fighting for a revolutionary alternative to capitalism and Stalinism based on common ownership and workers' democracy. To find out more about our ideas and activity, visit our website at workersliberty.org, or email awl@workersliberty.org



Why we need a rank-and-file network



By Camila Bassi, chair, Sheffield Hallam UCU (pc)

My perspective and participation in the national dispute has very much been shaped by our local industrial dispute over workload intensification and stress.

What pushed our branch over the legal threshold in the national dispute was the 84.4% mandate in the local dispute, a dispute that has built up over a long time. Through the lens of the local struggle, our members have easily drawn the connections and seen the holistic picture.

Our local dispute has been directed by our well-attended branch meetings, our democratic sovereign body. Our branch committee of elected officers and reps has run the day-to-day of the dispute and formed our strike committee for the first eight days of action. We made this strike committee open to all members the run up to the current 14 days of action.

The organic development and participation of a collective of student activists called Hallam Students Support the Strike has added a critical dimension and point of leverage to our struggle: organising impressive solidarity action on the picket lines and through social media, and gaining us important national media coverage. At present, we are putting the

latest offer from local management to members. What we have learnt is that every time the employer has said they cannot offer more, and we have run and won an indicative ballot for action, run and won a legal ballot for action, struck, struck again, each and every time, the employer has moved.

Every time a local member has faced bullying management during this dispute, once they have told us, as a branch we have had their back. With no exceptions, management have backed down. We've grown our branch to record numbers. At the rank-and-file level, we have never been as confident and organised as we are now. This dispute has brought to the fore new faces, new energy, new confidence.

If the latest offer from management is accepted by our members, we recognise this moment as the beginning of a genuine, rank-and-file struggle.

We are planning to expand the number and activity of health and safety reps, and aim to carry out regular stress surveys, publicise the findings, apply pressure on management, and further grow the union. Before this industrial dispute, we had members who have never been on strike before, and members disillusioned by previous national strikes called for odd days and hours in months like June, when we are no longer teaching. What this local dispute has taught all of us is, if we organise properly, from the rank and file, we move forward, we gain.

Our experience locally demonstrates the critical need for a national rank-and-file network. The 2018 USS pensions dispute

saw embryonic forms of rank-and-file organisation, but specific to the pre-92 sector.

The network we need would be open to affiliation from branches, with transparent and democratic structures. It might intervene in union elections, but capturing individual positions in union officialdom wouldn't be its primary purpose.

Such a network could fight for the formal structures of the union itself to open up and extend towards the grassroots, across the pre- and post-92 HE sector and FE sector, to not only horizontally share lessons in class organisation, but to understand how the local vertically connects with what is happening nationally.

For my branch, the disconnect is vast. We have no national negotiators in our branch, unlike our UCU comrades up the road at the University of Sheffield, and have been relying on social media and hearsay to decipher what might be happening nationally.

A rank-and-file network could demand the live streaming of national negotiations, which would promote accountability and democratic steer from local branches, and provide a clear sense on the ground of why we are, or should be, on the picket lines.

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Stepping up the action

By a Cambridge UCU activist

Numbers on the picket line have stayed static since the first round of strikes. We're evidently not losing momentum, but we're not noticeably gaining it either.

Picketing is down by approximately half compared with the 2018 USS pensions strike; somewhat disappointing for a union that grew during this period by over 16%

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nationally, and by more than 80% in Cambridge.

The strike has allowed us to lay better foundations for longer-term union building. A number of people have stepped up to help organise their departments and become active reps, and importantly in the case of some traditionally poorer unionised faculties, such as Neuroscience, Astronomy, and Physics.

Cambridge University remains one of just five UCU branches in the UK (out of over 150+) that aren't yet recognised by the employer. Having active departmental reps in every department and faculty will only strengthen the case to change this, and should be a priority campaign locally irrespective of the outcome of this round of strikes.

This coming week could make or break the strike. If activity doesn't escalate during week three, it is difficult to see why UCEA, UUK, or USS would budge.

There will soon be a long break between

academic terms, and the strike ballot runs out in May. Time is running out. If member morale ebbs, the pressure to accept anything that looks like a slight improvement on the employers' latest offer will increase.

To win more, we need to step up the impact of our action. With over 1,600 members and well over 100 committed activists in Cambridge alone, a renewed drive to build effective picket lines, and call other direct action, such as occupations, in coordination with students, could force the hand of local management to intervene nationally. If other UCU branches did likewise, this could shift the balance of forces in our favour.

This shows the need both for local organisers to call for, and organise towards, heightened disruption, and for a national rank-and-file network in the union prepared to coordinate militant activists to take these steps in a joined-up manner.