



UCU Strike Bulletin

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

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- ➔ **Build solid pickets on every strike day**
- ➔ **For rank-and-file scrutiny over negotiations**
- ➔ **Disrupt exams: picket exam halls, boycott marking**



We've had five days of national strikes so far, with nine more scheduled.

Negotiations with the employers are ongoing, and we're told they're "constructive", but we have no further detail beyond that. Greater transparency in these negotiations is essential; rank-and-file members of the union need the right to scrutinise and assess what the employer is putting on the table, and collectively decide how to respond.

Lively pickets are being organised in many places, but on the whole the pickets since 24 February seem smaller than the October-November 2019 strikes, and than the USS pension strikes in 2018. Some branches are strategically deciding not to picket every day, in some places because they're conscious that workers can't afford to live close to their institutions and travelling in to picket is a financial burden to people already losing money due to being on strike. But ways need to be found around this, whether that's via agreed picket duties allowing people to rotate, or using hardship funds to pay for travel expenses. Allowing pickets to dwindle, or become token presences, will suggest to the employer that the strike is weakening, and relieve pressure on them to offer a new settlement. Most fundamentally, solid picketing on every strike day means maximising the possibility of persuading fellow workers, and students, not to cross, therefore maximising the disruption of the strike.

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.

After the next set of strikes, things become more difficult. The Easter break, when many staff will take leave or be away from campus, will necessarily slow things down. Unions should look to organise local actions, such as meetings and demonstrations, to keep as many people mobilised as possible, but some loss of momentum is almost inevitable. The question is, how can we ramp things back up and escalate after Easter, when we move into exam seasons, with schedules varying across different institutions?

The aim must be to disrupt exams and marking. None of us will relish the impact this will have on our students, but the nature of the work we do means this is where we have most leverage. We must look to call action that will disrupt the exams themselves, and the period of marking afterwards.

The AUT, one of UCU's predecessor unions, called a marking boycott in 2006. It was fairly effective, and would've been even more so if the union leadership hadn't called it off prematurely. Since then, a precedent has been set whereby many institutions view boycotts as a form of strike, and will dock full pay. We have to be prepared for that, but not intimidated by it.

A national programme of selective and rolling strikes, with dates determined by input from local branches depending on what would be more disruptive in their particular institutions, targeting exam days

themselves, with an ongoing marking boycott in between strike days, could be a next step. That might seem like a de-escalation following two rounds of all-out national strikes, but if it was planned and executed effectively it could be an step up in terms of the impact of the action.

For strikes on exam days to be effective requires solid pickets, as well attended as possible, that made a real effort to prevent students and other workers from crossing. Exams are often administered by non-academic staff who aren't in UCU.

Appeals not to undermine the strike should be made to them, both directly via picket lines and via the local campus organisations of unions such as Unison, Unite, and GMB.

French school workers boycott the bac

In January, school workers in France launched an invigilation and marking boycott of the baccalaureate.

Reforms to the exam system have been introduced, which will extend the exam period. Teachers say this will increase workload and put too much pressure on students.

The boycott disrupted the imposition of the new system. French school workers were right to assert their power where they had most leverage.

We should do the same.

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.