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The University Worker

A rank-and-file strike bulletin

WHERE NEXT AFTER THE MAB?

We started the MAB (Marking and Assessment Boycott) on the 20th of April. We are now into the fourth month of the industrial action. The response by university management has been to introduce punitive pay deductions, ranging all the way up to 100% for participating in the MAB. Members in branches have had to scramble to figure out how to make the MAB effective in their local institutions and departments, raise strike funds, respond to the employers, undertake legal action, organise local strikes (in some cases), all while trying to keep up morale.

In *The University Worker*, we argued for an indefinite strike at the end of 2022. The wise and learned leadership of the union and various bureaucratic factions argued that this wouldn't be possible. We argued for a MAB starting in the new year. Yet again, it got pushed back. The leadership pushed for action later in the year. Once we started the MAB, it became clear there had been next to no preparation for it from the national union. This was their strategy that we tried to make the best of. They have consistently tried to sabotage the action. Any advances are down to the tenacity of members to make the action work.

There are many different ways to carry out a MAB. In order to make it effective it needs planning and ground-work laid in advance. We have not been able to produce the leverage needed to force employers to make concessions in this phase of action. Currently, UCEA is refusing to negotiate and the leadership have come back empty-handed. This does not mean the MAB was a mistake - instead, it means we need to build more leverage to win this dispute.

This is not a belief shared by the national leadership. Congress voted for a summer re-ballot. Our current mandate ends on the 31st of September. Without a re-ballot, many of us will be forced back to work - without the protection of a live strike ballot or Action Short Of Strike (ASOS). The last HEC meeting did not vote on whether to action this congress decision and some of the leadership are now trying to push the decision into the long grass.

Industrial disputes go through phases of pushing forward and, too often in UCU, defeats. The risk now is that we become obsessed about who said and did what in the national bodies of the union, losing sight of the need to fight locally as well as nationally. Replacing leadership - whether the general secretary or others - will just bring in a new bureaucracy to the union. There can be no rank-and-file general secretaries. We can't vote for people who will solve this for us. What we need instead is a rank-and-file strategy to move the dispute forward.



Organise everyone, win a political victory over funding: This is how we go forward

However much we bemoan the fucking stupid nonsense going on in the upper echelons of our union, it's not the only factor behind our defeat. There is another glaring problem: when our union organises/disorganises strikes or marking boycotts, we have been unable to stop universities functioning.

After all the fighting over strategy, we ended up with a badly organised and ineffective version of these tactics. The strike was suspended and the MAB was given almost no preparation. Not only has this damaged our action now, but risked the possibility of arguing for it in the future.

This dispute has been brutal. The employers have had absolutely no desire to concede an inch to us. Due to a funding model that sees home student fee income declining in real value every year, some VCs are very...

highly motivated to offer us nothing at all. In response, we have escalated to new heights. The summer MAB was their nuclear option, and we deployed it without their help. But unlike Oppenheimer, the nuke was a dud. Universities are happy to send people off with either no final grades or grades achieved by ridiculous marking processes that clearly violate basic academic standards. We've discussed this dispute exhaustively, and come up with two major strategic conclusions.

First, we need to find a way to crank up the leverage further if we are to win future strikes - and the most obvious way to do this is by organising industrially (so that everybody who works in the university is organised together in one group, rather than academics striking whilst everyone else carries on working).

Second, we have to win a political victory on funding. It's not possible for us to win big over wages, pensions, casualisation and discrimination without also winning over university funding. The half-marketised £9k system is a roadblock in our way, and a system that directly harms students and wider society. It is both a practical necessity and a social responsibility for us to win a political battle over funding before as part of reshaping the way universities are run.

Third, We need a bottom up approach to the formation of our demands so that members feel a direct identification with the stakes of industrial action. Too often, a layer of members have passively endorsed ballots committing themselves to actions they have not expected for issues they do not understand. This has led to chronic scabbing and to the membership being defenceless in the face of bureaucratic power-bearing. The membership needs to take ownership of its demands and strategy. Only then can it control the union leadership and force the hand of employers.

1. Organise everyone

The pay grades we strike over apply to everyone employed by universities. But when we go out on the picket line, we do so primarily as academics, disconnected from the thousands of people who work alongside us in other roles. This is a completely ridiculous situation, that only prevails because the geniuses at the Trade Union Congress want to protect the membership income of UNISON, Unite, and GMB and prevent unions scrapping with each other. And it fucks us - because instead of shutting down universities over issues that affect all university staff, we end up standing on picket lines in the cold whilst everyone else goes into work. Strikes that interrupt not just teaching but maintenance, cleaning, catering, administration and so on will be vastly more powerful. On top of that the involvement of other workforces would add skills, perspectives and connections to

the movement. A union made up primarily of academics has its own unique imbalances, as anyone who's been on Twitter in the last year knows well.

The challenge is how we get there. Our esteemed leaders are not going to upset the applecart and argue with the TUC, so unless we coordinate something from below we are doomed to have less and less effective strikes and suffer the consequences. There's one way we can see to develop this industrial approach: we set up inter-union committees on campus, hold all-worker open meetings on campus, and, in 2024, start pushing local disputes where we can ballot together and bring everyone out together. Once we have a proof of concept we can investigate how we go about forcing the UCU leadership and the TUC to accept that we will no longer accept their top-down sausage-slicing of the university workforce that has left us so weak and divided.

2. Funding is the key

So long as university funding remains in this semi-marketised state, we will be subject to the inane management bullshit of the modern university, and winning lasting victories on pay and conditions will be difficult. But beyond those immediate self-interested conditions, it is now obvious that the marketisation of Higher Education has delivered nothing but disastrous results for our students and society more generally. Instead of being a place of intellectual discovery and exploration, universities have become graduate factories, pumping out chunks of labour-power to fill the demands of the market. Critical pedagogy, social good, personal growth: they've all been thrown on the bonfire of 'employability.' We watch our anxious and depressed students work full-time jobs and struggle to keep their head above water, then try and teach them in lectures that are primarily attended via Zoom or Teams. Nobody wins. There is an absolute practical and political necessity that we push back against this bullshit. Higher Education has been broken. It's time we started trying to fix it, not just get a better pay rise whilst the ship continues sinking.

That means taking on the government, and fighting them over the future of education policy. Labour, Tory, it doesn't matter - we will have to force them to offer students and staff a better settlement, because a continuation of the status quo is unacceptable.

What Is The University Worker?

The University Worker is a rank-and-file bulletin made by university workers (both academic and non-academic). We want to use this bulletin to share what's happening at different universities, and build our collective power to win our disputes. Join the WhatsApp here:

<https://chat.whatsapp.com/D19vorm4fRVDzHPvm088mZ>