

14/02/2023

The University Worker

A rank-and-file strike bulletin

Our Demands

As union officials negotiate at ACAS, and we demonstrate outside, we want to remind both them and the employers what we're fighting for. The absence of any communications on the specific demands of the non-pay elements of the Four Fights has been a big concern for all members. This concern has not been helped by the replacement of our elected negotiators with less accountable union officials. Below you can find a clear articulation of our demands for all Four Fights and the USS dispute. We cannot let vague rhetorical promises about security and improved conditions take the place of concrete demands. We want the implementation of specific sector-wide provisions which will bind employers to meaningfully improving our working lives.

OUR DEMAND ON PAY: The original pay demand was for RPI plus 3%. RPI is forecast to be 10.7% in 2023, which would mean an absolute minimum rise of 13.7%. Remember this hardly even begins to make up for the long term decline in pay across the sector, which has now reached over 25% in real terms since 2009.

OUR DEMAND ON WORKLOAD: A maximum 35 hour working week, strict regulation over workload allocation so that 35 hour working week is never exceeded, sector-wide implementation of the Health and Safety Executive's Management Standards on workload and work related stress, no emails outside of working hours and a ban on unpaid labour.

OUR DEMAND ON EQUALITY: Close gender and ethnic pay gaps by 2025, refuse to comply with Immigration Enforcement, paid visas for international staff, and staff diversity quotas that reflect the national average for every grade.

OUR DEMAND ON CASUALISATION: Binding national framework on the terms and conditions of casualised staff including: an end to zero-hours contracts, the eradication of 'independent contractor' status for teaching staff, shifting from "worker" status to employee for teaching staff, transferring hourly-paid staff to fractional contracts, automatic permanent status to all staff with required continuous service, limited use of fixed-term contracts in line with employment law (i.e. only when there is an 'objective' justification), minimum preparation time of 3 hours for hourly paid teaching activities, teacher training provided to all postgraduate teaching assistants, paid marking for hourly-paid staff in line with FTE, paid administration hours (emails, registers, other class admin), minimum 3 year contracts for graduate teaching assistants,

parental leave provision for all casualised employees, FTE annual holiday pay for termly contracts, end to all employment agency subsidiaries in HE, Acting Up allowance paid to all hourly paid staff taking on extra responsibilities, improve job security for researchers, assimilate all casualised teaching staff to the national pay structure, review the use of hourly paid lecturers in post-92 universities, and bring outsourced workers back in house on specified timescales.

OUR DEMAND ON USS: Finally, although not part of four fights, our demands around the USS pension scheme are simple: reverse the cuts proposed in 2018 and fight for improved pensions for all. This would still put us in a position where earlier entrants into the scheme receive a final salary pension, while later entrants have career average. However, it is a start. We don't think this will be won with "experts", whether on joint panels or pontificating on twitter. If it will cost more, the employers will have to pay for it.

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.

A field guide to poor excuses for scabbing



The Academic Marxist
But I work in Labour Studies...so if you think about it, me striking would hurt the trade union movement!



The Half-Measurer
I'm going to demonstrate how overworked we are in academia...by using a strike day to catch up on my work.



The Critical Geographer
I can't strike...my work is too important to the global south.



The Picket Line Non-Understander
I'm not going to cross the picket line...therefore I've rescheduled all my classes off campus.



The Influencer
I'll join the picket line today...although I have to shoot off at 1pm as I'm taking part in a panel event at another university.



The Martyr
I won't be striking...but I will report to HR that I have in solidarity with it!

Against Scabbing

Recently, we have seen reports that the UCU branch at Harper Adams University in Shropshire has voted to skip certain days of strike action as they “cannot afford to go on strike.” We have to call this what it is: scabbing. Refusing to withdraw your labour, whilst your colleagues around the country do so, undermines our dispute. The bosses will look at actions like this as a sign of weakness, and therefore it is important we call them out and ensure they are not repeated. What happens if members at another branch follow suit and decide that they also “can’t afford to strike”? And then another? And another? We have to hold strong together, and stay out until the bosses concede to our much needed demands. Anything else sows divisions within our workforce, and weakens our leverage as workers. This isn’t just about commitment to the ongoing strike either. As the wave of threatened pernicious “restructures” from struggle hardened university managers continues, now is no time for any local branch to flinch.

If strike funds are a concern, then let's address that collectively - perhaps other branches can hold fundraisers for your local fund, or as a branch you can encourage creative ways to get around pay deductions (such as not reporting strike action, as discussed in our previous bulletin). Voting to scab as a branch does nothing but worsen all our positions - but reaching out to your fellow union members can only strengthen us.

We’ve all heard something similar from colleagues: “Oh of course I will be striking ... I’m just going to rearrange a few things here and there because I really care about my students.” Throughout universities members stand on the picket lines, but behind the scenes many are undermining the strike.

Sometimes the arguments are hidden, while other times they get over-theorised in emails and social media. Perhaps their research is just too important, their students different from ours, or they can support the strike in some other way. However you intellectualise it, if you work at all during a strike, you are a scab.

In part, this is because so much of academic work has become individualised. In a dispute like this we face off against our local employer as well as the UCEA nationally. It may not seem like disrupting one class will have an effect on the dispute. However, when thousands of academics, don’t participate fully in the strike - i.e. scab - our collective power is undermined.

It takes confidence to cancel classes, refuse to reschedule, and face the pressure of management. None of this is unique to academic workers. Whenever workers go on strike they cause disruption and have to face down management. Worryingly, it seems like for many union members, they are more concerned about mitigating the effects of the strike than being seen as a scab by the rest of us.

As the dispute continues, we need to make it clear what going on strike means: withdrawing our labour for the days we’re striking, and not making up for any of that missed work. This means talking to our colleagues and other union members. If someone is finding this difficult, we can support each other. However, if someone chooses to break the strike - even in a small way - we need to be clear that they are scabbing and call them out.

Unison Strike Report

For the Unison branches that managed to get over the threshold last autumn, our mandate expires at the end of February. There are eight branches across the country still taking action on various days throughout the month - SOAS were out on the 1st, but none of the others were. Hitting the start of the National Student Survey feels like a strong position to be in, and co-ordination with our local UCU branch is still good, but the lack of communication between UCU central office and local branches has meant that we were still in the position of choosing dates in January without having a clear understanding of what UCU's plans were, which has undermined our ability to co-ordinate our action effectively.

As for next steps, we're still waiting to see whether we're going to re-ballot to extend our mandate over the 2022-23 offer or wait for the ballot over the 2023-24 offer to start. Unison's HE conference just voted down a proposal to return to national aggregate balloting, which from our current position would be a definite step back and just leave us with no branches able to strike. Our local branch is in good shape, but it's hard to know how the national picture compares.

We started off very strong in October and November, and this round of action has seen a slight decline in numbers compared to that, but we're still in a strong position overall. We've had another burst of new members signing up and it definitely doesn't feel like the picket lines have just ended up as "the same old faces", I've seen different groups of workers turning up at the pickets on each of the days so far. Morale has stayed high and the weather's been as good as could be expected for February.

It's possible that outside and student support has dropped off a bit, but again that's understandable, since there's so much action happening at the moment, so everyone's attention and energy stretched a bit thinner. Not a bad problem to have!

In the immediate future, there's not much potential for us to escalate as we'll be focused on either re-balloting, or else trying to consolidate our growth as a branch and then preparing for the 2023-24 ballot. I feel like the past six months have done a good job at introducing a lot of workers to strike action for the first time, which gives us a solid foundation for escalation when we do go again. Perhaps the most important ways to escalate in future would be a) more Unison branches getting their mandates, and b) more effective co-ordination with UCU, but both of those are out of our hands as a local branch to some extent.

- An anonymous university worker and UNISON member

Student Occupations!

Students at a number of different campuses have now occupied university buildings. They are calling for our strike demands to be met, as well as for their own specific demands. So far students at the University of Manchester, University of Sheffield, and University of Warwick have all occupied buildings, with students at LSE continuing to host day-long sit-ins on campus. **Strike, disrupt, occupy!**