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The University Worker

A rank-and-file strike bulletin

Keep the strikes going!

The Hot Strike Summer is over: now it's the Shit Deal Spring. Last week, university workers got back on strike. Many of us joined with strikes in other sectors and a mass demonstration in central London. We then got, yet another, eballot from UCU HQ.

Let us be clear about the so-called offer: the only concrete part of it is the pay deal that has already been imposed. There is vague wording on other parts of the four fights. The USS wording is: "we jointly agreed to prioritise the improvement of benefits to pre-April 2022 levels, where this can be done in a demonstrably sustainable manner." It does not commit to restoring the benefits.

So why were we eballoted on it? Although the podcasts, tweets, videos, and so on have been trumpeting the victory, from the actual details it is a sellout.

This dispute has been pulled between those who wanted to take action and fight this year and others in the leadership of the union who think we can't win this year. They have undermined the strike from the start of the term. Their position is that we can't win this year and should spend time rebuilding to fight in the future. The so-called "bank and build." This is based on a reading of trade unionism that expert organising by staff members can lead to super majority strikes.

The problem with this approach is that it ignores the actual conditions we are fighting in. First, if we retreat this year, the employers are not going to leave us in peace to rebuild. They will come back for more. Second, we are in the biggest strike wave in decades. We have an unprecedented mandate and we are squandering it. If we take a sellout deal it doesn't just affect us, it damages everyone else too. Third, the union has only ever been built through taking action. It is the strikes that have built confidence and formed the networks we need. Forcing through this strategy has meant fighting and undermining the reps and activists needed to win in the future.

We've already rejected this deal, the eballot was being used to try and pull the remaining strike action. There was then a vote at the BDM on consulting and pausing - repeated after the leadership didn't get the vote they wanted. This was followed by an HEC that voted not to consult on the non-deal and keep the strikes going. This is not how we should organise

democracy in the union. Sending out eballots to consult is not how we build campaigns. Voting should be part of collective discussions we have with each other about how the strikes are going, our demands, and what victory looks like.

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.



Keeping the strikes going is a victory for the rank and file. It is a victory for all members who believe we can fight for a better higher education system. It is a victory for the current strike wave as we all try to survive the shit deal spring.

The general secretary and union bureaucracy are attempting to set the terms of the dispute along purely economic lines. This is why we need to hold onto and build up the political impact of our strike. This dispute is not just about pay or pensions. It is about fighting to change a sector that is devaluing education, relying on precarious labour to rip off students.

Our strike is about demanding a different kind of education, while standing up to demand more for our entire class in the present.

There is no point in an industrial dispute where you can bank concessions. This is not a game show. If we stop now to rebuild, there is no reason why the employers will halt their attacks. If we return after pausing our dispute, we will go back to the same workloads, insecurity, and inequalities. If the leadership keeps repeating that we can't get any more, confidence will be further undermined.

We can't take a gradualist approach to our fight. The sector is in crisis and university bosses will attack us whether or not we're on strike. There is no "peacetime" that would allow us to rebuild. There's only time when we have leverage against our employer and we organise through that power, and time when we don't, and we organise without that power. In either case, we face increased challenges from the constant attacks on our conditions.

In this dispute, we can fight for more than improved pay cuts and vague agreements to restore a pension scheme. Through our collective action we can fight for a different kind of higher education, side by side with workers across the economy. And if the officials don't think it is possible, they need to get out of the way.



UCU Democracy: Spectators or actors?

Submission by Royal Holloway Early Career Academics

In a context where UCU comms have pushed a particular perspective on the deal and the ballot, the decision taken by the Higher Education Committee to vote 'no' to consultation and pausing the strike has certainly baffled many UCU members, who, like us, feel strongly about internal democratic practices. As 36,000 voted in the e-ballot (with two thirds voting 'yes'), the fact that the HEC voted against consultation and pausing the strike might work as a strong argument that the HEC failed to "respect the views of the members". That was indeed the argument made, when the UCU National Twitter account shared a tweet implying that the HEC had disregarded the votes of the members. Looking at the briefing given to the members of the HEC, it is clear that there was an attempt by the leadership to direct the HEC decision through the e-ballot (referred to there, perhaps more accurately, as a 'survey'). The brief acknowledges problems with the formulation of the survey but still argues that, should the HEC decide differently, they would incur serious legitimacy issues. Not mentioned is that the e-ballot would likely privilege the perspective of workers not striking, as many striking workers would not be checking their email on a strike day.

We need to take a step back and look at how the Union is structured: UCU is a "member-led" union, whatever that means, but has a fundamentally representative structure that values branch and other meeting forms involving representatives. The e-ballot and surveys similar to it operate on a different political plane, instead seeking individual expressions of opinion. Is it more democratic to ask active members in BMs or ask all members through a survey in their inbox? This question lies at the heart of the disagreements within the Union after last week's developments. Indeed, those who think that all members should be asked their opinion, regardless if they are taking action, and those who think that those taking industrial action should be deciding on the dispute are expressing political views that are not based on facts, but rather principles. They are, in a sense, ideological and a-priori (and that is absolutely fine) and difficult to reconcile.

However, the problem we see with the individually focused e-ballots that we wish to discuss here is how easily they can be manipulated within the context of the communication structures of the UCU...

Read the full piece here: notesfrombelow.org/article/ucu-democracy