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The University Worker

A rank-and-file strike bulletin

Take Back Control!

This week's University Worker feels like we've been here before. Again, the UCU is wracked by internal conflict at its top levels, while the rest of us in branches are left to pick up the pieces. None of us expected the general secretary to send an email after work on a Friday that told us we have to go back to work - especially with no deal on the table.

On Monday, we called a demonstration outside of UCU headquarters, like we did back in 2018 when the union leadership tried to sell out the dispute. We didn't do this because we are trying to settle a factional score or convince members to vote for someone in the elections.

Those of us involved in The University Worker are not part of any faction inside the union, whether UCU Left or whatever the UCU Right is calling itself now. We, like most rank-and-file members, have nothing in common with those manoeuvring behind closed doors for bureaucratic power. What we are interested in is directly and practically supporting workers in developing organisational power on the ground. Only an organised, informed and fighting rank and file can deliver the kind of education system that we actually want. Top down trade unionism will only ever reproduce existing conditions in the sector.

The key divide in UCU is not between the right and the left, however they divide within the union structure. The key divide is between the rank-and-file and the bureaucracy. This is a divide between those who think we can be treated like a stage army, made to watch the latest "most important video/tweet/whatever", berated by the union's twitter account, and the rest of us who actually had to go back to work this week.

It hardly needs saying, but doing an email vote to check whether we agree with the general secretary unilaterally calling off our strike action is ridiculous. We can't go back on the decision now and it has sucked vital energy out of the dispute. This has left reps with the onerous task of having to level with members about the leadership's bad decisions while rallying in support of the re-ballot. This is happening alongside strong ballot results for other groups of workers. There is no time like the present to strike together. But now we find ourselves sitting on the sidelines, even of our own dispute.

Union democracy is about members having control. Too often, those of us who want to build a campaign and fight for a transformed higher education are told that we don't represent the membership. However, this is a failure of the union's leadership,

both past and present. Leadership isn't about just reflecting the lowest common denominator in the union. It's about inspiring members that, together, we can fight for something better. It's about having some vision and a strategy. This won't come from an individual leader or a faction, it will only come from an organised workforce at its limits with the daily realities of a sector in crisis. Leadership is in the rank and file.

We can't rely on anyone else to forge this leadership. To win anything, we need to build our rank-and-file strength. This means we can't let the bureaucracy off the hook for what they've done recently, but it also means getting back to organising together. Our fight is with a higher education system decimated by extreme vice-chancellors, but also successive governments. If this fight is really about the soul of the university, then we cannot flinch from our task. It means taking on the employers, but also embracing that larger challenge of transforming our education system from below.

So what can we do about it? We need to make the re-ballot a resounding success. This isn't about calling members and apologising that we're having to resort to strike action again. Instead, it's about winning an argument that if we get the mandate, we can win together. This means raising demands about the kind of education system we want, what this means for pay, casualisation, equalities, workload, and pensions. 5-8% pay doesn't even come close.

A field guide to bad defences of the bureaucracy



The Cheerleader

"They're our union leader, so if you don't support their decisions, then you're not supporting our union!"



The Industrial Relations Expert

"This is all part of the science of negotiations. Just sit tight. The RMT has paused their strikes for negotiations too, so it must be fine!"



The Wasn't-Striking-Anyway

"I'm so glad the strike action has been paused. Now I can go back to work without having to hide my scabbing anymore!"



The Inner-Circle

"I just got a WhatsApp blast reminding me to remind you that criticism of our grand leader will not be tolerated."



The Time Traveller

"I'm so proud to be in a democratic union that polls the membership about a decision they've already unilaterally imposed on us."



The 'Democrat'

"Um, actually only 10% of members vote in NEC elections and go to branch meetings. Online polls are far more democratic!"

Report from a UNISON Activist

The cancellation of strike action for two weeks, a decision taken by national union figures, is a blow for those seeking to extend and escalate struggles within higher education. To suspend strikes for nothing more than negotiations that are already happening makes a favourable deal for workers increasingly unlikely. For militants in Unison the pause stymies efforts to draw more branches into action and harms rebuilding efforts.

UCU's aggregated ballot brought its entire membership out on strike, and the overly personalised way in which comms from the national union have centred on the figure of the general secretary means that the main focus of this dispute has centred on UCU. This position has created a potential deal that is more favourable to its membership, especially on pensions, and somewhat neglects the issues faced by workers represented by other unions (not to say that this is likely to be a good deal for UCU members, its not)

The pause hits Unison members on strike particularly hard. Our ballot was conducted earlier than UCU's, and our mandate is set to expire at the end of the week – meaning our only remaining opportunity for strike action has been denied. This problem has been compounded by understaffing in Unison's ballot team, delaying re-balloting. Without a result, in the form of a concrete satisfactory offer from the employers, we are left to gamble on achieving another mandate among a de-escalated and demoralised membership.

The feeling amongst colleagues in my workplace on the afternoon that the strikes were called off was one of confusion. Why, if negotiations are ongoing, and there is no deal to put to members, is our only leverage being taken away, presumably at the most critical stage of negotiations? It is a pertinent question and one we should be making to elected officials across unions.

It is on members to push for greater power within our unions. UCU has always had a more robust internal democratic culture which is why the general secretary's actions have caused such a stir. But the democratic deficit extends to Unison too. The decision to cancel strike action supposedly rests with the elected Service Group Executive for higher education, yet national officials superseded it.

The pause highlights how bureaucratic officials cannot be relied on to build actions that achieve real gains for workers. Militants should continue to strengthen and grow grassroots networks of workers across unions to organise for power both within their workplaces and nationally. This of course means achieving ballot mandates and bringing more branches into the strikes. But it also means cementing a militant rank and file that is unafraid to challenge both employers and union leadership.

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..

Report from a Unite member at Essex

It is also important to remember that what is happening doesn't just effect UCU members. As a Unite member at the University of Essex sent in: I think there is a sense amongst the membership that we are passengers. We are not listened to by the leadership or negotiators at the national level. We're also following UCU's lead despite each union being equal partners at the negotiating table. We decided locally that picketing an open day would have the most effect, but the national leadership overruled and decided the 23rd would be best. Now that's been called off too.

Call for submissions: make the re-ballot a success!

The next University Worker will be a special issue on strategies and tactics for the rebalot! We want to include:

- Lessons learned from previous campaigns
- How to effectively use tech
- Ways to deal with common negative responses to canvassing
- Creative ideas + anything else you than can help the rank-and-file

We will publish in print and online - and can include links to additional resources. Let's make the rebalot a success and build our power together

Send submissions here notesfrombelow.org/contact

Join The University Worker WhatsApp announcement group here: tinyurl.com/uniworkerwhatsapp

