

24/04/2023

# The University Worker

## A rank-and-file strike bulletin

### Casualisation: Our Red Line

At long last, UCU has initiated the Marking and Assessment Boycott. After the most recent e-ballot, members have decided to suspend further industrial action on the USS dispute. This means we are taking a summer MAB on an aggregated ballot mandate exclusively over the Four Fights.

This situation is unprecedented. For the first time, UCU branches across the sector are poised to target one of the main choke points of the academic labour process (summer marking and graduation). With a recently renewed ballot, this puts university workers in an incredibly strong position. More uniquely, we are approaching national bargaining with the power to gain serious concessions on the issue of casualisation. If binding on all employers in the sector, such concessions would qualitatively transform the sector as we know it.

However, this interpretation of the situation is not one the national union leadership has subscribed to. Instead, the General Secretary has glibly remarked that only a couple of % more on pay would suffice to call the action to an end. This indicates that for the leadership, the issue of casualisation is merely window-dressing which has helped shore up support for demands which squarely benefit permanent members.

The leverage we now have at our disposal puts us in a stronger position than at any other time in the history of the Four Fights dispute. This fact has been clearly demonstrated by the way institutional managers are coordinating quasi-legal deduction levels to crush the MAB before the action has even started to bite. And this leverage will accumulate as marking deadlines pass. Walking away from our current position, as our industrial power grows, with a few % more on pay and the same 'death by committee' deal on casualisation is untenable. This would be a sell-out of casualised university workers of historic proportions.

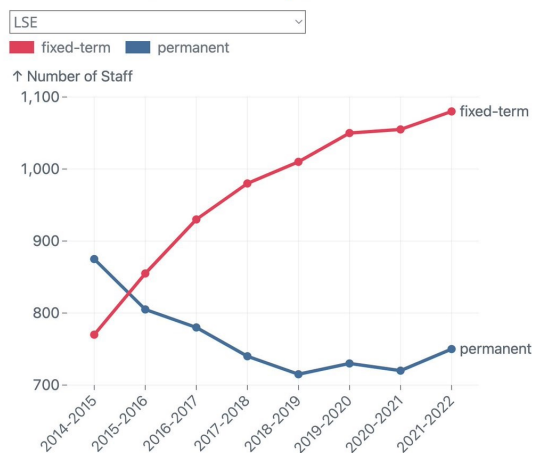
UCEA has long known that casualisation is the scourge of the sector, but has only recently conceded to negotiating on the issue. This means that a term which politically describes the decomposition of labour in our workplaces has been accepted into the terms of negotiations. This is a significant victory in the battle of ideas, but is clearly not enough.

Of all the Four Fights, 'eradicating casualisation' would cost the employer the most and have the farthest reaching consequences. Not only would employers have to pay for it in money, they would have to pay for it in flexibility - a currency of a different order in the just-in-time university. For this reason, UCEA will never honour anything they are not bound to. It is imperative therefore that a red line of the MAB must be that any agreed provisions on tackling casualisation must be binding.

Some argue that casualisation is too unwieldy to comprehensively remedy in negotiations, that 'casualisation cannot be eliminated overnight'. Willfully or not, these people are perpetuating ignorance of the solutions that are already out there across the sector. In previous bulletins we've listed concrete demands that could produce nationally binding provisions to tackle casualisation. If members are expected to face disproportionate deductions for participating in the MAB, they need to know exactly what they are striking for. And if we're demanding a national framework for regulating casualisation, which is unlikely to be revised for a very long time, it needs to be right.

We cannot afford to be gradualist in addressing casualisation. The structural tendencies of labour casualisation in the sector are stark and impact us all. Just look at this graph produced as part of a recent and damning report by LSE UCU:

Number of **fixed term** and **permanent** academic staff at:



This current model for HE is built on the hyper-exploitation of a 2nd tier of workers, who are forced to jump from contract to contract (if they're lucky enough to get one) juggling teaching at multiple institutions with next to no paid prep time. This is unsustainable and is directly tied to the erosion of the conditions in the sector. We must throw everything behind this action.

The organisational difficulties of a MAB are real and shouldn't be downplayed. But we're already seeing a real effort by the rank and file to share resources and advice to support the action across branches. This is promising and should go further.

The course of this action will define the future of our union and our sector. A victory on casualisation could fundamentally transform the political orientations of the union for years to come. A sell-out on casualisation could irrevocably crush a decade of momentum that emerged in the afterlife of the student movement, and carried precarious workers' politics into the agenda of a university workers union. We will be on the side of casualised workers.

## **5 Lessons from a MAB**

Last May, at the University of Brighton, we took part in a Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB) over pay and conditions, along with over 20 other UCU branches. Many branches, including ours, acquired local gains through this. This year through winning our aggregated ballot, every UCU branch in national pay bargaining is taking part in this action. Now we need a huge collective win. Here's what we learnt through our 2022 MAB.

### **The MAB can feel isolating – make it collective**

Compared to a picket line, a marking boycott can feel like an isolating experience. It is important to act collectively and support each other through this experience. Last year we met regularly to gauge problems, consider solutions and collectively make decisions. There may be some areas of the university that are less dense in terms of membership. Providing a space of support for those members increases participation. Each department / course may have different deadlines for getting marks in, as well as for moderation and exam boards. It's important that branches know these dates so that members can be supported at key times. Mapping the remainder of the academic year will help branches to get a sense of time scale and flash points. Don't forget that ARPS members can provide huge support in mapping too.

### **Bosses worry about awarding degrees – hold your nerve**

At first our management seemed quite relaxed about the MAB, refusing to even meet with us unless we stood down. It was only when they realised this action could actually stop degrees being awarded that they started to worry. This was our point of leverage. It is important to double down when management panic, making it clear final pieces of work will not be assessed, internal moderation will not take place and exam boards will not meet. We need to stop the university from functioning as a degree printing machine. Holding our nerve is crucial to getting a big win.

### **Students will be angry – at management**

Students will be, and arguably should be, angry; their education has been deteriorating for years through marketisation, while management sit on their hands and do nothing. As we've seen in other local MABs, there may be contingency strategies the university will use to manoeuvre around our boycott, such trying to change regulations or hiring scabs. It is clear this will devalue degrees, may result in a worse marks for students and changes the terms that they signed up for when they started. The student voice played a role in stopping management successfully using these sly tactics at other universities. It's helpful to talk to student groups or the SU now to consider how complaints can be effectively channelled and solidarity maintained.

### **Solidarity is out there – reach out to other campus unions**

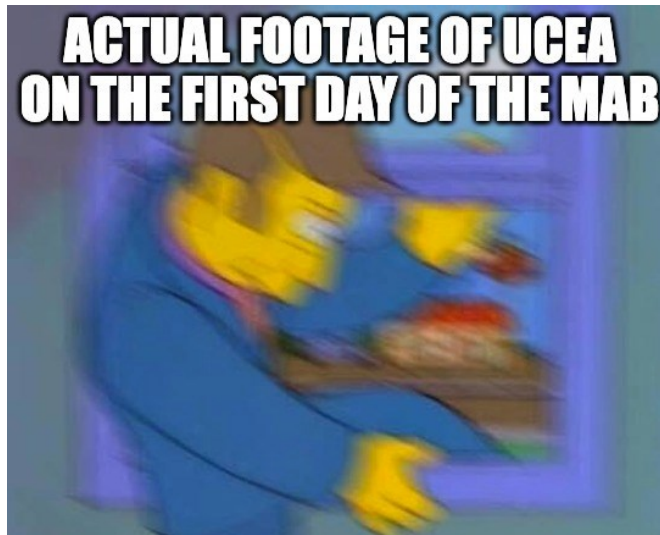
Our Unison branch has provided incredible solidarity to us. Just the other day they donated £700 to our hardship fund. Having meetings across campus unions can be a very good way of

building solidarity and keeping on top of the strategies management are using to undermine the MAB. Unison is in the same dispute for pay and conditions as us so clearly our win is their win too. Outside of the pay dispute, branches such as the RCA work closely with IWGB providing mutual support in times of need. Building this kind of solidarity will help with the dispute now and our ability to take on the bosses again in the future.

### **Threatening 100% deductions is one thing, taking them is another**

Obviously with MABs we are not withdrawing the entirety of our labour. While we may be working to contract and refusing to mark, we are still working doing other things. In 2022 when our employer threatened 100% deductions, it was clear management felt they were on legally dubious grounds. In the end they never actually took deductions at all. It was used as an intimidation tactic, but it did not work. We should of course still plan to twin with other branches for mutual financial aid and consider wage sharing in our own. However, it is important to understand that there is not a legally solid case for taking 100% deductions.

Our VC has again threatened to take 100% deductions for participation in the MAB. Beyond the grievances that could rise if these are taken, two key questions appear. The first is: how do management know who is involved? It is only after the marks are due that we could even be evidenced as 'taking part' in the boycott. If legally we do not have to inform employers of 'future' action, then up until then members might have been legitimately prioritising other work. The second is: will we continue to work if we are not being paid? Hell no! The SHESC passed a motion stating universities that take 100% deductions will be met with strike action. It is important branches that have been threatened with 100% and other punitive deductions get together now to sustain each other's action. If we build strong solidarity networks and hold our nerve, this dispute is ours to win.



## **Report from Essex**

At Essex, management has responded to the MAB by threatening deductions. If members don't notify their participation in advance we are facing 80% deductions, with 50% if we do. The branch is, of course, advising members not to notify. We are raising money and asking members without marking to donate a percentage of their salary to our local fund, preparing for when marking is due.

## **Report from Greenwich**

Greenwich UCU is getting organised. The university management have declared 100% pay deductions but for only 15 days of the 6 weeks of the MAB, i.e. 50% pay deductions. We are targeting key courses to disrupt graduation and implementing a wage sharing system so that non-striking members can support. The MAB has forced us to get more organised and I think it will leave the union stronger. Good to try a new tactic!