

UCU

Strikes

To Strike, or Not To Strike

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Jargon Buster

UCU University & Colleges Union. The main trade union for academic staff

UUK Universities UK. Universities as a collective. Almost like NUS for Universities.

UCEA Universities and Colleges Employers' Association - represents HEI's in national disputes

USS Universities Superannuation Scheme - Pension Scheme most university academic staff at pre-1992 institutions are members of

"The Picket Line" Line where work begins - to cross the picket line is to enter work and actively strikebreak

Strikebreak To attend work when others are on strike - this is considered an unacceptable thing to do to trade union members

ASOS Action Short of Strike - Not officially striking, but working to contract, not taking on extra activities other than job description requirements



University and College Union

The main trade union for university academic and academic-related staff

Oxford UCU has approx 1,200 members

Postgraduates that are also staff can become members

PG membership is free

Recognised by the University

However, colleges do not recognise UCU (meaning staff solely hired by colleges will not be able to strike). This has a particular impact on Grads
Sits on a Joint Consultative Committee with the university to discuss issues
and disputes

Why Strikes?

USS

&

'Four

Fights'

What's up with USS?

- **Defined Benefits:** Promises a specific income when retired
- **Defined Contributions:** Pension is dependent on employees contributions, and fund's investment performance
- In 2017 USS produced a valuation saying they were in a technical deficit of £17.5b.
- UCU disputed this valuation, saying it was taken from a worst case scenario, rather than a realistic one.
- USS Joint Negotiating Committee then accepted a lower technical deficit of £6.1b.

What's up with USS?

In response to the deficit USS proposed a series of changes to the scheme, which were:

- Moving from **defined benefits** to **defined contributions**
- Contributions would remain 8% for members and 18% for employers
- Members would be enabled to pay only 4% while still receiving the usual employer contribution.
- Members' 8% (or 4%) would include a contribution to partly finance death in service and ill health retirement benefits.

What's up with USS?

For UCU the move to **defined contributions** was the red line, and this is what the strike initially started over.

UCU argued for ways to continue the **defined benefits** scheme, even if this meant an increase in membership and employer contributions.

UUK felt that **defined benefit** schemes were increasingly expensive, and may lead to even higher member and employer increases that could lead to cuts in other aspects of universities.

What's up with USS?

In March 2018, following 14 days of strike action, UCU accepted an offer from UUK that set up a Joint Expert Panel with members from UUK and UCU to work through the valuation and to reach an agreement. This was accepted by 64%.

After much back and forth USS proposed a new 2018 valuation and options that would keep the defined benefit scheme, but would mean increased contributions from members and employers. USS Trustees passed a new contribution of 9.6% by the member, and 21.1% by the employer. By October 2021, this would raise to 11% for members, and 23.7% for employers.

What's up with USS?

UCU felt that members contributions should not raise higher than 8%, and continued to strike into 2019 because of this.

By 2020, USS had began a new valuation, but this and strikes were halted by the upcoming pandemic.

As it stands UCU and UUK are united that the increased membership is not necessary, however UUK have pushed through changes and cuts to the defined benefits scheme, rather than continuing to fight against increased membership costs.

Four

Fights

Low

Pay

WE ARE FIGHTING AGAINST



20%

fall in salaries against inflation since 2009

£8.70

the hourly rate of the lowest paid teachers in HE



Zero%

pay offer by employers in 2020/21

WE ARE FIGHTING FOR



£2,500

pay uplift on all pay points



£10

minimum per-hour wage for all contract types



10:1

maximum sector-wide pay ratio

Four

Fights

Casualisation

WE ARE FIGHTING AGAINST



3,545 academic staff on zero-hours contracts

68% of research academics on fixed-term contracts



41% of teaching academics on hourly-paid contracts



WE ARE FIGHTING FOR



staff to move from hourly-paid to fractional contracts



a framework to eliminate precarious employment casualised contracts across HE

national guidance to end the outsourcing of support services and bring staff into in-house employment



Four

Fights

Workload

WE ARE FIGHTING AGAINST



4 in 5

of HE staff surveyed are struggling with workload

78%

of staff reported increased workloads during the pandemic

86%

of staff surveyed had been directed to support for mental health due to workload



WE ARE FIGHTING FOR



35

hours to be the standard weekly employment contract of all HEIs



a UK action plan for workload model agreed between HEIs and their local trade unions

the workload model to take into account post-pandemic changes in working practices



Four

Fights

Equality

WE ARE FIGHTING AGAINST



15.1%

pay gap between men and women in the sector

17%

pay gap between black and white staff in the sector

9%

disability pay gap in the sector

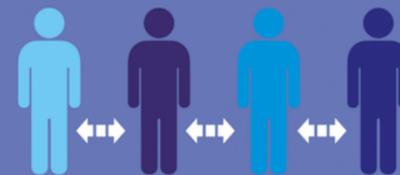


WE ARE FIGHTING FOR



a national time-specific action to close the gender, ethnic and disability pay gap agreed by each HEI

an implementation agreement which is progressed and reported back to JNCHES



HEIs to encourage staff to declare their protected characteristics with employers to help address discrimination

2018

February – March

UCU balloted members over strike action due to proposed changes to the USS pension scheme

58% of UCU members voted, and of this 88% voted for strike action, and 93% voted for ASOS

Initially 61 institutions were to go on strike, however this raised to 64 after further balloting. For context there are 68 universities where staff are members of USS

Universities are represented by Universities UK in this dispute

14 days of strikes start on the 23rd February 2018, and this becomes the longest ever strike in UK HE history

on 13th April UCU members accepted UUK's proposal for the pension issue by 64% of voters in the ballot. Strikes come to an end.

2019

November – December

UCU balloted members over strike action again, for continuing disputes in relation to USS, but also what they called the 'Four Fights'

Universities were represented by UUK on USS, and UCEA on 'Four Fights'

This time UCU balloted HEI's separately to increase chances of beating the 50% turnout of members required by the Trade Union Act

64 branches balloted, and 43 reached the 50% voting threshold. Nationally the turnout was 53% with 79% voting for strike action

Some were striking over both USS and 'Four Fights', and some over just one

Strikes start on 25th November, and ASOS takes place from 5th December - 12th December. ASOS takes form of not rescheduling teaching missed from strikes. Some universities threatened to cut pay to staff due to ASOS

2020

February – March

Another ballot saw 14 new institutions reach the 50% threshold, taking the number of institutions with a mandate to strike up to 74 (some added extra disputes on)

UCU announced another 14 days of strikes taking place from February to March 2020

Good progress was seen on three of the 'Four Fights', and the USS pensions issue still remained complicated

Although the disputes didn't seem to reach a complete ending, the rising COVID pandemic meant there wasn't a desire for further balloting at this moment

There was a sense that this was not over, just paused. Understandably the pandemic only added rising tensions and concerns to issues over pensions and pay, workloads, etc.

2024

Picking up from where they left off pre-pandemic, UCU balloted their members over whether to strike for USS pensions, and the 'Four Fights' again.

Any strike action can be an extension of pre-pandemic strikes, with added post pandemic tensions.

Strikes in Oxford?

Oxford UCU was not one of the institutions that passed the 50% threshold to be able to strike, so for the time being strike action is not foreseen at Oxford.

There are, however, calls to rebalot - especially due to many Oxford UCU members claiming they did not receive their ballot papers on time to post before the deadline.

If Oxford UCU reballots, then we could potentially see strike action in 2022.

| 2018 | 2019 | | 2020 | | 2021 | |
|------|------|---------------|------|---------------|------|---------------|
| USS | USS | 'Four Fights' | USS | 'Four Fights' | USS | 'Four Fights' |
| X | | X | X | X | | |

Student Reactions

Many students supported the strikes, campaigning with staff against marketisation. They observed and stood on picket lines and shared the message of solidarity with fellow students. Polls showed support for strikes sat at approx half the students surveyed*.

Universities put pressure on students not to support strikes and some told them that if they did not attend lectures they may lose their study VISA's.

Student occupations of university buildings in support of strikers took place at a few institutions.

NUS spoke out in support of the strikes and a letter was sent to Universities Minister, UUK, UCEA & USS signed by sabbatical officers across the UK.

Other students however were less supportive and took issue with the intense disruption the strikes had on their education. This lack of good feeling rose as the disputes continued.

*[YouGov](#), [THE](#), [BBC](#)

Tuition Fee

Refunds

This student interest into the strikes quickly turned into a discussion of refunds for missed teaching time, emphasising the rising marketisation of HE. Students campaigning on tuition fees sat on both sides in terms of support for strikes.

"I don't want a consumerist education service. I believe education is a public good and not a service to be sold. But if we are going to be treated as consumers we are going to ask for our money back."

By March 2018 126,000 students had signed letters and petitions calling for fee refunds due to the pandemic.

Lawyers had been co-ordinating a 'no-win, no-fee' suit for students, that supposedly 5,000 students signed up to.

The OIA began to receive complaints and ruled that universities should be issuing refunds where disruption hasn't been minimised.

Our

SU

Policy

UCU Strikes (HT18, updated MT19) For future potential strikes with UCU, Oxford SU will take the following as the default policy and action of solidarity:

1. To support the cause and organisation of the strike action and communicate this to the University.
2. To release a statement in full support of the UCU strike action.
3. To email all graduate students to encourage membership of UCU.
4. Liaise with UCU representatives.
5. To encourage students to respect the strike by not crossing the picket lines and not attending classes over this period except in the case of compulsory assessments. This could include, but is not limited to, producing materials including posters and leaflets to help explain to students what is happening and why our staff needs support.
6. To encourage students to participate in solidarity action as requested by UCU's Oxford branch including standing on picket lines and excluding nonattendance at compulsory assessment.

Our

SU

Policy

Put simply, we must:

Tell the university we support the strikes

Release a statement in support of strikes

Email all graduates encouraging UCU membership

Liaise with UCU Reps

Encourage students to respect the strike by not crossing picket lines or attending classes*

Encourage students to take part in 'solidarity action'

**not including compulsory assessments*