



UCU Strike Bulletin

Produced by members of Workers' Liberty active in the University and College Union

workersliberty.org // awl@workersliberty.org // [@workersliberty.org](https://twitter.com/workersliberty.org)

Build the rank and file!

The election of Jo Grady as UCU General Secretary earlier this year was a big step forward for the union.

The previous leadership had a record of compromising too soon in disputes and had never delivered the support for workplace organising needed to change the power balance in universities.

Electing officials and NEC members committed to a more combative approach to organising is important, but it's not sufficient, or an end in itself.

In every union, there is a tension between the "rank and file", the grassroots members in workplaces, and the "bureaucracy", the union's officialdom for whom the union is primarily a set of structures, financial considerations, and, on an individual level, a career, rather than an instrument of struggle.

We need ongoing organisation to link up branches that support the union's new more militant strategy; to help develop it, push it forward, and control it democratically. Informal groupings like USS Briefs, or ad-hoc co-ordination on Twitter, can only go so far. This is particularly important to avoid cliqueness or a sense that involvement in the union is determined by who you know.

An independent rank-and-file network can also advance and defend perspectives that bureaucratic pressures often act against, such as the need for the union to fully support and empower the struggles of casualised members, and the need to make proper links with other campus unions, especially those organising precarious and outsourced workers.

Rank-and-file co-ordination doesn't need to be hugely time-consuming, but it does mean having some structured meetings to bring together branch representatives. It also means having mechanisms for involving branches as transparently and democratically as possible in decisions at all stages of the dispute. Public streaming of negotiations with the employers would be a good first step in making sure everyone knows

what's going on.

Our aim should be a concretely organised rank-and-file network, based on affiliations from union branches, that fights for the radical transformation of our industry and our union, and ultimately aspires to one industrial union for all further and higher education workers - permanent and casual, directly-employed and outsourced.

The marketisation context

The "bigger picture" of marketisation is the key backdrop for the current strikes.

The shift towards conceptualising the higher education sector as a market and higher education as a commodity sold to student "consumers" has occurred in multiple phases over the past 30 years, including the introduction of tuition fees in 1998, the trebling of tuition fees to £3000 per year in 2004, their further trebling to £9000 per year in 2010-12, and the introduction of the "Excellence Frameworks".

The attacks on education workers' pensions, pay, and conditions, and the increasing precarity of employment in the education sector, stem from marketisation. Accordingly, UCU's message should be that pensions and pay are under threat, workloads are untenable, and employment is insecure because of higher education's structural transformation. The main reason the 2018 USS strike sparked such a major upsurge in student activism is that students were able to see their interests as aligned with those of academic staff over teaching conditions as well as marketisation as the source of extortionate rents, rising fees, and overcrowded campuses.

Links with students

Students are vital allies in the struggle to transform education.

Their direct action, in support of our strikes but also in furtherance of their own demands around fees, cuts, rents, and other issues, are a key source of pressure on university bosses.

To help set off a new wave of student-led direct action on campus and renew efforts to organise the student movement into a viable force on the national stage, UCU members must link our strike demands to the larger fight over the very purpose of education itself, and connect UCU's struggles with those of students and other workers. We also invite UCU members to get in touch with the Student Left Network at

studentleftnetwork@gmail.com and come to its planned Student-Worker Solidarity National Gathering in Sheffield on Saturday 30 November.

VOTE LABOUR, THEN REMAIN

On 12 December, we have an opportunity to kick the Tories out, and replace them by a Labour government.



Do we want a government for the rich, or a government of a party inked to unions, committed to clawing back some of the vast wealth held by the rich and big business and spending it on rebuilding services and improving working-class people's lives?

Electing a Labour government is also the only viable path to stopping Brexit, as Labour is now committed to a new referendum with a remain option. Labour for a Socialist Europe has been active in this election to argue for a clear anti-Brexit policy on the basis of class struggle within Britain and across Europe. The Labour Campaign for Free Movement is also active within the election effort, promoting migrants' rights.

Free Our Unions, a campaign against anti-trade union laws backed nationally by the IWGB, FBU, and RMT, is fighting for a Labour government to implement the agreed conference policy of repealing all anti-trade union laws and legislating for a full right to strike.

To find out more about these campaigns and to get involved, visit:

- labourforasocialisteurope.org
- labourfreemovement.org
- bit.ly/FreeOurUnions

On 29 November, link up with climate strikes

We need workers' climate action!

This strike provides an unprecedented opportunity for university workers to take more action



alongside the inspiring youth strikes for climate, which have been happening worldwide now for over a year.

UCU has taken an active lead on this already, proposing the Trades Union Congress motion in September calling for 30-minute walk-outs to support the global climate strikes, adding worker support to a movement so far carried by school students, and Extinction Rebellion activists.

This move opened up avenues for workers up and down the UK to constructively intervene in and support the climate justice movement. Workers walking off their jobs has the effect of immediately shutting down production - the economy can only function with the active participation of the workers within it. When workers withdraw their labour we learn this

important lesson. For these two reasons alone, we should call on the UCU to propose this motion again to support action for every climate strike from now on.

But university workers alone will not have the power to halt and reverse climate change. Key levers rest in the hands of transport, energy, food/agricultural, construction, and manufacturing workers; workers in the most polluting industries.

Combined, these sectors make up some 90%+ of global CO2 emissions. Without democratic workers' control over these aspects of the economy, private for-profit ownership will continue the race-to-the-bottom resource extraction and unsustainably accelerated production which drive climate change. Such democratic control can only be won by the workers within their sectors. That means organising with them to win control, and in the development of a just transition for those with jobs which need phasing out.

This must not stop us taking action and agitating for a more urgent response from our universities, but we have to engage with

those working in these sectors whilst we do so. This is especially true for those in academic research benefiting production and extraction in these polluting sectors.

The scale of this task is monumental - probably the single biggest challenge humanity has ever faced. But a fighting, conscious working-class can, and indeed must, win this battle.

The fight against climate change is at its core a fight for human emancipation - ultimately, the only fight worth waging.

About Workers' Liberty

This bulletin is produced by members of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty active in the UCU. We are a socialist group active in the labour and student movements in Britain, fighting for a revolutionary alternative to capitalism and Stalinism based on common ownership and workers' democracy.



To find out more about our ideas and activity, visit our website at workersliberty.org, or email awl@workersliberty.org

How to build a local dispute on workload

Workers at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) are striking in a local dispute over workload, in parallel with the national strikes. UCU SHU branch chair Camila Bassi explains the dispute.

Our dispute is over unpaid work and stress. Specifically, changes to our academic work planning and the restructuring of our professional services have led to an unprecedented intensification of workloads and a crisis point in academic staff health and wellbeing. SHU records reveal dramatic increases of referrals to occupational health and the usage of the university counselling service by academic staff - just one indicator of the problem. In talking to members, it is clear that our workplace conditions are unsustainable.

Our demands are concrete, we are asking for: 20% of our work plans allocated to general academic duties, bringing us up to the sector average; a doubling of the time currently allocated to us for academic advising - a university benchmark role and promise to students of 1:1 academic and pastoral support which they have thus far

not adequately resourced; an increase in the time we have to mark assignments, from 10 minutes per 5 credits to 15 minutes; and finally, for the university to implement an academic



work planning policy that is genuinely equitable and translatable to the hours that we actually work.

Our message to students is that our workplace conditions are your teaching and learning conditions. Our industrial struggle is to improve both.

We are one of a handful of the post-92 HE sector on strike alongside the pre-92 universities. The issue that pushed a critical mass of the pre-92 HE sector on strike is the long-standing dispute over their pension scheme, USS, namely the effective robbery of their delayed salaries. What pushed SHU UCU on strike in the national dispute is our local dispute on unpaid work and stress. There are four pillars to the national pay dispute: pay inequality, job insecurity, rising workloads, and pay deflation (an almost 20% real wage cut over a decade). For sure, the USS pensions dispute and our local dispute on workload intensification have enabled striking members to draw connections on issues that holistically represent a broken system for which we are the shock absorbers. Members are saying: no more.

Our local dispute is being directed by our well-attended branch meetings, this is our democratic mandate and sovereign body. Our branch committee of elected officers and reps currently forms our strike committee and runs the day-to-day of the dispute.

We have and continue to make efforts to engage with the elected representatives of SHU students' union. Officially, like the NUS, they are in support of our dispute, which means a lot to us. Other organic groups of students have emerged and are organising solidarity action on social media and on the picket lines. As academics, at the front line of the student experience, we care deeply about our students' education. The holistic politics of this dispute, which link workload intensification to zero hours contracts to not enough time to mark students' work, or prepare lectures, or support students, is what we as a union are talking to students about. Again, our workplace conditions are their teaching and learning conditions - and our fight is to progress both.

We are leading the HE sector with our local industrial dispute on "workload intensification", and we have a 84.4% strike mandate. The strength of our strike mandate is because this is THE local issue, longstanding and widespread. Any gains for our membership locally would be hope for members across the sector.

Our local struggle is part of a process that has already begun with the USS pensions dispute: members drawing connections, seeing the holistic picture, and saying "no more can we be shock absorbers for a broken higher education system, enough!"