

The UCU Strike Ballot: An Explainer

This briefing provides background information for students' unions to help understand the issues involved in the UCU strike. The strike ballot is currently open and will close on October 30th. NUS will continue to brief unions as the dispute progresses.

Navigating this briefing

This briefing provides an initial guide to the potential UCU strike, the issues that it is bringing to light, why NUS is supporting the strike, meaningful action that you can do on your campus and discussing the issue with your officers.

Throughout the course of the UCU dispute, NUS will brief students' unions on what is going on and how to support the strike.

Key Players & Key Terms

Key players

The two key parties involved in this dispute are:

- **UCU:** the trade union for higher education workers, including professional services staff, academics and postgraduate research students. Their **Higher Education Committee**, a group made up of reps elected by UCU to represent their Higher Education members, has launched both strike ballots.
- **UUK:** Universities' UK is the representative body for universities across the UK. They are leading the negotiations with UCU about the amount employers and staff should pay into USS pensions.
- **Joint Expert Panel:** Panel set up with UCU and UUK nominees and an independent chair, to re-assess the value of the USS pension scheme

Key terms

- **USS:** This stands for Universities Superannuation Scheme. Lots of universities and higher education employers are members of this scheme, which means that their staff have access to the USS Pension once they earn over a certain salary. The salary level you need to earn before being a member is set by each member institution. It is also the name of the organization that manages the USS pension pot.
- **Defined Benefit:** this is a type of pension scheme. If you have a defined benefit pension, it means that once you retire you will be paid a certain amount of your final salary (how much you earned when you retired, usually the peak of your earnings) per year as your pension.
- **Defined Contribution:** this is the other type of pension scheme. The amount that you get on retirement is based on how much you have paid in, rather than what you earn when you leave.
- **Casualisation:** this refers to academic staff being employed on 'casual' contracts, for example for a half day of teaching per week, rather than on an annually-salaried basis.
- **Joint Negotiating Committee:** This is where UCU and UUK meet to discuss pensions.
- **RPI:** The Retail Price Index – this is a way of measuring inflation by charting the cost of a shopping basket of standard goods each year. Therefore if someone's wages are increasing 'below RPI,' the increase in their

pay is not going up at the same rate as the cost of a weekly shop.

How does the strike ballot work?

UCU opened two strike ballots at UK universities on Monday 9 September in a dispute over USS pensions and pay, workloads, casualisation and equality. The union's higher education committee (HEC) has launched a ballot of 69 institutions over USS pensions and also for a pay, workloads, casualisation and equality ballot that will run at 147 institutions at the same time. The ballots will run until Wednesday 30 October and HEC will meet to consider the results on Friday 1 November. The ballots will be disaggregated so each institution will be polled separately.

Fifty per cent of UCU members in each institution need to have voted in the ballot for it to be valid. Once this threshold has been reached, there needs to be simple majority in favour of industrial action for a strike to go ahead, and the union has six months from the close of the ballot to call it.

It is important to note that not all universities are members of the USS Scheme, particularly modern universities, but most will be captured by the pay ballot. You can check whether your university is in the scheme [on their website](#).

Pay, Workloads, Casualisation and Equality

Alongside the USS ballot, UCU are holding a ballot on whether to launch industrial action on pay, workloads, casualisation and equality. More information about USS can be found below, however as not all institutions are USS members, the Pay, Workloads, Casualisation and Equality ballot will affect a broader range of providers.

Pay

The pay offer in 2018/19 for the majority of HE staff was yet another below inflation increase. The value of UCU members' pay has declined and continues to fall.

Since 2009, the cumulative loss to pay (compared to rises in RPI) is over 20%, therefore they are demanding that employers increase staff pay by 3% plus RPI. This is both a 'keep up' and 'catch up' proposal.

Workload

UNISON's 2018 survey of members in higher education found that 71% of members said that their workload had increased in the past year. 64% said that they were either 'Very Concerned' or 'Concerned' about workload and unsurprisingly, 63.5% said that they were either 'Very Concerned' or 'Concerned' about work related stress. UCU believes that this must urgently be addressed and are calling on institutions to limit unsafe and excessive workloads.

Casualisation

Casualisation has become an increasing problem in higher education, with staff in insecure work without good reward schemes and training. Most universities continue to use hourly paid contracts for some teaching staff, and most universities rely on external contractors to deliver some part of their own services. UCU are calling this ballot to ensure that employers reduce the number of zero-hours and hourly paid positions.

Equality

UCU are asking for a nationally-agreed action for HE institutions to close the gender pay gap and to specifically address the racialised pay gap, taking account of the ways in which intersectionality affects pay and grading. Every year the official pay data in UK higher education shows continuing and persistent pay inequality, which needs to be urgently addressed.

The USS Dispute

How does USS currently work?

Under current rules, USS members pay 8.8 per cent of their salaries into the scheme. The contributions were increased in April from 8 per cent and are due to rise to 10.4 per cent this October and 11.4 per cent in April 2020 in order to plug the deficit. This will see a typical lecturer on a £45,000 a year salary paying £1,000 a year more for the same pension on retirement.

What's the dispute over pensions contributions?

The dispute over USS stems from planned increases for employee contributions to the scheme to make up an estimated deficit. This means that university staff would have to pay more in, because the Scheme was at risk of running out of funds if everyone drew their pension.

This is because the scheme is a **defined-benefit pension scheme**, meaning that all members of the pension will be paid a defined proportion of their final salary, so it needs to have a lot of funding behind it to be able to pay everyone what they are owed.

The Trustees of the Scheme estimated in July 2017 that there was a £7.5bn deficit in the scheme's finances, based on its position on 31st March 2017. This was immediately challenged by UCU, as it was an estimate which they did not agree was accurate.

In response to this a proposal was put forward by Universities UK (UUK) and accepted by USS. The proposal recommended that all contributions moved to a **defined contribution model**. This would mean that the Scheme would be cheaper to run, as it wouldn't be based on predicting how much money would be needed to cover members' final salaries. UCU claimed that this would result in retirement income falling across all

members, with some groups seeing very significant losses.

Strikes in 2018

UCU engaged in a 14 days' of strikes, supported by students, in 2018 to defend their pensions and said it was only fair that any cost this time around should be shouldered by the employers. The employers dropped the proposal to move to defined contribution following this and it was agreed that the joint expert panel would be set up to review the 2017 valuation, as UCU believed it to be inaccurate. This panel is made up of people nominated by UCU and by UUK, with an independent chair.

The panel concluded in September 2018 that the scheme's finances were not as disastrous as had previously been predicted. It decided members would be able to keep their defined benefit pensions at a cheaper cost of 29.2% of a member's salary, to be made up by employer and employee contributions, rather than the 36.6% previously proposed by USS to address the deficit. Despite support from UCU and UUK the trustees did not implement this.

USS launched a fresh valuation in January which halved the deficit to £3.6bn. But they still proposed contribution increases above the panel's recommendations.

At a meeting of the USS Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) in August, the universities' proposals - that will see members pay 9.6% of their salary into their USS pension, compared to 8.8% at present and 8% before the strikes, with further hikes planned from 2021 - were backed by the chair Sir Andrew Cubie.

UCU tabled its own proposals to the JNC setting out why universities should meet any additional costs. The union previously wrote to universities in June and warned that if they did not agree to limit members'

contributions to 8%, or meet the cost of any additional contributions, then they faced the risk of a strike action ballot. UCU General Secretary Jo Grady has said that the union have no desire to take strike action that would see members miss out on pay and that employers still have time to avert this.

Talking about this with your officers

This issue can be complex to understand, especially for officers who are not engaged in thinking about pensions in their own circumstances. When briefing them on these issues, break it down using this briefing and our accompanying communications, but also try the following things:

- Think about how relevant parts of the information are for your institution. While the pay ballot will capture the majority of institutions in the UK, the USS dispute will not factor for many universities. You can double check whether your university is a member of USS [on their website](#).
- As it was last year, a UCU strike is likely to be controversial among students. We would recommend taking time to talk through difficult questions that your officers may receive because of their position to prepare them and mapping different scenarios with them.
- Begin planning for strikes to impact events now, and planning your communications to students, so that everyone can be on the same page well before timely action is required.

Showing solidarity and support

As NUS supports the UCU in this dispute, we would recommend the following:

- Writing to the head of your institution to urge them to oppose the changes to the USS and improve working conditions for all staff. You can either do this as a union, or organize individual students to do so.
- In the event of a strike, UCU members will lose pay and this is then held by the provider. We would recommend lobbying

your university to ensure that this pot of money is safeguarded and used for the good of students, for example in a hardship fund, rather than going into general funds.

- You can issue this information around your institution to ensure that fellow students understand the issues facing their lecturers and other staff members of the university. This will be very important in building support for the strikes, if they do occur, and ensuring students understand why their teaching is being disrupted.
- Consider how your union services can help students who are concerned about disruption that a strike may cause, or supporting a strike may cause, for example those who are concerned about missing classes due to attendance monitoring.
- NUS's Vice President (Higher Education) Claire Sosienski Smith will be leading our work on the pay and pensions dispute. If you would like her to visit your union to discuss this issue, please email Claire.Sosienski-Smith@nus.org.uk

Further information

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