

Supporting the UCU Strike: Winning the Arguments

NUS is supporting UCU in their disputes over pay and equalities and pension changes. This briefing lays out why we are in support, and answers to some common arguments that could be made against them.

The UCU Strike

The UCU are taking strike action between November 25 and December 4 2019. Their ballot is valid for six months from November 1, which means they could take further strike action between these strikes and April.

They are involved in two disputes, the first over Pay, Equality, Workload and Casualisation and the other over changes to the USS Pension Scheme.

This is because staff pay has declined by 17% over a decade, compounded by gendered and racialised pay gaps, they do significant amounts of unpaid work due to the size of workloads and casualisation is becoming an increasing problem. This means that many teaching staff in particular are employed on hourly paid contracts or zero hours ones, with very little job security.

The USS dispute is a continuation of the issues that sparked the UCU strike in 2018: those who are members of the USS Pension Scheme are being asked to pay in more money in their monthly contributions, but in return for this they will still receive the same amount on retirement.

If you would like more detailed information on the issues behind these ballots, then see our detailed briefing [here](#).

NUS Stance

NUS maintains a close relationship with UCU, and is supportive of them throughout these disputes. This is because we believe firmly in showing solidarity with other unions which fight to make our education better, and UCU's action, particularly that for pay and equalities, is integral to improving education.

UCU also represents a large proportion of NUS members. Postgraduate Research students can join UCU for free during their studies, and it is them who, as future academics, stand to benefit significantly from improved working conditions should UCU be successful in this dispute.

We also view UCU's action as part of our wider fight against marketisation and for a funded, accessible and lifelong education. Government reforms have forced higher education providers to fight each other in a 'market' over student fees. As a result, providers have driven down pay and conditions for front-line staff in order to put those savings into activity that improves their 'competitiveness' such as marketing and recruitment. The market regulation of education puts staff and students in a more precarious and disadvantaged position. The logic and forces that have driven down staff's pay, conditions and pensions are the same that have hiked our students' fees and rents.

We know that the student experience will always be better with satisfied staff who are

able to teach and support students to their fullest ability. Currently, precarious conditions and a decline in pay exacerbated by gendered and racialised pay gaps do not allow this to happen, and so we stand together with UCU to make sure it does.

Winning the Arguments

These are some common questions and arguments that you might hear about the strike from students who are concerned.

What does going on strike mean?

Going on strike means that trade union members, i.e those part of a representative body for employees, decide together to stop work. This is to prove that the place they work cannot function without them, in order to highlight their importance to their employers and win their demands.

Strikes have been used as a tactic for hundreds of years in the UK, and the right to go on strike is broadly supported in civil society as a way of workers being able to leverage with their bosses.

Do strikes ever work?

Yes! Trade unions have been organising strike action to win their demands for hundreds of years, and some of the things we take for granted today were won through strike action, including the first ever national minimum wage, won by coal miners in Wales in 1932, and strikes led by women in 1968 at the Ford Motor Company resulted in the 1970 Equal Pay Act – and the film *Made in Dagenham*!

The thing that successful strikes have in common is a strong support base, and that's why it's vital that students support the UCU strike.

Shouldn't you be taking the side of students on this and standing against disruption? Are you representing the student body by supporting this?

Your answer to this will, to some degree, depend on how you have made the decision to support the strike. Some students' unions

choose to hold referenda, while others will pass motions through their Union Council. Other officers will have been elected on a mandate of building relationships with the UCU and supporting them in their disputes, which is also a democratic mandate.

As a politically-elected leader, you cannot represent all students all of the time, and so when supporting the strike you have to be prepared to bring students on board with your decision by winning people over to your arguments. This means it is important to make sure you are informed on the issues that strike is about, and you have a strong relationship with your own UCU branch.

You can also support students to complain to the university about it. This can add pressure on your Vice Chancellor to lobby the bodies responsible for negotiating better pay and conditions to continue negotiations with UCU in the hope of resolving the dispute.

We have released a separate briefing for Advice Services which covers supporting students through the complaints process and the options available to them, and you can use this to support students who are dissatisfied with the disruption that the strike causes and wish to complain.

It is important to be clear that students should be angry with the university, but the individual staff on strike are simply trying to win better conditions for themselves and other people on the same contracts!

And don't forget - last year, polling from YouGov showed that [61% of students supported the UCU strike](#).

Why do they have to go on strike to make their point?

Going on strike is a last resort for many members of staff. They will lose pay for all of the days that they spend on strike, and they would much rather be teaching than standing in the cold!

However, the problems that have led to the UCU taking strike action are too significant to ignore.

Teaching staff are so overworked that they're unable to spend quality time with students or preparing classes. They have also seen their pay [decline in value by 17%](#) over a decade and face gendered and racialised pay gaps. As well as this, many of them will not even be on permanent contracts and will be on zero hours or hourly paid arrangements. This especially impacts postgraduate students and early career researchers and given the additional workload that they face in preparation and marking, means they are often undertaking significantly more work than they are paid for.

This is all exacerbating a crisis of stress and mental health in education, and the only way to turn around the situation is for lecturers to make their voices heard using the strongest action possible in an effort to resolve the dispute quickly. At the moment, they need negotiations to restart in order to resolve the dispute, because so far there has been no solution reached that both parties are happy with.

Don't lecturers get really good pensions anyway? Why should we defend pensions that are much better than ours will ever be?

The pension scheme under question for striking staff is the USS Scheme. The dispute has arisen because of a fear that the Scheme was running at a deficit – so there wouldn't be enough money to pay everyone who was owed money from it, so members' contributions had to raise significantly, but they would still receive the same amount of money when they retired.

However, it was then revealed that this accountancy was inaccurate and there could be a compromise position. UCU and UUK agreed on a new amount that members could pay in, however the USS Trustees refused to accept this, which is why the dispute is continuing.

Pensions should be designed so that those who pay in during their working lives have enough to support them through retirement; it is only in recent years with the decline of the value of pensions and increases to the retirement age in the UK that we've become accustomed to the idea that pensions might not sustain us and we will have to work for longer. This is about thinking more broadly than about just your own future and remembering that fighting for a dignified pension for one group of people does not take money out of your own!

On a purely practical basis, strike action will end sooner the stronger the support for it is, and the quicker management get back around the negotiating table with a solution – so students should get involved!

Aren't lecturers really well paid anyway?

Lecturers are paid under the average salary for full time work. The average salary of the UK lecturer is £31,669 according to Indeed, while the average salary for a full-time job is £35,423 according to research by the Office for National Statistics.

However, if you're answering this question, then it's really important to remember that the UCU dispute is not just about lecturers and people perceived as 'well paid' – it's about the whole range of academic staff involved in making our universities work, and the pay dispute is also a question of liberation and equality.

While staff pay has fallen in value by 14% over the last decade, Black and Women staff members also suffer from pay gaps across the institution, and so averages don't tell the full tale – especially when you then take into account precarious contracts, meaning that lots of early career academics – the ones who are most likely to be known to students as doing the most teaching – have to apply for jobs on an almost annual basis, because permanent, full time contracts are very rare. The median gender pay gap in 2018 for UK universities was 13.7%, while the UK average was 9.1%. The

university with the highest pay gap was Harper Adams, which was 33.7% - you can find the 2018 results for your institution [here](#).

In addition to this, the cost of tuition fees, or rather the amount of student debt accrued, to complete the qualifications to become an academic means that it is extremely expensive to reach the level of lecturer in the first place.

What are my rights if my classes are cancelled?

We have released a full briefing and legal guidance, targeted at students' union advice services, on supporting students to complain to their institutions for compensation.

Student complaints can put additional pressure on universities to lobby their representative organisations to come back to negotiations with UCU. If a student wishes to complain, we advocate asking for compensation rather than a refund. A refund reinforces the consumer relationship between student and institution, and if it were a refund of tuition fees paid by the Student Loans Company, it would likely be delivered as an accounting trick and remove some money from their final balance, rather than them seeing a payment. Compensation is much broader and more flexible.

Students should follow standard complaints processes within your institution and should be directed to the SU Advice Service where appropriate.

I thought there was less money going into higher education now, why should some staff get a pay rise?

It's true, tuition fees have been frozen now for three years, so universities haven't had an inflationary increase of funding that comes from students.

However, it seems there is always the money to give some staff members pay rises. Vice Chancellor pay has become a national topic of concern, and according to the Office for Students, the [average pay rise](#) of senior staff over the past year was 3.5%.

This doesn't include all of the perks that they get on top, including in many cases free accommodation and extremely generous pensions. UCU is asking for a 3% pay rise, plus inflation, which will combat the decline in value of their pay and ensure their pay is back at a liveable level for all staff. If UCU win this, it is important to remember that it will have a positive impact for staff at all levels, not just lecturers, but technicians and researchers as well.

I am a Masters student and have paid very high fees for my education; how can you support something so disruptive to it?

Of course, the strike action is going to be proportionately more disruptive to students who are only studying for a short period of time.

For postgraduate students, it's vital to remember that this is about improving pay and conditions in academia as a whole, and as Masters students are the most likely to go on to research degrees and academic jobs, the UCU dispute, if successful, could have a materially positive impact on the conditions that they go on to work in.

Any questions?

Further briefings on the following issues are available on our [UCU Strike Hub](#):

- In-depth briefing on the issues behind the strike
- Supporting Student Complaints and the UCU Strike
- Suggested asks for students' unions to universities
- Template letter to Vice Chancellors for individual students
- Legal Guidance for Students' Unions on Students' Rights During the Strike

If you have questions on this briefing, or there are questions that you feel we have missed and would like to discuss, please contact Hannah Sketchley, Policy Officer, on Hannah.Sketchley@nus.org.uk