

UNION

TRADE
UNIONISM
&
INDUSTRIAL
ACTION



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HIGHER EDUCATION STRIKES: A SUMMARY FOR STUDENTS

This pamphlet will tell you lots you need to know about what trade unions are, what they do, why higher education workers are striking, and what we hope to achieve. Here are the headlines:

KEY TERMS

Trade unions are organisations of workers, for workers, campaigning for better pay and working conditions.

A strike is the withdrawal of labour to put pressure on employers so that they will work with unions to provide better working conditions.

Higher education staff (including professional services, teachers, researchers, and postgraduate students) are striking for two things: better working conditions and fair pensions.

Pensions are deferred pay, and this pay is being effectively stolen from staff by a valuation system that makes no sense to the experts.

Casualised staff are staff on insecure contracts without permanent/open ended jobs - they are precarious, low paid, and many don't have the same access to basic rights like sick leave and maternity pay.

WHY ARE YOU STRIKING?

The race and gender pay gap is huge in higher education. For example, just 1% of Professors are Black.

Pensions have been devalued by 20%. Staff will retire in poverty if they can afford to retire at all.

Workloads are unsustainable. 1 in 5 members of higher education staff work an additional 16 hours a week on top of contracted hours - the equivalent of 2 working days.

Pay has been cut. A lecturer teaching in 2022 is being paid **25% less** in real terms than a lecturer a decade before, because wages haven't increased with inflation.

Universities rely on exploitative labour. An estimated **25-30%** of higher education teaching is done by a precarious workforce and **68%** of higher education research staff are on fixed-term contracts.

42% of staff on casualised contracts report struggling to pay household bills.

WHAT ARE TRADE UNIONS?

A trade union (or simply, a union) is an organisation of workers that protects or improves the conditions of employment of the workers it represents.

SAFETY IN NUMBERS

Unions both provide workers with **collective bargaining power**, allowing them to negotiate working conditions with employers, as well as **protecting individual workers** from detriment and job loss.

OVER
1.3 Million
PEOPLE ARE MEMBERS
OF UNISON

There are many different unions - you may have seen the CWU (for postal workers) and the RMT (for transport workers) in the news recently. Most unionised workers on campus belong to either **UCU** or **Unison**.

UCU (University and College Union) represents those who work to deliver higher education in the UK. This includes **academic staff** such as lecturers and teaching assistants, but **also includes non-academic staff**, such as some members of professional services staff. **Postgraduate students can also join UCU.**

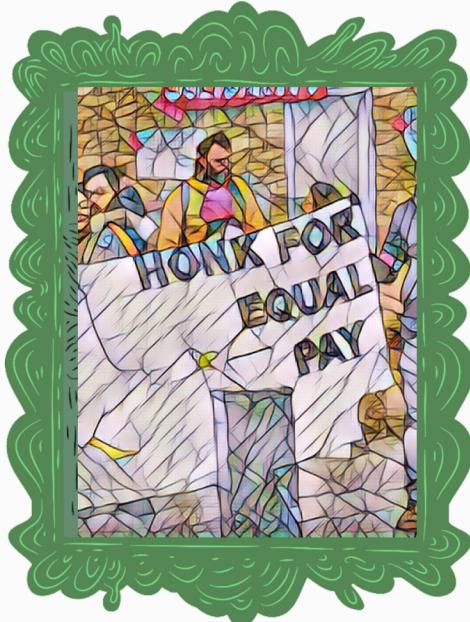


Unison, the largest trade union in the UK, represents **various workers in public services**, including NHS workers. On campus, you can find Unison members working at **the library, in professional services or as cleaners or security staff**, among other places. **If you work for the Students' Union you can also join Unison.**

WHAT DO UNIONS DO?

Unions promote and safeguard the interests and rights of workers in a given workplace or sector. This can either mean negotiating or taking action to improve wages or working conditions, or to foster workplace wellbeing in other ways.

INDUSTRIAL ACTION



When workers withdraw their labour (stop working), employers cannot deliver goods and services to customers and benefit from them financially. Industrial action can take various forms: it might mean a strike, action short of strike, or other ways of withdrawing labour that are more specific to a given workplace (such as a marking boycott at a university).

Industrial action forces employers to recognise the value of the labour that workers do, and allows workers leverage in bargaining with employers for various causes, such as **better pay** or **working conditions** or addressing issues like **unjust workplace policies** or **unfair dismissals**.

... AND MUCH MORE!

Going on strike isn't all there is to a union! Industrial action is always the last resort - unions can and do approach employers for negotiations **without the intention of striking**, and it is **only** if employers refuse negotiations or won't agree to reasonable demands that a union will ballot its members for strike action. Unions also:

- provide their members with mutual aid, such as **legal advice** to help fight back against unfair employers, or **financial support** to cover wages lost due to striking
- create a sense of **community** in the workplace and hold social events
- promote **values** such as workers' rights and solidarity between workers

WHY ARE HIGHER EDUCATION STAFF STRIKING?

There are two disputes in the #UCURising campaign: the first is about **pay cuts and working conditions**; the second is about **USS Pensions**. Both of these are about funds being cut from or misappropriated in higher education. We want better conditions and more resources to make sure **you** have a better university experience and we can afford to live with dignity.

WORKING CONDITIONS

University staff are experiencing:

- **falling pay**
- **unsustainable workloads**
- **an appalling gender and ethnicity pay gap across the Higher Education sector**
- **precarious employment practices**

Since 2009 university staff pay has effectively been cut by **25% in real terms**, while staff are being asked to work harder and longer than ever before. Employers' own analysis highlights that women, Black and minority ethnic, and disabled staff experience significant pay discrimination. Yet employers are refusing to commit themselves to meaningful action on any of these appalling conditions.

Top Tip: Ask your tutors about their contracts: you'll be stunned how many are paid by the hour or are employed for less than a year.

PENSIONS

University staff pensions have also effectively been cut by **£240,000** since 2011, and Universities UK recently voted to cut our pensions by a further **35%**. Pensions are not a gift from our employers: we pay our wages into our pensions, and have watched these savings disappear. We are calling on our employers to revoke the massive cuts they imposed on members of the USS pension scheme and to put pressure on USS to restore benefits to 2021 levels as soon as possible.



DO STRIKES WORK THOUGH?

Do you like **weekends, minimum wage, sick pay, maternity pay, and safety in the workplace**? These have all been won by workers, through organised action!

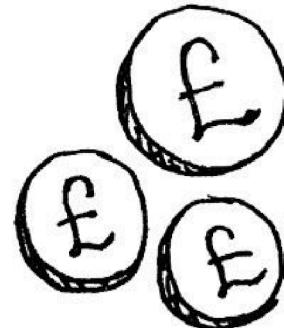


Organised action is the best way we can prevent further exploitation and set a precedent for resisting exploitative working conditions. A win for one union is a win for us all.

Why Strike?

In 2020/21, universities generated record levels of income from tuition fees and other sources, hitting £ 41.1 bn

Universities finished 2020/21 with £3.4 bn more cash in the bank than they started it with.



How's all this cash being spent?

Not on staff wages:

Staff pay has dropped by around **25%** in real-terms since 2009

Staff pay has been cut in **12** of the last 12 years

Not on secure contracts:

Universities are increasingly reliant on precarious and unfavourable contracts

46% of universities use zero hours contracts to deliver teaching.

68% of research staff in higher education are on fixed term contracts, with many more dependent on short-term funding for continued employment.

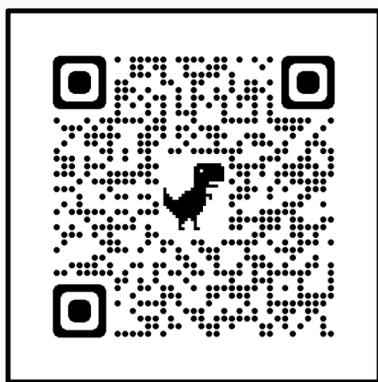
UCU have described this kind of casualised labour as “fundamentally dehumanising”, noting these staff are treated as “SECOND-CLASS ACADEMICS”.

www.ucu.org.uk
#UCURISING

Read more here:



HOW CAN I GET INVOLVED?



If you have a job, chances are you can join a trade union!

Scan the QR code above to use the online union finder tool made by the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and find a union that's right for you. If you don't have a job now, you likely will have in the future. People you love work, and you depend on people who work: **defending workers benefits us all.**

HOW CAN STUDENTS SUPPORT STAFF?

Firstly, THANK YOU. We care about you: **our working conditions are your learning conditions** and a win will improve the Higher Education sector for us all. We need your solidarity and your support means the world.

You can:

- Tell the Vice Chancellor that you support striking staff and that you want the strikes to be over. Evelyn Welch's email is vice-chancellor@bristol.ac.uk
- Join us on the picket lines and at rallies and be ready to make some noise (and meet some picket pups, like Willow, right)
- Be angry - to your friends, on social media. Bristol University made over £66 million surplus last year - we shouldn't be on picket lines and you shouldn't be missing teaching
- Join a student group to support the strike



If you like, you can watch some classic films about the history, politics and emotions of being on strike. Pride, Made in Dagenham, Peterloo, In the Name of the Father, Harlan County, U.S.A., Norma Rae, Matewan are a few suggestions of films that explore strike action and social protest in different periods, places and contexts (yes, we might be on strike, but we're still setting homework...)

MYTHBUSTING

There are a lot of misconceptions about what it's like to work in Universities, why we're striking, and what happens when we strike. It's useful for management and the government to perpetuate these myths to demonise workers. Knowledge is power! We have some answers to common queries here, but feel free to ask union members questions.

Strikers are all teachers

A lot of the discourse focuses on teaching and lecturers, but UCU and Unison members are made up of academic and research staff as well as professional service staff. They run libraries and labs, maintain buildings, manage IT, finance, and HR, to name but a few areas of expertise. Universities are big beasts with many moving parts, and everyone suffers from cut funds.

Strike days are just paid holiday for strikers

People on strike do not get paid for strike days. Some institutions even withhold pay until any cancelled teaching is replaced. When we take Action Short of Strike that means we are only working to our contracted hours - the fact that Universities don't like this (and it's so disruptive when we do do this) shows how reliant institutions are on free labour and unsustainable working conditions.

University workers earn a lot of money and are just being greedy

There are a whole range of pay brackets represented across Universities. Some people are hourly paid. Some only get paid 10 minutes to mark 1000 words of essay. Some get paid the equivalent of less than minimum wage. The average salary for a lecturer is about £33k-£41k. Is that less than you thought? On top of this, staff pay has been cut by 25% in real terms since 2009 and many can't afford to pay their bills. In contrast, Evelyn Welch's initial salary is £285,000.

University workers get loads of time off anyway

It's a common misconception that those working in schools/universities get lovely breaks off over Christmas and Summer. Universities are working year round, and staff are too. The student-facing bit in the classroom is a percentage of a lecturer's workload, alongside marking, designing assessment, preparing to teach, responding to emails, hosting office hours, creating resources, research, public engagement, widening participation - to name but a few activities. And not all staff are lecturers.



MYTHBUSTING (CONTINUED)

University jobs are nice, easy jobs, the working conditions can't be that bad

53% of surveyed higher education staff show probable signs of depression and 29% reported being emotionally drained from work every day. 1 in 5 staff reported working the equivalent of 2 extra days per week on top of their contract. Working conditions are making people ill.

Universities just don't have the money to pay staff

Universities are thriving. Bristol alone has a £66 million surplus and is taking more students (and extortionate student fees) than ever. The money is available - it's just being misappropriated. The Russell Group (a group of 24 Universities, including Bristol) reported a collective surplus of £2.2 billion over the pandemic.

There are bigger issues going on in the world right now and University staff are relatively privileged

People are capable of focusing on lots of problems at once, and the strikes are resisting a wider context of discrimination, casualisation, the devaluation of higher education, and the devaluation of labour while some people get richer and the many get poorer.

Lots of people - like nurses - get paid significantly less, so we shouldn't support University staff/University staff shouldn't complain

A win for one union sets a precedent for all unions. Everyone is entitled to a fair wage and fair working conditions. Unions know this and stand in solidarity with each other.

If staff cared about students they wouldn't strike

This really is a last resort and we would much rather be doing our jobs in the warm than shivering on a picket line! Crucially, we are striking because we care about our students - you deserve staff who aren't burnt out, services that are well staffed and well funded, and good working conditions and pay in your own future.



THANKS FOR READING THIS FAR

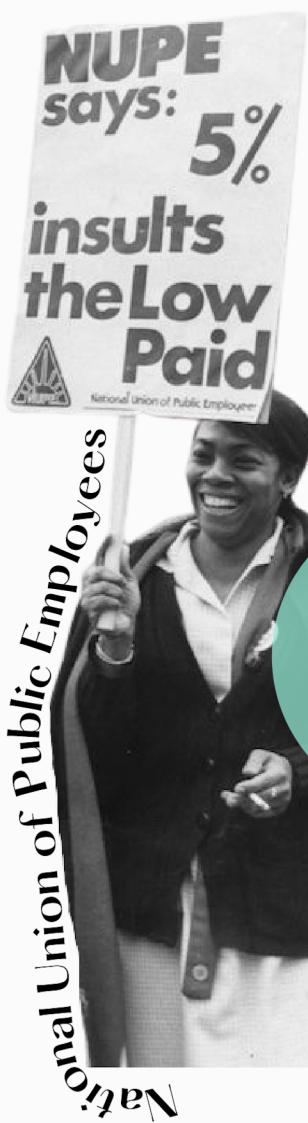
As a reward, here are some historical strike facts to impress your mates down the pub with:

- The first labour strike (that we know of) took place in 1152BCE in Egypt. The artisans of the Royal Necropolis walked off their jobs because they had not been paid. The strike succeeded - their wages were raised!
- The term 'strike' originated in England in 1768, when sailors 'struck' or removed the topsails of merchant ships at port in support of demonstrating workers. The ships, and thus the economy, were crippled.
- In protest of gender inequality, on the 24th October 1975, 90% of Icelandic women went on strike from both paid employment and domestic duties, including childcare. Equal pay legislation was passed the next year.
- The General Strike of 1926 was the largest ever strike action in the UK.



This pamphlet is a mash up of different resources and documents produced for free by union members - special thanks to Queen Mary University London Community Solidarity for the template, Bristol History and Will Pooley for their student-facing writing, Hannah Walters for the graphic, and Louise Creechan and Willow the dog for image rights. Please share and adapt this template and feel free to print and circulate as needed. If you would like any help changing this template please email me at joan.passey@bristol.ac.uk

TRADE UNIONISM



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