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## **University of Brighton Branch Newsletter**

# **December 2019**



**As I write this, UCU strikers are coming to the end of their eight days of strike action.** Whilst it's very frustrating that we're not striking as well, the UCU pickets have been inspirational. It's not just the seasoned activists who have been standing out in the rain and the cold. UCU have mobilised a large layer of members for picket duty, who are determined to stick up for themselves.

They are campaigning for decent pay, but also pay equality, an end to casualisation and rising workloads. Were it not for the anti-trade union laws, we'd be out there with them.

As it stands, the employers' organisation have met with UCU, and are prepared to discuss the issues of casualisation and workload, but are refusing to budge on pay.

Meanwhile, UCU are balloting those

branches which did not meet the 50% turnout threshold the first time, with a view to joining the action.

Our branch gives full support and solidarity to those striking to make the University a better place for us all.

It's been great to see UNISON members talking to the pickets, bringing tea, biscuits and encouragement.

What happens once the strikers go back to work will rest on the attitude of UCEA and to some extent, what happens on 12th December.

If UCU continue with strike action in the new year, UNISON will continue to discuss what we can practically do, both to support UCU and to fight for pay justice.

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## University of Birmingham shows how to win on pay

After six days of strike action, the UNISON branch at the University of Birmingham has voted to accept an improved offer from the Vice Chancellor.

For historic reasons, Birmingham University sits outside of UCEA for support staff. This means that the branch negotiate directly with their university's management.

The strike action has won a 4.85% pay rise for the lowest paid, such as cleaning and catering workers, and a sliding scale of increases up to 3.0%.

(This should be compared to our "final" offer from UCEA, applied to Brighton, which was 3.5% for the lowest paid, rising to 1.8%.)



Birmingham University UNISON branch secretary Mike Moore welcomed the percentage rise for the lowest paid, stating "strike action is always a last resort for any trade union, but we were tired of seeing our members pay cut in real terms every year at an employer that makes multi-million pound surpluses every year. The determination and persistence of our members brought the University back to the negotiating table and we have been utterly blown away by the support and sense of community this campaign has shown both within the branch and beyond."

After initial talks broke down, the University imposed a below inflation 2% pay increase and failed to talk about Living Wage accreditation and the gender pay gap.



UNISON members at Birmingham voted 78.6% in favour of strike action on a 51.3% turnout. This was eerily close to our pay ballot result (78.1% on a 51.4% turnout), but since this was a ballot of Birmingham members only, the 51.3% turnout beat the legal limit for strike action.

This is significant because if our branch were to pull out of national pay bargaining then something similar could have happened here. (Oddly, the UCU branch at Birmingham is included in national pay negotiations.)

Our branch sent solidarity messages and financial support for their hardship fund. We're hoping to get someone from Birmingham at our Annual General Meeting on 5th March to tell us about the dispute, what lessons they learnt from it and why this matters to our branch, as we discuss the best tactics to achieve pay justice.

# University Reviews

As I write this, there are four reviews or savings schemes taking place:

- The Schools “Size and Shape” discussion, to save £1.3 million
- The Academic Services review, to save £1.0 million
- The Information Services savings of £1.5 million
- The Estate and Facilities Management, Managed Halls savings of £0.75 million

So the plan is to save £4.55 million from 1st August 2020. To put this into perspective, if only half of that is savings made by employing fewer people, that’s about 70 full time grade 4 jobs.

The main driver for all these proposed changes is the projections of student numbers. The University’s Annual Financial return to the Office for Students (OfS) was discussed at the Board of Governors’ meeting last week. (Papers available through Staff Central.) Bearing in mind this is what the University is telling OfS and not necessarily what the University really thinks, the projections for students and therefore income are pretty bad.

The forecast number of students for this year are 15% down on what they were two years ago. This is then projected to get worse next year, losing another 4% until they recover slightly by 2023-24, but we’re still well below the number we started with. This assumption drives the forecast deficits, which will be much worse if the University does not achieve the “substantial” savings. The target for 2020-21 is £10 million and “significant re-structuring is being undertaken.”

It’s worth quoting the bit about academic schools:

*“The number of academic schools is being reduced. Subject disciplines are being realigned with delivery by a reduced number of optimally sized academic schools. More consistent leadership structures are to be adopted across schools, making more effective use of staff at principal lecturer level in leadership and management roles. The new school structures will become operational from August 2020.”*

So the University is telling OfS this whilst we’re being asked to contribute to the discussion. The OfS return sounds like a decision has already been made.

Its too early to say that the University management is panicking, but this is perhaps the early stages of a reaction to the situation we’re in. If new undergraduates can’t or won’t come here then there’s an urgent need to address that, and cutting jobs and pretending that fewer people can do things more efficiently won’t fix that problem.

Our contribution to the discussion on all the above will be based on the principle that we’re in favour of whatever might make the University more streamlined and geared towards improving the student experience, but we are firmly opposed to compulsory redundancies. We accept that some people may want to take voluntary severance (some have still never been asked) but it’s not voluntary if the alternative is redundancy.

Obviously it depends on the starting point when it’s a case of counting savings (absent heads of schools posts have already contributed to this), but to make such massive savings by having fewer schools or re-jigging who does what in terms of student administration means that some people have to go. Despite the significant drop in student numbers, there’s no culling of courses (yet), which would provoke resistance from UCU of course, but the report does say...

*“The course portfolio is being refocused, with redesigning provision to better align with market opportunities.”*

What this might mean is open to interpretation, but I would not trust any group of managers who want to “refocus” something. I suspect significant changes to the number and type of courses offered is coming later.

All this adds up to a programme of significant job losses, to be announced at the end of January, or early February.

Our branch has always taken the position that forced redundancies, applied to more than a handful of members will be resisted. Whatever is proposed will be discussed at the branch committee and we will, if necessary, convene an Emergency General Meeting, which will decide what to do.

On pay, our members demonstrated that they were prepared to take strike action alongside UCU to campaign for a better offer. When it comes to jobs, we will perhaps need to take a more localised campaign forward, declare a dispute and ballot our members.

We understand that managing a university under significant student number and financial pressure is difficult, but that doesn't mean that we're going to accept job losses without a fight.

We will continue to argue that higher education as a significant public service needs to be properly funded. If the government can't or won't do that then we'll campaign for more resources and the University leadership are welcome to join us in that campaign.

## Climate Strike 29th November 2019

Our branch was once again marching through Brighton on the latest climate strike to demand urgent political change. The University's commitment to sustainability and plan to set a target for being carbon neutral is welcome, but what's required is significant and urgent action on an international scale.

We've written elsewhere about the need for major changes in how the planet is managed. In the new year, we'll organise a series of events to discuss what's necessary, either to encourage governmental change, or, if necessary to campaign against inaction. If you'd like to help us organise these, please feel free to get in touch.



This is the last of twelve newsletters we've produced throughout 2019. If you've got this far, thanks for reading and please don't forget to vote on 12th December. We hope you have a great Christmas and New Year, and here's to a government that's not made up of millionaire Tory toffs.

Please save the date - **5th March 2020** for the **Annual General Meeting**, with meetings at City Campus, Falmer and Eastbourne around that time.