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University of Brighton Branch Newsletter

September 2021

The new academic year brings many questions and challenges both for the University and its workforce. UNISON members will be facing many issues - Covid safety considerations, falling real-terms pay and the future of the University. It's probably too early to say how student recruitment has gone, but with the start of a demographic boom, which has led to some Russell Group universities paying students to defer, you would hope that the new intake of first years is a healthy number, especially with brand new student accommodation.

The last academic year left unanswered questions, especially over pay, with a legal strike mandate over the 2020-21 pay freeze and the pay award for 2021-22 to be imposed at the end of this month, in spite of all unions being in dispute over it. We have some important decisions to be made over both these issues.

In terms of Covid, it appears that the

University leadership are planning to revert to an almost business as usual situation, albeit with some staff partially working at home under the "agile working" framework.

We have severe reservations over this, given the number of cases nationally and locally and the fact that many thousands of excitable students may not be the most vigilant in terms of prevention. Nobody genuinely knows the effect of thousands of students travelling around the country and the planet to begin courses taught primarily face to face, and so it's understandable that many people will be very nervous about being in enclosed spaces with so many people,.

At the very least, we would like to see face-coverings still worn, significant, measurable ventilation and control measures still in place to manage this, with specific consideration to the most vulnerable.

Ivan Bonsell, Branch Secretary

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Covid 19 - September 2021 Update

With the return of students, the University is gearing to adopt a “Covid-aware” approach, in line with what the government are saying. This is basically shifting the emphasis from the University dealing with Covid safety to individuals taking responsibility themselves, by washing hands regularly, wearing a face-covering “when moving around the University” (strongly advised at least) and being regularly tested.

The problem with all this is that we’re relying on thousands of students to follow the “advice”, which is little more than a “please will you?” There’s no more attempt to get students to follow this than there is on public transport, which is patchy to say the least and continues to be a major issue for those concerned about the prospect of catching a life-threatening disease.

Our concern is that this is placing the emphasis far too much on “individual responsibility”, which is not what we would expect our employer to do. It is true that rates appear to be falling, ahead of an expected spike when the impact of school students returning shows itself, but passing off genuine fears of Covid as psychological problems is not, in our view, addressing the very real problems that many people can see, that polite requests for people to be careful in enclosed spaces are weak, to say the least.

Our position is that we want the University to continue to be forceful about the need for people to continue to wear face-coverings, to continue to keep a distance from other people (staff or students) and for the maximum ventilation to be in force. We’d also want a clear limit on the number of people at any one time in certain rooms, lifts etc.

We’ll be discussing all this formally at the (rescheduled) Safety and Wellbeing Committee due to take place this week.

If any members are concerned about the situation, then a discussion with your line manager is essential. If they don’t agree with your concerns or are not willing to compromise then you have the right to take out a grievance, report the incident to Health and Safety, and in extreme cases, refuse to work in a situation which you feel puts you or others at risk.

Clearly this is a difficult time for everyone, but we don’t feel that giving students what we think they might want, or following government/Office for Students (lack of) guidance overrules health and safety considerations.

We all have a responsibility to keep each other safe at work and UNISON will do its best to forcefully make the point that slavishly following what this government wants universities to do is not necessarily going to be the best option.

The latest meeting of the Safety and Wellbeing Committee (SAWC) took place this week and left trade union safety reps increasingly frustrated at the University's approach and unwillingness to move away from unilateral decisions made.

The whole point of SAWC, being a joint committee, is to provide oversight of the University's health and safety processes, and this is clearly very important when we're in the middle of a pandemic. The University has the option of sticking with the government's guidelines (which actually amount to almost not really bothering) or adopting its own control measures - face coverings, distancing, ventilation etc.

What the Covid-aware approach does is pretty much leave everything to "individual responsibility" so that there's no real joined up thinking other than ineffectually telling students, staff and visitors that they're strongly encouraged to wear face coverings occasionally.

What we're not getting at SAWC meetings is the ability to scrutinise the measures in place (or lack of them) as a Committee, but a one way delivery of decisions already made by the Incident Response Team (IRT), which is basically UEB with a few handpicked managers thrown in for advice, which may or not be followed. We've seen no minutes or reports from IRT, which speaks volumes in terms of what SAWC is supposed to be for. Decisions are made at IRT, currently mirroring what the government is saying, and then presented to SAWC, where necessary, as a fait accompli and a done deal since information has already gone out.

It's interesting to compare this to the early days of lockdown, when there was actually a massive amount of consultation and discussion over seemingly endless risk assessments and things to discuss and consider.

The trade union safety reps are now being treated as awkward sods who won't ever agree to anything.

What we're saying is that we appreciate there's a need for things to happen on campus, but that effective control measures, that would generally cost very little and would help to control the spread of Covid and reassure staff and students that working on-site, within certain limits, is as safe as possible.

The principles of mandatory face-coverings, controls on distancing and room occupancy and measurable minimum ventilation standards are perfectly reasonable, and we think they should remain in place.

If the University refuses to listen to our significant concerns over safety, we'll have no choice but to seek the views of members as to whether they will be willing to carry out certain tasks, when they do not feel safe.

Pay Disputes

It's still complicated.

Thanks to all our members who voted in the postal pay ballot, which was over the pay freeze of 2020-21 (payable, or not, from 1st August 2020). In spite of all the difficulties of Covid and remote working for

many, we achieved a very credible **71.3% vote to reject the final "offer" on a 52.6% turnout**. This gives us a legal mandate to take strike action over pay and whilst the turnout was close, it gives us confidence that we can hit that 50% turnout after the disappointment of coming so close in the One World Nursery dispute.

Unfortunately, this was supposed to be part of a national campaign, so the fact that only three other branches managed a 50%+ turnout means that realistically, we're not going to be able to take action which is going to put pressure on the national employers' group to offer us all a better pay rise.

However, this does not alter the fact that we have a mandate for strike action and our branch committee meeting this month will consider what we want to do and what we could do, to secure our members a better pay offer.

For 2021-22, as you'll appreciate, the final pay offer (1.5% and a bit more for grades 1 to 4) is to be imposed at the end of this month (and back-dated to August). Whilst this better than the 2020-21 kick in the teeth, it still falls short of what inflation is and is likely to be in the near future and of course increases in NI contributions to come in 2022 will pretty much wipe it out. In real terms, it's almost certainly another pay cut.

Branches are being asked if we want ballot members over this (I know) and so in our case, there's a reasonable view that we probably don't need to since we already have a mandate to strike over pay, but for many complicated reasons, it may be that we have to go through the whole process again. Obviously we conscious of balloting, balloting and then balloting again with every ballot even more important than the last one, but we want to be able to secure pay justice to all our members (and those who benefit from our efforts but don't feel the need to join!), so sometimes we just have to do stuff for the end product.

Either way, we will let members know what the situation is later in the month and we'll have a members' meeting to (attempt to) explain it all.





Join us online for the Young Members' AGM!

If you're aged 26 or under, and a member of UNISON, you're deemed to be a young member. We only have a few of you, mainly because the University is not good at employing young people, but we're very keen to get our young members involved in our branch, the union and the region, so please get in touch if you have any questions about getting involved. We'd love to hear from you.

The regional young members' AGM takes place on-line. All young members are welcome to attend as branch delegates. Just let us know if you're interested.

AGM DETAILS

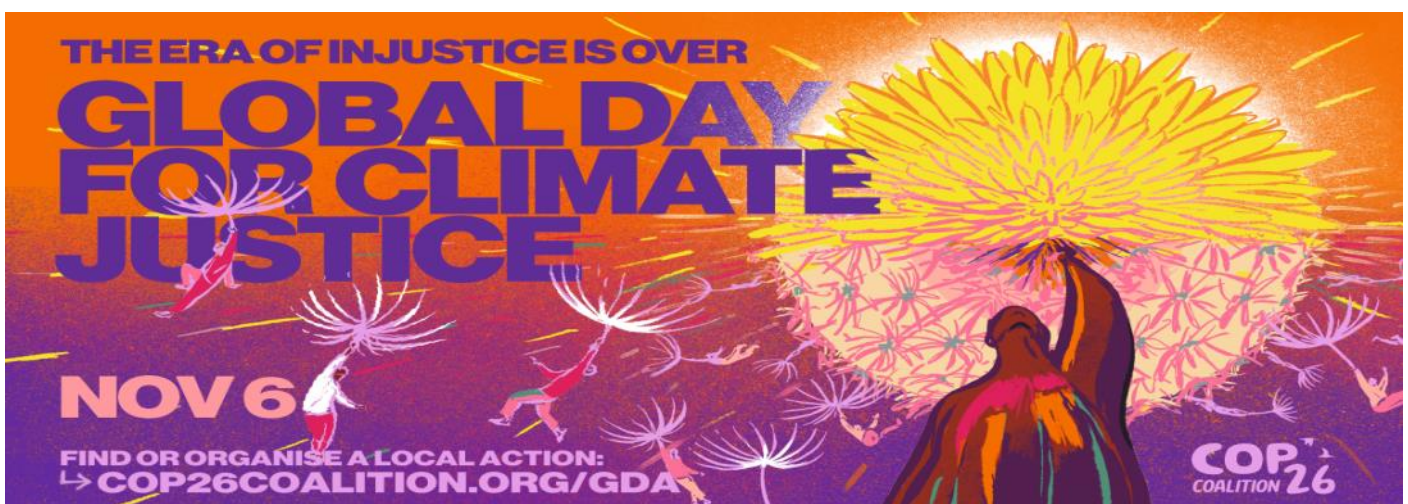
WHEN: 15:00 - 16:30 on Thursday 4 November 2021

WHERE: The meeting will be held online using Microsoft Teams.

This will be the second Regional Young Members' AGM we've held virtually. We had a great turn out at the last meeting - let's make this one the biggest we've ever held.

Our branch supports campaigning over COP 26

UNISON's national conference supported a motion to support protests at COP 26 in Glasgow in November. Clearly it's a long way to go, but we're willing to support financially if any member would like to attend the protests - just let us know!



“Covid Aware”? - Joint meeting with UCU

For the first time ever, we’re holding a joint meeting on Teams with UCU members to discuss safety issues, specifically Covid safety in the light of the University’s unilateral adoption of the “Covid Aware” approach.

Being Covid Aware is pretty much doing very little to address both the physical threat of catching a life-threatening disease and the psychological effect of being in an environment that doesn’t feel safe. We want the University to be much more in tune with what our members are saying about Covid and we are demanding the following:

- *The University should mandate that face coverings are to be worn indoors and in classrooms during teaching unless the user is exempt.*
- *CO2 monitors secured and regularly maintained should be fitted in all teaching rooms and multi-occupancy offices with signage explaining the maximum CO2 concentrations should be below 800ppm (typically 10-15 l/s/person).*
- *Continued requirement to have windows opened continuously, where windows open, and irrespective of weather conditions; likewise internal doors to enable a through-flow of fresh air*
- *Provision of OH assessments for staff deemed clinically (extremely) vulnerable to Covid, irrespective of vaccination, and also to long Covid (which disproportionately affects women).*
- *The University should monitor infection / hospitalisation / death levels and to commit to a review of the situation if significant rises occur and not to rule out teaching returning online this academic year*
- *Physical distancing measures to be maintained at 1.5 m*
- *Protocol to be established for circumstances when a lecturer can request that a student goes home if they seem to be symptomatic.*
- *Supply the protocols which have been developed for a local surge or spike affecting students in campus residencies or the local area.*
- *Protocol for what options lecturers have to request mask wearing and move back online or make recordings available if they need to.*
- *Protocol for when a staff member has to isolate?*
- *Emergency arrangements if there are a large number of staff off sick with Covid-19*
- *Public transport should be taken into account for Occupational Health Assessments.*
- *Free parking to be given to staff with concerns about using public transport*
- *Protocol sign in rooms for what they should do if they feel ill or begin to show symptoms.*

All welcome! 1pm Friday 17th September on Teams

Join the meeting on [Teams](#) [irfcfx1]