



Our newsletter is free to all members.

If there was ever a time to join a trade union, it's now, when both UNISON and UCU are fighting back over pay. If you're not a member, join today.

University of Brighton Branch Newsletter

2nd December 2021

Special Strike Edition

We're producing a special edition of our monthly newsletter because this is a massive event for our branch.

This is the first time we've taken strike action since 2014 and whilst this began as a national claim for better pay, our claim for a staff bonus is now a local issue, since we were one of a handful of branches successfully achieving a legal strike mandate.

We know many of our members are determined to campaign for pay justice and taking strike action is a last resort when we can't get any change by just asking for it.

When the pay freeze was imposed in August 2020, everyone working in higher education, including Vice Chancellors, were concerned about the future and whether students would materialise given the pandemic. Whilst universities did lose considerable amounts of income, they all survived.

Some universities have made bonus payments to staff for working through the pandemic. Our claim for a bonus is reasonable and proportionate. Members of staff would be encouraged to know that the Vice Chancellor recognises the serious financial straits many staff have fallen into.

So, on Thursday 2nd December, please join our strike, don't go to work or log on to the network at home.

We need sustained pressure, alongside UCU, to make the point that we're not putting up with endless pay cuts and working more for less.

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Frequently Asked Questions

We know taking strike action is a big deal, especially if you've never done it before, so here's more explanation of what it's all about. Please get in touch if you have more questions.

What is the strike about?

All university staff had a pay freeze imposed on August 2020, in the early days of the pandemic. UNISON called for universities to pay their employees properly and many branches balloted members to oppose the freeze and begin the process for industrial action.

Our members voted 71% in favour of taking strike action to campaign for a decent pay settlement, with a turnout which achieved the necessary 50% of members. Few other UNISON branches managed to achieve this. We therefore have a legal strike mandate in our pay dispute locally, here at Brighton.

We agreed to make a claim for a one-off bonus for all support staff, to make up for the pay freeze and in part, to recognise the work we've all done throughout the pandemic. We don't think that's too much to ask. We've been clear all along that we're happy to negotiate over the amount, especially if we can have more for lower grade staff, who are likely to be struggling the most.

The University have so far refused to make any offer.

Isn't the University short of money?

Yes, but it always comes down to what you spend the money on. Many universities like Brighton have invested in shiny new buildings to attract students. We're not opposed to that, but staff wages have fallen and fallen in real terms and we think staff morale and welfare is just as important as the facilities in which we all work and study. We know that many of our members are in financial difficulty, and regularly make hard choices to get through to the end of the month.

Tuition fees are failing to go up with inflation. Rumour has it, fees will be cut to £8,500 or lower. Many universities which struggle to grow student numbers are up against it. We recognise that. The only long-term solution is to campaign for adequate government funding for universities. Vice-Chancellors passing on cuts by cutting staff wages in real terms is unsustainable and unjust. We must oppose it.

Isn't there a better way of campaigning which won't affect students' education?

We're open to suggestions, but ultimately, most working people know that if you want to gain better terms and conditions at work then you need to use the powers that you have. Taking strike action is not something that any of us want to do, but it's the only effective method of pushing back and demanding that the University leadership thinks again about its priorities.

Won't they just cut jobs instead?

We have all witnessed some tragic job losses at this university just recently. Our pay didn't go up as a result. It's not one or the other. The university management seems set on resolving its problems by attacking our pay, our working conditions, and our job security.

Will the strike achieve anything?

There are no guarantees. The only certainty is that if we do nothing, we'll never get any more than they want to give us and we all know that Vice-Chancellors will normally want to achieve more with fewer resources.

We'll lose a day's pay. In doing this, we demonstrate our determination to achieve a significant benefit for all. Thursday's strike action is about pay. Sticking together and standing up for ourselves also puts down a longer-term marker.

The best scenario is that we're offered a bonus which we can democratically decide to accept or reject, without having to take any action, but we have to plan for action and show that we're serious.

What about the students?

We know that students have faced disruption over Covid (as we all have) but we would hope that many of them would be willing to support what we're doing. It's in their interests for universities to be run by properly rewarded staff who are well motivated.

Students also face rising living costs and a future of massive debts when they graduate. We need to unite with them to campaign for proper university funding and proper grants for students which cover their costs of studying. Fees should be abolished and replaced with central government funding for higher education, instead of a government wasting money on subsidies for the rich, fossil fuel grants and aircraft carriers.

Why should those who didn't vote to strike join in?

Trade unions (unlike universities) are democratic bodies where important decisions are taken by balloting our members. Some will have voted to not strike and some will have not voted, but the democratic decision to strike has been taken and we'd expect all members to respect that.

If we'd voted to not take any action, we wouldn't then be arguing for striking, against the majority decision.

Since an ex-prime minister once claimed there's no such thing as society, it's always been in the interests of those with power to make us think we chose how we act as individuals, with self-interest being the main driver. Trade unions are based on harnessing the collective power of working people so that we can collectively achieve more than we can as individuals. It's in our self interest to stick together.

If our members choose to work on our strike day, they're failing to recognise the point of the trade union they've joined and they are weakening our ability to achieve our aims. We'll hope to be able to persuade them otherwise.

What's the picket line for?

Striking workers have traditionally formed picket lines to try to persuade other workers not to weaken the strike and go in to work. Officially, we're there to ask other members to join in, as explained above, but we can give out leaflets to anyone we come across to explain our reasons for striking and appeal for support.

Loitering around in the cold outside a workplace you're not going in to, and not getting paid for it, may not seem like the most fun thing to do, but it's important to show we're united and emphasise the collective spirit of a union. Whilst withdrawing our labour is the main tactic, receiving support and encouragement from others is always a healthy part of any campaign and its incredibly uplifting to recognise that most working people will instinctively support workers on strike, just as our branch has done over the years.

Working people make up the vast majority of those in society and nothing happens without us working. The more unity we have, the greatest chance of achieving a settlement we're happy with.

What about the loss of pay?

You will lose one day's pay, based on 1/365th of your annual salary, which will probably be deducted from the January payroll. You will need to declare that you've taken action on MyView.

However, we will have a strike hardship fund which members will be able to claim from if they are going to struggle financially. We will appeal to other trade union branches for financial support to sustain this and whilst we can't promise to make up for lost wages, we can channel funding to those most in need, especially given that not every member will make a claim.

What about non-members?

They should join a union. Or at least we should try to ask them to. People can join UNISON on the day of the strike and join us on the picket lines. It's happened before.

Every non-member who goes into work will weaken the effectiveness of the strike, but we're never going to get 100% of employees joining and as long as we make sure everyone is asked then that's all we can do.

It goes without saying that all pickets will be impeccably well behaved and try to persuade people to join us on strike in a polite but assertive manner. We will not threaten or verbally abuse anyone, but we will try to patiently explain what we're doing and why, and why we want everyone to support us.

If we do end up with an increase in pay, non-members will get it as well.

I've never been on strike before, so I don't know what to expect?

Going on strike can be scary and worrying if you've not done it before and some people will feel a lot of pressure from their manager or maybe others to break the strike and attend work. The low level of industrial action for many years has played into the narrative that striking is for trouble causers or lazy workers. (There's nothing lazy about getting to a picket line on a freezing cold morning, before the sun comes up, on a day you're not getting paid.)

Any manager pressurising you to be at work on our strike day should be reported to us.

Once you've got over the initial hurdle of thinking you're doing something wrong, going on strike can be an exhilarating experience. It's a recognition that we all have much more in common with each other and that we have a great deal of power if we use it properly.

Do I need to tell my manager I'm striking?

No, absolutely not, but if you're feeling guilty about it then you can always tell them anyway. They may ask so that they can try to provide cover. There are rules about what can and can't be covered, (they can't get temps to do it) but nobody should cover your work if they wouldn't do that normally.

UNISON members should not do the work of UCU members on the days they're striking but we're not.

Our aim is to cause disruption by not being at work, so we shouldn't be making it easier for those remaining members of staff to try to keep things going. The University's management will go into overdrive trying to make sure buildings are open and there's an appearance of normality, but we all know that in reality, very little will be happening if we get this right.

What if I'm working from home?

We know many members will be due to work from home on Thursday 2nd, and we still expect everyone to take strike action, by not working. Please don't log into the network. If you're willing, we'd love more people on our picket lines, so even if you can only make it for half an hour, come and say hello - children, friends, partners, pets etc. all welcome.

What happens after 2nd December?

We're hoping the University will make us a serious offer, but if they don't, we'll need to decide if we want to give it another go, maybe for more than one day.

At the very least, we'll try to assess the strike's impact and discuss with all members what we think we should do next. Winning an industrial dispute is often about being determined enough to threaten action, whether you take it or not, but you can't threaten something you're not willing to go ahead with.

The rollout of UCU's campaign will obviously be a factor in our future decisions, but we will try to make sure we're listening to all members.

What if I can't afford to lose a day's pay?

Isn't that really the point? So many people are in such a precarious state financially that even losing 1/365th of their pay is scary.

The reality though is that your pay has fallen and fallen anyway, because we've not been able for a variety of reasons to resist this. This strike is the first stage in turning this around and saying to the Vice Chancellor that it's not good enough.

We're hopeful that our Hardship Fund will be able to help out those most in need and make the collective sacrifice much more equal.

Why are you doing this now, in the middle of a pandemic?

If not now, then when? We've put up for years with crap pay settlements and the pandemic has been used by the university sector and central government as a reason to put things on hold whilst our wages have taken a massive real-terms hit. We can't easily pick and choose the timing of our action, but we can start here and now to turn the tide and make a real difference into the future.

Are any members exempt from striking?

We would hope that all direct University-employed members will join us on strike, but those working for the Students' Union or other employers are not involved in this and should go to work as normal.

Also, to quote UNISON's Industrial Action Handbook, there are special cases where we would not expect members to strike:

"It is UNISON practice to ensure that members who would suffer long-term financial loss can work normally during industrial action. They are:

- employees in their last year of service who are in a pension scheme.
- pregnant women who have notified their employer of the expected date of the birth (unless there is a clear commitment from the employer that the member will not suffer detriment).
- people whose state benefits may be affected if they take part in strike action."

So, if you're close to retirement, due to go on maternity leave or if your benefits could be affected, then you are exempt. Please contact us if you have any specific concerns.

What you could do, is make a donation to our Hardship Fund instead, so that you're helping out those who do take action.

Are any other UNISON branches striking with us?

SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) in London are matching UCU's three strike days. They have also made a claim for a staff bonus. We send them our full solidarity!



What pay have we lost anyway?

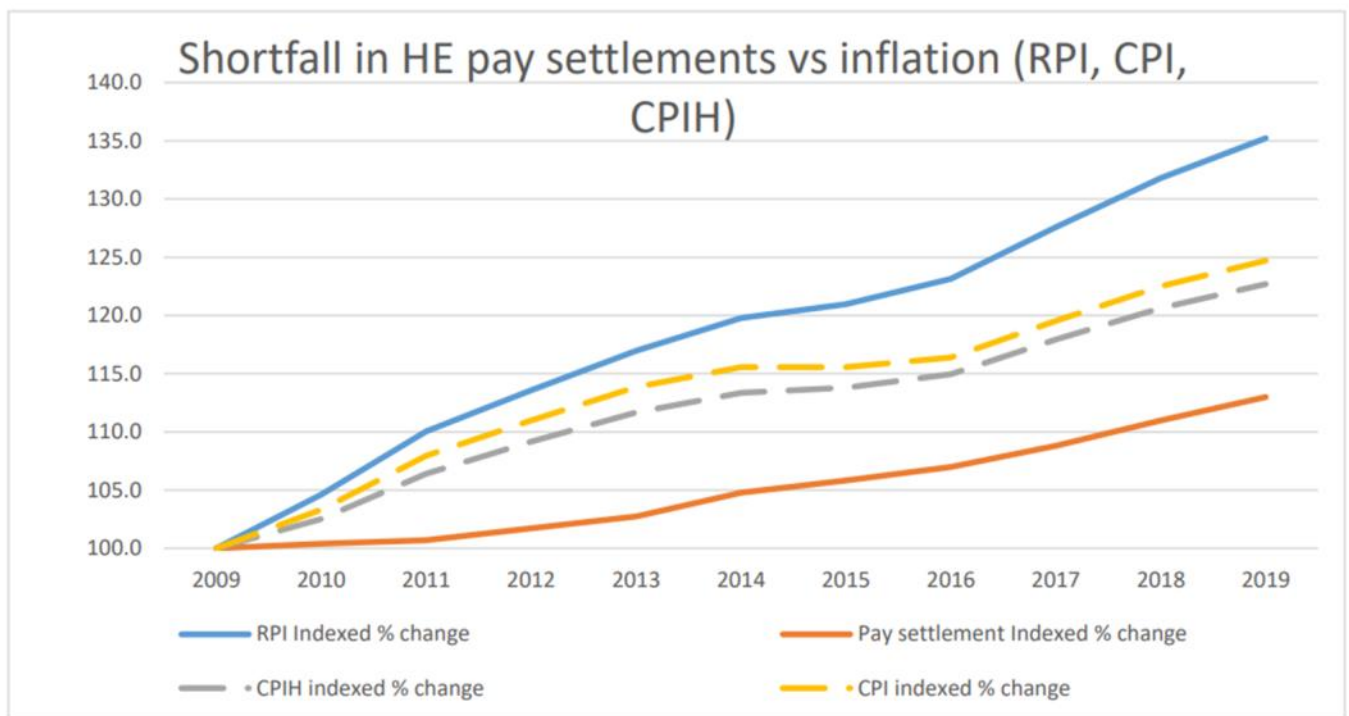
It's complicated, but everyone agrees that the pay of all university staff has fallen back in real terms since the world financial crisis of 2008/09.

The joint union pay claim for 2020/21 made the following points:

“The loss in value of pay has resulted in HE staff having less disposable income and facing increasing financial difficulties. From a 2009 baseline, pay awards in higher education have resulted in a cumulative increase of 13% over the past ten years.

In the same time period, the RPI index has increased by 35.2%. The impact of the cost of living rising so much faster than HE pay is that higher education staff have seen the value of their pay decline by an enormous 22.2 pence per pound since 2009 or 16.4%.

UCEA's own report 'Real Wage Changes on the New JNCHES Pay Spine' demonstrates that staff pay has declined by up to 10.5% from a 6 baseline year of 2008/09 or 9.5% from a baseline year of 2009/10 when measured against CPI. The UCEA research concurs with the unions that this is significantly higher when compared against RPI.”



What this graph shows is that since 2009, up to 2019, our wages have gone up by about 13%, but depending on which version of inflation you want to look at, they should have gone up by 25% or 35%, and all this is before the 2020 pay freeze and the more recent 1.5%!

If you're feeling poorer than you were ten years ago, it's because our pay can't buy what it used to.

We're not just talking about a few quid. For example, someone earning £26,341 now, at the top of grade 4, has lost £6,190 since 2009. That's £6,190 extra that you should have this year if pay had kept up, and that's only this year. (What about the years in between?)

The reality is that universities have spent the higher fee income on fancy buildings and more and more marketing to encourage students to come here, rather than somewhere else, but at the same time, university funding has been falling, with no increase on the basic undergraduate fee.

You can check your own pay on UNISON's national Higher Education Website.

So how would you sum up the situation?

That's easy.

On Thursday 2nd December, UNISON members will be striking (not going to be doing any work) to force the issue over our claim for a pay bonus.

We're not asking for much, just that the University give us a bonus, which we're happy to talk about, to make up for the 2020 pay freeze.

We want all UNISON members to join us (unless you're exempt) and we will be picketing the buildings to try to persuade people to join us.

Our picket lines will be well disciplined and made up of lots of different people.

We'll be celebrating our determination to campaign for better pay, but we are taking this seriously and we recognise the sacrifice in lost pay today that every striking member has to go through to get us pay justice for everyone in the future.

If you're a member, please make sure you join us.

If you're not yet a member, join today.

We'll have membership forms on the picket lines, or you can join on-line.

We're not striking because we want to cause trouble, or disrupt the education of students.

We're striking because it's the only way we can make our point about refusing to put up with years and years of falling pay.



Serena Cheung