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The University Worker

A rank-and-file
strike bulletin

We must escalate!

We are relaunching The University Worker. This is a bulletin written by and for rank-and-file members of UCU. By rank-and-file we mean those of us who have to go back to work after the strikes, not paid officials or staff. Like previous issues, we want to bring together and share reports about how the strike is actually going on the ground.

For this first bulletin, we've brought together reports from different universities, as well as calling for ideas about escalation. Off the back of an impressive turnout and vote for strikes, we don't just want to do three days and then sit around waiting until next year. If the strike wave of this year taught us anything, it's that we need to get serious about leverage. This could be through an industrial strategy (ie leveraging UCEA and UUK) or a political strategy (leveraging the government). Both require an active, engaged and informed rank-and-file putting our shoulders to the wheel to drive this dispute forward.

Please send us suggestions and ideas for the next bulletin, as well as reports from your picket line. What is and isn't working nationally and locally? Where is the leverage to win in your workplace? How can we escalate this dispute? The UCU demo at Kings Cross on the 30th of November provides a brilliant opportunity for us to plan - or do - escalations together.

If we want to win this dispute, we can't leave it to anyone else!

- *The University Worker editorial collective*

Report from QMUL

Alongside the pensions and 'pay and conditions dispute', there is an important context in which workers at QMUL are organising. Queen Mary has been the site of some of the most punitive anti-union tactics in the UK. The six-figure salaried Vice Chancellor enacted a 100% deductions policy for action short of strike during the last bout of industrial action, all the while workers and the made-poor across the country were being pulverised by a cost of living crisis. While other university VCs threatened



100% deductions for ASOS, QM remained a pariah institution by being the only university to maintain the policy and enforce it against workers.

At one point, when inflation was rising to record levels, along with rent and mortgages, the management were threatening to deduct 21 days pay from workers' July pay packet and the same from the following month. However, union organising meant that deductions for August were halted, a campaign to replenish the local strike fund mitigated the callous wage theft by management, and London weighting allowance was increased by 21%; though there is still much to do, as the policy remains on the books. Further, QM management recently introduced a new mechanism whereby students can notify the university of missed teaching activities in order to "ensure compliance the competition and markets authority" regulations. While claiming this it to do with regulatory compliance, this 'snitch form' is clearly an anti-union attempt by management to pit students against staff, and manipulate students into surveilling striking workers. Further, professional support staff at UNISON recently balloted over pay and, while they narrowly missed the threshold by 4%, are re-balloting, confident they can surpass the anti-union threshold. Given how especially important PSS are to the running of the institution, simultaneous strike action will provide an important opportunity to coordinate strategy to pressure management.

After the results of the UCU ballot, a motion was passed at the local branch to call for indefinite strike action

from term two as a way to leverage power over management. While HEC decided otherwise, and QM management contacted staff to renew the threat of 100% deductions for ASOS, the QM branch passed another motion to take indefinite strike action if 100% deductions for ASOS took effect.

There is the desire among much of the rank and file to ramp up militancy, knowing that doing otherwise will encourage management to run roughshod over workers. Indeed, we are seeing the effectiveness of that militancy already; with management having found it very difficult to implement their last round of ASOS deductions; and delaying the imposition of future deductions. Management are slowly but surely relenting.

The rank and file at QMUCU are remaining steadfast and optimistic that they can, along with students, win this round of industrial action. They are hardened by years of strike, often in unforgiving economic and meteorological conditions! However, they are also taking local initiative to think of creative ways to push against a punitive and unforgiving senior management.

- Rank and file member at QMUL



Report from University of Glasgow

At Glasgow, UCU is one of four campus unions, alongside GMB, Unison, and Unite. Since the summer, each one has achieved strong mandates for strike action. Whilst each union has of course secured an individual mandate, the struggle to vastly improve the conditions of working in higher education translates across all of them. The strength of having the four unions with a mandate has revitalised what has felt like a long and unrelenting fight for UCU members at Glasgow. Whilst we regrettably might not be able to take action on all of the same days, collectivising our efforts in terms of strategizing, picket lines, and simply keeping each other going, has transformed the strength of feeling towards the UCU rising dispute locally. When we next look to nationally decide strike dates, we would do well to keep this in mind.

For these first three strike days at Glasgow, we plan to

draw on this joint campus union solidarity. We have planned a joint union rally in Glasgow on the 25th, bringing together the other three unions, and EIS, who have industrial action planned for the 24th – cementing the benefits of considering Scottish university and school term dates when deciding when to go out. On November 30th, our Unite branch are out on strike. We plan to hold long and loud picket lines to let the university know that their workers are united – and we will be, until and beyond when we achieve our demands.

Goldsmiths: Restructure and Struggle

In the middle of a cost of living crisis, Goldsmiths bosses have withheld wages from scores of casualised teaching staff for a second month in a row. This has put many precarious workers into a state of serious financial straits. Many of those affected by this wage theft have no recourse to additional funds and this is wreaking havoc on their lives. This most recent administrative dysfunction follows significant disruptions to the processing of grades which resulted in countless cases of inaccurate marks going out to students.

This all stems from Goldsmiths' ill-conceived professional service restructure which has gutted the internal infrastructure of the university. After a year-long local industrial dispute against this restructure and associated redundancies, staff and students are now feeling the impact of staffing and services shortages. Workloads have become unsustainable, precarious staff are on the breadline and students are being routinely failed by a broken system.

This is also a context where an internal investigation of the unilateral suspension of department heads and union members Des Freedman and Gholam Khiabany found that 'there was no case to answer'. Goldsmiths' management have provided no public apology or explanation for these authoritarian and union-busting tactics, leaving staff to assume that bosses can suspend at will.

In this context, the UCU national strike serves as an opportunity to mobilise workers across Goldsmiths and to develop a long-term strategy that responds to the re-composition of our workplace. The post-restructure situation poses difficult tactical and strategic questions: do we let the dysfunctions ensue? Or do we take on the extra workload? Do we demand a return to the original structure? Or do we use this organisational transition to push for more radical changes? The daily administrative dysfunctions and impulsive authoritarianism we are seeing at Goldsmiths are symptomatic of a fractured

leadership. The legitimacy of Goldsmiths' leadership has long been in a state of crisis, but now, as the dust settles on the restructure, there appear genuine in-roads to removing pivotal figures in the senior management team. The question is: how do we do this and where do we go from there?

- UCU member at Goldsmiths

Migrant worker intimidation at Oxford

The national ballot has allowed Oxford to join the dispute, having missed the turnout threshold on the last few ballots. University management have responded to the strike with a combination of carrot and stick. All visa holding staff have been summoned to a compulsory 'briefing session' on day one of the strike. The session is advertised as helping ensure that 'all sponsored visa holders understand and comply with Home Office regulations.' This is a blatant attempt at intimidation.

At the same time, two large discretionary cost of living payments totaling £1,800 have blunted the edge of the inflation crisis for many of us, but any short-term bonuses that are not reflected in long-term pay rises are just real terms pay cuts by the back door.

Oxford's college structure complicates the strike, with a broadly accepted (but probably legally dubious) consensus that college staff cannot participate in the strike due to their different employer, meaning that action will primarily be concentrated in the departments. However, support in the departments does seem strong. Students and postgraduate researchers are also leading their own campaigns to support the action.

We need to take management on over their overt victimisation of migrant staff; unionise the colleges; build solidarity with the other unions that represent other workforces in the university; and maximise the effectiveness of our pickets. It is essential that we use the next few days as a chance to build leverage before the action really gets going next term.

- UCU member in Oxford

Unison members - we must fight and win a rebalot!

In August, Unison balloted members in higher education nation-wide, to strike RPI +2% pay rise), a maximum 35 hour working week for all, and other demands. Whilst the results were hailed as a victory by the national office, only 22 branches managed to pass the anti-union 50% turnout threshold. In the end, not all of these branches

took strike action.

For months now Unison have been saying they plan to rebalot those branches that did not manage to meet this turnout threshold. They have now announced that they will be rebalotting 51 university branches from 30th November - however, these branches will be rebalotted at various different timescales.

Rank-and-file Unison members must keep putting pressure on the union to conduct a proper rebalot, where all branches are given an opportunity to push for strike action. Striking together makes us all stronger.

When the next rebalot takes place, we must take our own initiatives to smash the anti-union threshold. This means talking to our co-workers, mass postering, doing walk-arounds on our campuses to find and talk to members, and more - especially those of us in branches that can often feel dormant. It was only in branches with active bases that passed the ballot last time - let's take an example from them and throw our all into getting this next ballot over the line, whether we're committee members or not.

Imagine our industrial strength if all staff members are out on strike together: cleaners, lecturers, security guards, admin staff, librarians, PGTAs and more, whatever union we are in. When all of us go out together, our universities will be shut down, and our individual demands bolstered. Let's fight for this rebalot so we can win what should be ours!

- Unison member within University of London



University of California shut down by strike

Since last Monday, the University of California (UC) has been shut down on its ten campuses due to strike action by tens of thousands of workers. As well as mass demonstration, reports have shown: undergraduates creating blockades of main roads into one campus for five days; professors cancelling classes in solidarity; and unionised truckers refusing to cross the picket line into campuses. All these things are placing further leverage on the UC to meet their striking workers demands.

However, in recent days the UAW, the union representing academic workers at the UC, voted to remove language in their wage demand that references fluctuations in the cost-of-living. A 'cost-of-living allowance' (COLA), that dictates wages increases based on rent prices, so that no employee pays more

than 30% of their wage on rent, has been a central demand of rank-and-file workers at the UC; so much so they went on wildcat strike demanding it in 2020. The removal of COLA from their wage demand arguably removes the long-term sustainability of any wage demand won through the current strike—and therefore has caused considerable outrage amongst striking workers towards their union, UAW. We stand in solidarity with all striking workers who refuse to settle for less!

Outsourced security guards strike at UCL!

Security guards at UCL, outsourced through the subcontractor 'Bidvest Noonan', took strike action on 14th and 15th November. They are demanding three things: that UCL ends outsourcing and brings them back in-house; a minimum of £15 per hour; and recognition of their union, the IWGB. More strike action is planned for later in the academic year. On the strike days, a large picket line kept up the noise, turned away big delivery trucks, and attracted supporters from all over London, including a number from UCU.

In a test of the Tories new anti-trade union laws, for the two weeks before the strike, agency workers were brought in through the subcontractor 'Systematic Security Services'. These agency staff were originally being paid below living wage, breaking UCL's own pay policy. Security guards refused to train these agency workers, recognising it as an attempt to break their strike action. On the day of the strike action, this tactic obviously paid off - with the agency staff brought in unable to turn off fire alarms; handle important medical deliveries; and generally manoeuvre the day-to-day chaos of a university campus. A publicly announced third day of strike agency, publicly called off at the last minute, also hit UCL's pockets. This 'dummy' strike meant UCL had to pay both their usual workers and agency staff brought in to cover the now non-existent strike action on the third day.

Just before the strike, Bidvest Noonan also cancelled security guards' overtime shifts - which accounts to over a third of some workers' income. However, after a collective response from security guards in the IWGB, Bidvest Noonan and UCL have backed down and returned overtime.

Security workers are planning to support the UCU picket lines at UCL, as UCU members have supported theirs. In the future, hopefully strike action by our two workforces will be able to coincide again. When we strike together, we are stronger!

- IWGB member at UCL.

What Is The University Worker?

The University Worker is a rank-and-file bulletin made by university workers (both academic and non-academic). We want to use this bulletin to share what's happening at different universities, and build our collective power to win our disputes.

Help us distribute the bulletin!

There are 150 picket lines across the country. We want to be on all of them. Download the PDF from notesfrom-below.org, print some out and hand them out at your university!

Write a strike report!

Help us communicate between branches and write a strike report from your picket line. You can find a strike report form at: www.tinyurl.com/universityworker

