

# BREAKING POINT: WE NEED ALL-OUT ACTION TO WIN

University bosses are intensifying exploitation of staff and treating students as cash cows. Only decisive action can protect our working and learning conditions

## HIGHER EDUCATION workers in the University and College Union (UCU) are on strike from 1–3 December in a dispute over proposed pension cuts, pay and working conditions.

Workers were balloted in October over cuts to the USS pension scheme for pre-1992 universities, and a sector-wide campaign over the ‘Four Fights’ – pay, workload, casualisation and inequality.

Although strikes in 2018 and 2019 passed the national 50% threshold, the UCU balloted on a disaggregated, i.e. employer by employer basis, meaning many branches narrowly missed the threshold.

General Secretary Jo Grady proposed a conservative strategy which was sharply criticised by Branch Delegate Meetings, which overwhelmingly rejected her proposals for a token two-day strike, to decouple the two disputes, and to reballot over Four Fights on an aggregated basis next year.

In a victory for the grassroots, the Higher Education Committee subsequently voted to hold three days’ joint action on the two disputes, and to reballot 42 universities from 6 December in preparation for escalating action in the new year.

The battle is now on to mobilise the biggest possible support on the picket lines, and use the strikes as a springboard to win the reballots, fight for rank and file control over the strike, and campaign to escalate the action up to an all-out strike supported by coordinated action from the other unions in the education sector.

### PENSION CUTS

Both disputes represent a wider struggle over marketisation of higher education, with employers attempting to minimise their financial responsibilities to staff – as well as intensifying their exploitation through longer working hours and precarious contracts.

Staff pay has fallen by 20% in real terms across the higher education sector since 2010 and the gender pay gap is 15%. Huge numbers of university teaching staff are on zero-hours contracts, with ever-greater numbers being pushed into short-term contracts with no security. UCU research has consistently found that members work over 50 hours per week.

Since 2011, the USS pension scheme has been subjected to repeated attacks by employers, which have closed the final salary scheme, increased employee contributions, reduced protections against inflation, and introduced a salary threshold up to which defined benefits are accrued.

Now Universities UK are proposing fresh cuts which the UCU says equate to a 35% loss of guaranteed retirement benefits for the average member.

According to USS, successive valuations have indicated that the scheme is in a large “technical deficit”, i.e. its projected returns will not be enough to pay out the defined benefits it had previously promised. But the financial assumptions made as part of this valuation process are highly controversial.

Maintaining unity between the USS dispute and the Four Fights campaign is essential to building a militant national UCU campaign on both issues.

### A STRATEGY TO WIN

In 2018, UCU members at 64 universities struck for 14 days against an attempt to replace the defined benefit scheme with a defined contribution scheme, which would have resulted in younger workers losing up to half of their pension.

The strike was the longest in higher education history and a strong grassroots campaign recruited 15,000 new members. But momentum was lost after the union leadership under former General Secretary Sally Hunt proposed a deal which was unanimously rejected by the branch delegates’

meeting. Criticism of the leadership’s actions resulted in UCU officials undemocratically shutting down the union’s congress.

The fact that the UCU have been forced by employers to undertake a third strike in four years shows we need a bold strategy that can win. The experience of local struggles at Goldsmiths, where lecturers have called for the university accounts to be opened to inspection, and Liverpool, where a three-week strike beat proposed redundancies, shows the way forward.

The ballot results show the UCU membership is prepared to fight, and the debates in the Branch Delegate Meetings show that members are prepared to put pressure on the union leadership, reject timid strategies for action or attempts to decouple the dispute, and demand bold and escalating action on both struggles.

The lessons of the 2018 dispute, where the union leadership attempted to demobilise the action without securing any meaningful victory, and the cautious strategy originally proposed by Jo Grady this time, shows we need to fight for the strike to be put under the control of a strike committee of delegates elected and recallable by the members.

To win, we will need to organise the rank and file to fight for:

- A massive campaign of support for branches rebaloting their members to beat the anti-union threshold.
- Campaign for a marking boycott, and escalate the action to an all-out strike in the new year.
- Demand universities open their accounts to inspection by staff and student unions.
- Campaign for Unison, Unite and the NEU to ballot their members for coordinated action with the UCU in the new year.
- A rank and file strike committee, with supervision over negotiations, and a veto over any return to work.