



*Our newsletter is free to all members.
If you're not a member, you need to join
now to get a vote in the pay ballot.*

University of Brighton Branch Newsletter

August 2018

blogs.brighton.ac.uk/unison

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First of all, a massive thank you to everyone who voted in our pay consultation and who managed to come along to our meetings. As you may have seen on our blog, the result are as follows:

84.4% of responses were to REJECT the offer

15.6% of responses were to ACCEPT the offer

The turnout was 57.7%

We're very pleased with this, because not only does it show support for our position to reject the below-inflation offer, it demonstrates that we can encourage a significant number of members to vote at a time of year when many people are away or very busy.

The result nationally was that a clear majority of staff expressed a view that the offer should be rejected, in line with the recommendation from this branch and the union on a national basis.

So, UNISON will now organise a national ballot of all higher education workers at the 140+ universities covered by UCEA, which is the vast majority of them.

Ballot papers will go to home addresses, probably in late September or early October, given the necessary bureaucracy involved in organising such a national postal ballot.

The challenge now is to effectively repeat the exercise with different rules. The anti-trade union laws, designed to make life very difficult for organised workers to take effective action, say that we need to have a 50% turnout in a strike ballot to be able to take lawful action.

It is absolutely crucial that every member at the most organised universities makes sure that they vote and that members check that their UNISON-member colleagues have also voted.

New members can of course vote, provided they join on time, but we think that being able to play a part in determining what pay increase we'll all receive from August is a good reason to join, so please encourage people to do so.

Before the ballots go out, we need to check that we hold correct home address information for each of our members, so if you think that we might not, please get in touch and we can check the data we hold about you.

You can call the office (ext. 2450) or email unisonhelp@brighton.ac.uk.

Alternatively, why not register with **My UNISON**, www.unison.org.uk/my-unison/, which allows you to update your details on-line? (We can let you have your membership number if necessary.)

Ideally, a strong national vote for action will push UCEA back to the negotiating table with a better offer than the “final” one. This will clearly be more the case if UCU and other higher education unions vote for action. UCU are currently balloting at Brighton and elsewhere, so it is possible that we could see joint action before Christmas.

We don't want to strike and lose pay any more than the University's management or students want to see disruption, but we have been offered a pay “increase” which would see our pay fall in real terms again and sometimes the only way to make sure we are taken seriously is to threaten to strike.

Equally if we do strike, there's little point having tactics which involve us having one day of action and then nothing for months. Recent experience suggests that strikes are won when a united group of workers takes action with a serious plan for escalation. We withdraw our labour to force the employers to reconsider, not to let off a bit of steam.

If we do take escalating action, we will make sure that those members least able to sustain a loss of pay are able to claim welfare payments. The point of a strike is to win it, and for that we need a show of strength from the people without whom the university cannot function.

That said, a strong commitment to strike, decided on a democratic basis by both UNISON and UCU members at the University, will potentially force the University to close for the day, because they don't have enough people to try to sensibly or legally keep it open.

Whatever happens over the next six months, we're determined to do everything we can to reach the 50% turnout threshold with a strong response to support strike action. Please make sure you vote when you can and watch out for all the things this branch will be doing in the Autumn.

More Pensions News

As you may have seen in a previous issue, support staff at Staffordshire University are facing a downgrading of their pension as the university management attempt to transfer them to a wholly-owned subsidiary company, as a cynical trick to remove them from the Local Government Pension Scheme and put them into an inferior in-house scheme. Workers at Manchester University are facing a similar prospect.

To their credit, Staffordshire UNISON members have voted to strike and will be taking action on 16th August. Our branch will send them our full support.

If universities get away with saving money by avoiding pension contributions for the lowest paid group of staff then they will inevitably try it here. The LGPS will become an elite scheme for the highest paid local authority and university managers only.

You can predict the announcement:

“Our pension costs are the highest of any comparator university and to ensure a sustainable future which allows us to make a strong investment in student satisfaction into the 21st century, we have to make some challenging decisions. By transferring support staff to University of Brighton Corporate Education Services, we will be able to compete more effectively with other institutions and our focus groups have told us that reductions in employee contributions will be welcomed by a great many of those staff affected.”

We have to be clear that any downgrading of our pension rights will and should be treated as a hostile attack on our terms and conditions. HE workers have to stick together to defend the pensions we have and resist any attempt to downgrade our rights.

For those who say it's not worth taking strike action because the benefits never outweigh the loss in pay, it's worth considering the financial implications.

What you have to remember is that any increase in pay now lasts into the future, but is always relative to purchasing power, related to the rate of inflation on things you need to buy.

For a union member working full time at the top of grade 4, a day's lost pay would be between £68 and £96, depending on how it were calculated, but a 1% increase won as a result of that strike would be worth £250 every year for the rest of that person's time at the University. The pay deduction would be recouped after about four months.

As a more realistic example, taking a week's action to win a pay settlement worth 1.5% more than originally offered would cost at most, $5 \times £96 = £480$ less any strike pay or welfare payments, but if the striker worked here for a further ten years, at today's prices, 1.5% is worth £3,747.

Obviously there's no guarantee that a strike will win concessions from the employers, but there is an absolute certainty that being unwilling to take action will mean a further real-terms pay cut for us all.

As an extension of the principle that if you don't ask, you don't get, in trade union terms, if you are unwilling to take strike action, then a pay offer which falls below inflation is the best that you can hope for.

We know our members and those of UCU are determined to make sure that we don't suffer pay cuts without putting up a fight.



Staff Survey

The results of the staff survey have been shared and focus groups have been had.

To pick out some of the more striking results:

45% of respondents do not feel they have enough resources to complete their work effectively.

30% of respondents are not satisfied with their physical working environment.

34% of respondents can't meet the requirements of their job without working unreasonable hours.

34% of respondents don't believe that action will be taken on issues identified.

Overall, the survey confirmed what many people have been saying for a long time. Some members of staff, not all, but a significant number are overworked, under-resourced and with very little support for the effects of stress which their working environment has caused.

Hosting focus groups, organising school or department-wide meetings, insisting that SDRs take place may allow some people to air their views, but will not solve the underlying problems. If anything, it pushes the problem back onto middle managers who are generally unable to do anything about it and suffer the effects of stress themselves. It also suggests that we can solve this as long as members of staff accept changes and do things differently i.e. work harder and put up with it. It's trying to make things better by blaming the victims and asking for ideas apart from the obvious ones like more staff, more resources, more effective and honest communications and clarity on what we're all doing and why.

A good starting point, apart from an acceptance that the results are pretty terrible, would be to recruit staff where people are saying that are struggling to cope, backfill roles where people are on long-term sickness leave and ask ordinary members of staff where more resources are needed.

There's also, as we continue to point out, the need to deal with the causes of stress as a matter of urgency. All managers should be trained to recognise and deal with stress, including conducting stress risk assessments and those suffering from stress should be given appropriate help and support, not just the offer of activities to make us all more resilient.

Career progression?

One of the questions on the survey was about whether people thought that career progression was fair within the University. For support staff, this question makes little sense, because unlike academic staff, we have no real mechanism for progressing our careers other than applying for different jobs when people leave or retire.

Obviously, a trade union would not want a situation where managers can just promote people, because that would be open to all kinds of abuses, but that doesn't mean that we don't want members of staff who see themselves as working here long-term to be able to develop a career at the University if they want to, as long as any system is fair.

Part of a solution to this is to restrict the applications of new job vacancies to internal applications and only offer the roles to external candidates if it is clear that external applicants won't have the necessary skills.

There's also the option of looking at acting-up and mentoring schemes to allow people to develop their skills with a view to applying for different jobs, either here or elsewhere.

We're hoping to discuss some of these ideas with HR in more detail.