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University of Brighton Branch Newsletter

January 2019

A Happy New Year to all our members and readers!

Thanks for your continued support over 2018 and here's to facing the challenges of the year to come, based on the collective unity of working people.

2019 is likely to be an eventful year for higher education workers. The outcome of the Augar review of higher education funding is due at some point in the Spring.

What's been floated is the suggestion that fees for most undergraduate courses could be reduced to £6,500, with those for science courses increased to £13,500.

However you model this, a 30% reduction in fees for most students would represent a significant drop in funding for the majority of universities.

Some institutions would struggle to survive on that basis and Vice Chancellors would be forced to attempt wide-scale redundancies.

It would represent a significant attack on the principle of higher education as a public service, with the government probably

hoping that failing institutions would be bought up by private providers to be asset stripped and re-organised to provide degree courses on the cheap.

This may well be combined with an academic cut-off point for loans offered to potential students i.e. if your A-level results are not up to scratch, you don't get a loan and you don't go to university (unless you're very rich of course.)

A reduction in the number of 18 year-olds is bad enough, but this will further reduce the potential number of students, which does not bode well for universities struggling with league table places.

This, combined with employer pension cost increases, sets up 2019 as a battle for the future of higher education.

We've always been clear that all universities should be properly funded as a national public service, with its workers paid properly for the work we all do.

We will continue to campaign on that basis.

Ivan Bonsell, Branch Secretary

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National Higher Education Conference

This year's annual conference of delegates from all higher education branches of UNISON will take place on 10th January in Nottingham.

Our branch is represented by Sian Williams and Dan Simmonds, who will move our amendment to the 2019-20 Pay motion.

Our amendment, agreed by the Branch Committee, aims to commit the Service Group Executive to conduct a disaggregate ballot, rather than an aggregate ballot, in the likely event of a dispute arising over the pay claim for 2019-20.

The background to all this is the Trade Union Act, which means that trade unions cannot take lawful industrial action without a 50%+ vote of members being in favour of taking action, as well as achieving a turnout in excess of 50% of members. For example, if you ballot 1,000 members, you could achieve a 499—0 vote but that would still fall foul of the legislation and striking on that basis would be illegal.

In 2018, after a consultative ballot (an informal ballot conducted by local branches) overwhelmingly rejected the pay offer, a national aggregate ballot was launched. An aggregate ballot treats the ballot as one event, with tens of thousands of members across all higher education branches able to vote. This resulted in a vote of 62% in favour of strike action, but a national turnout of only 31%. Whilst we're pretty confident that our branch turnout was over 50%, some less organised branches will have dropped to fairly low levels and the 31% turnout achieved nationally cannot be ignored.



A disaggregate ballot is the trade union response to the Trade Union Act, and this treats each university as having its own dispute with the university management. This allows branches which achieve a successful ballot outcome, both in terms of result and turnout, to take action, but this would be limited to their own institution.

There are obvious drawbacks with this approach, since having some branches striking but not others could lead to a fragmentation of national pay bargaining and ultimately an attempt by some Vice Chancellors to offer more to settle "their" dispute, which they could attempt to do.

All trade unionists should be happy to see workers at other institutions win better pay increases by taking or threatening strike action. It's exactly what trade unions should be doing.

Many will, quite reasonably, argue that disaggregate ballots lead to disunity and leaving the weaker branches behind, but the reality of the 31% turnout last year means that we have to be realistic about what we can achieve in terms of delivering a successful strike ballot on a national scale. University branches of UNISON vary quite considerably in terms of membership, activists and confidence, and much of this is dependent on the history of branch organisation in a particular university.

For many, a handful of dedicated individuals can make the difference between a branch which can deliver meaningful results for its members and a branch which relies on regional support for casework and/or negotiating.

Those arguing for an aggregate ballot to be the defining tactic of the 2019-20 campaign are either wildly optimistic of our ability to deliver a massively increased turnout or guilty of trying the same thing and expecting different results. It makes no sense to repeat the exercise when realistically, you only have one opportunity to get it right. The people who suffer from this naïve tactic are our members, many of them poorly paid anyway, who are condemned to suffer further real-terms pay cuts. The reality is that an aggregate ballot in 2018 preserved the national unity of doing nothing.

For many of our most conscious members, being told how terrible the pay offer is and then being told that we're not going to do anything about it, is potentially one of the worst things a trade union can do. Most of our members at Brighton were ready and willing to strike and some have understandably blamed other members elsewhere for not voting and the union overall for following such a disastrous strategy.

Of course the best possible scenario is that we deliver a successful ballot result with a 50%+ turnout at every institution. Those supporting a disaggregate ballot are not suggesting that a few branches should strike alone. We're saying that a disaggregate ballot gives the union options to use our strength where we can, but with the best outcome being that most branches are involved in nationally coordinated action. Branches failing to reach the 50% threshold could re-ballot with increased confidence that they can join the action whilst giving legal solidary and support to those members striking elsewhere.



A serious analysis of the facts suggest that the potential pitfalls of an approach that uses disaggregate ballots are massively outweighed by the potential for branches to be able to fight and win over pay in 2019-20.

National pay bargaining is, of course, an important issue, but the increased marketisation and fragmentation of the sector is much more likely to prevent national deals being honoured than the tactics of the trade unions are likely to end national agreements.

Members and activists in smaller and weaker branches should not be fearful of this new approach. A mentality that argues that the best organised workers should wait until others catch up would be opposed to well-paid workers using their industrial muscle. The best modern day example is tube drivers, who have collectively achieved a good rate of pay by fighting for it. The unity of the lowest common denominator would have condemned tube-driver action for the sake of unity, rather than looking to win for our members where we can.

Of course the Trade Union Act is undemocratic and should be repealed, but workers and our members can't wait for a Labour government to do that any more than we can suffer another year of tactical errors. We want to grow our union by proving that union membership and collective campaigning can win results.

For 2019-20 at least, we need to embrace the tactic of disaggregate ballots with a full strategy for delivering meaningful increases in pay for all our members.

Support Staff Common Interest Group

The branch formally meets with the University's senior managers six times a year. Three of those are with the Vice Chancellor, alongside UCU, as the Joint Negotiating Committee and the other three are designed to concentrate on support staff issues when we meet as the Support Staff Common Interest Group (SSCIG).

These meetings are our chance to formally raise issues which matter to our members and try to reach a consensus on what the University will do to improve the working lives of our members or at least not make them any worse.

Often we agree to continue the discussions outside the meeting. We sometimes get them to do things they wouldn't otherwise have done, and sometimes we argue about things, the blatant injustices of the annual leave allowances and the poverty wages of proposed apprentices being the most obvious recent examples.

Our last SSCIG took place on 11th October. Amongst other things, we discussed the use of agency staff, the procedure for using and managing fixed-term contracts and the University's continued relationship with the Multi-Academies Trust.

We also raised the gender pay gap and what the University proposes to do about reducing it.

Their response so far has been to say that women are encouraged to apply for jobs and academic promotions. We think this is commendable, but insufficient. We want to see a significant financial appreciation of (mainly) women who work in roles requiring attendance during anti-social hours, which would go some way towards addressing the problem.

Our next meeting takes place on 16th January. As well as updates on continuing issues, we will be raising some of the issues facing technical staff, such as career progression and re-grading, which came out of the staff survey but we think needs some careful consideration.

We're also looking to discuss the staff survey outcome, because the major issue of work-related stress has, if anything, got worse for many people. Groups of staff are struggling with colleagues off sick and as we've said many times, no amount of yoga sessions or dog-walking will deal with the underlying problems of people with too much to do, with few resources and struggling with zig-zagging management decisions.

If you have anything which you think we should be raising at future SSCIG meetings then please feel free to let us know.

Our **ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING** will take place on

Wednesday 6th March at lunchtime in **Cockcroft Hall**.

All members are entitled to attend and we'll provide a free buffet lunch.

The AGM is your opportunity to hold all branch officers and reps to account and for the branch to agree collectively what our priorities for the year ahead should be.

Please hold the date in your diary.

We will hold other meetings at City Campus, Falmer and Eastbourne subject to demand for those who can't make it, but please try to come along if you can.

We're happy to pay for transport costs and you should be allowed time to attend if you ask your manager in advance.