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Fox-Hodess, K., Harvie, D. and Ivancheva, M. (2023) Breaking the impasse: reflections on university worker organising in the UK. *Global Labour Journal*, 14 (3). pp. 289-293. ISSN: 1918-6711

<https://doi.org/10.15173/glj.v14i3.5625>

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Global Issues

Breaking the impasse: Reflections on university worker organising in the UK

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Since 2022, Britain has been in the midst of its largest strike wave in decades, with protracted industrial action across much of the public sector, as well as in industries such as transport. In the twelve months to June 2023, four million working days were lost to labour disputes, a dramatic shift from 2018, when the corresponding figure was just 272 000, the sixth-lowest annual total since records began in 1891. Perhaps surprisingly, however, two-thirds of the working days lost in 2018 were in the education sector, primarily universities (ONS, 2019) – and university strikes have accounted for a significant proportion of the total working days lost in each subsequent year.

In early 2018, up to 42 000 members of the University and College Union (UCU), employed at sixty-four universities, struck for fourteen days as part of a national dispute over privatisation-inflicted reductions to pension entitlements. The mass mobilisation by UCU was a surprising about-face for a union that for many years had been criticised by its members for its overly cautious approach to industrial action. This mobilisation reached a crescendo in the spring of 2018 with a rank-and-file rebellion of members, many of them newly activated by the dispute, opposing capitulation by the union's then-leadership to the proposed cuts.

The pension dispute, however, was not based around a sector-wide demand. Proposed changes to the pension scheme primarily affected staff in the older research-intensive universities that participate in the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS). Faculty at the remaining hundred or so “new” or “post-92” universities accrue pension benefits in a separate plan. (The “post-92” universities, former polytechnics and teaching colleges, are so called because they were granted the right to call themselves universities by the government in 1992). In addition, casualised staff who move frequently between institutions on so-called “fixed-term” and “zero-hours” contracts – and who in any case may feel sceptical about their long-term prospects in the sector – were often less identified with the issue of the dispute than academic and professional services staff on open-ended contracts at the striking universities.

UCU's casualised members, who have suffered the most severe assaults on their working conditions, were nevertheless present in significant numbers on the picket lines in 2018 and were often more militant than their more secure colleagues. They naturally wanted to see the union address the issues that mattered most to them as well. Under pressure to reflect this reality, a year later, UCU opened a second, parallel dispute, involving workers in all 160+ British institutions of higher education. Known as the “Four Fights”, this revolved around claims on four issues: 1. Pay, which since 2009 has been eroded by one-fifth in real terms, even before Britain's recent cost-of-living crisis; 2. Equalities, with women, workers of colour and workers with disabilities facing substantial pay gaps; 3. Workloads, which are widely viewed by university staff as having become unmanageable, contributing to high levels of poor physical and mental health amongst university

workers; and 4. Casualisation, which is now pervasive, with one-third of university research and teaching staff employed on precarious fixed-term contracts. (These issues of course intersect in many ways. Women, people of colour and workers with disabilities, for example, are more likely to be employed on lower salaries and casualised contracts. Hourly pay for casualised workers can fall below minimum wage because of workload issues, that is, hours paid for are rarely sufficient to complete all of the tasks required.)

The disputes over pensions and the Four Fights have remained ongoing across five years, with university workers taking action in 2019, 2020, 2022 and 2023 – a total of more than ten weeks of national strike action since 2018. In some local branches, members have taken additional strike action over local issues, in particular “restructures” and layoffs, joined at times by lower-paid staff represented by other campus unions.

With 126 000 members, UCU is the world’s largest tertiary education union. In addition to university workers, who make up around two-thirds of its membership, it also represents staff in further education colleges, which provide “second-chance” vocational training opportunities for typically working-class and migrant students, as well as prison educators and educators in agricultural colleges. In universities, its 80 000 members range from precariously employed teachers and researchers to highly paid professors, and even senior managers; it also includes some professional services staff such as librarians, IT specialists and counsellors.

Nevertheless, the size of the union belies some of the challenges it faces. While Britain was once world-famous for the strength of its unions, the Thatcher government’s frontal attack on organised labour in the wake of the 1984-85 miners’ strike marked a sea change. Conservative governments have introduced a stream of anti-union legislation unchallenged by subsequent Labour governments. Restrictions were placed on the internal governance of unions and the right to picket, while wildcat strikes, solidarity strikes and political strikes were declared unlawful, with devastating financial consequences for non-compliance. Since 2016, participation in industrial action ballots must exceed 50 per cent for any subsequent actions to be lawful – regardless of the percentage of voting members supporting the action. Fearful of financial repercussions and litigation, unions have generally responded with compliance to these draconian legal changes and overseen a period of dramatic membership decline, from a peak of thirteen million in 1979 (50 per cent of the workforce) to six million (less than 25 per cent) today.

UCU was formed in 2006 out of a merger of two older unions representing higher education and further education college teachers. Its national structures include a directly elected general secretary, president and national executive committee – these have primary responsibility for decision-making on national issues, including the disputes. Membership activity and involvement happens primarily at the branch level. Branches are organised within individual university institutions and led by directly elected committees. Branches communicate with the national union through motions, voted at an annual congress, as well as through ad-hoc Branch Delegates Meetings that have advisory power, with the union’s Higher Education Committee, a subcommittee of its National Executive Committee, making final decisions on dispute strategy. On a more informal level, a small number of activists are organised within three factions (Independent Broad Left, UCU Left, and UCU Commons) which are primarily concerned with influencing decisions by the union’s national executive officers. However, the overwhelming majority of UCU members are non-aligned. Typically, fewer than one in ten members vote in national officer elections.

The heterogeneity of members in different staff categories who are covered by the same national bargaining frameworks poses a significant organising challenge for UCU to aggregate and prioritise sometimes competing interests. For instance, staff on fixed-term research and teaching contracts are expected to organise alongside “permanent” faculty members who manage them or

benefit from their precarious low-paid labour to shoulder an ever-increasing teaching workload.

UCU has also struggled to articulate the smaller USS pension dispute impacting members in the sixty-four older, research-oriented institutions with the broader Four Fights dispute impacting members in all 160+ universities. This unresolved issue has to some extent been parked since April 2023 when UCU declared a “historic victory” in the pension dispute, with employers and the scheme’s administrators agreeing to full restoration of the benefits lost over the preceding half-decade. In contrast, the union has made only modest progress in its ongoing “Four Fights” dispute. Pay is set according to national scales and union demands on this front are relatively straightforward. The other three “fights” – to close gender, racial and disability pay gaps, to enforce manageable workloads and to limit casualisation – however, are complex areas of negotiation. Yet, rather than establishing clear and achievable demands on these critical issues, UCU has essentially put the onus in bargaining on employers to come up with suitable resolutions – a questionable approach to both bargaining and organising.

Standing in the background of both disputes are the structural problems plaguing the entire sector, stemming from the rapid defunding and marketisation of the British university system in recent decades. In particular, the dissolution of the government block grant to universities resulted in a seismic shift in university finances, resulting in dependence on student fees and generation of research funding through competitive grant bids by faculty (Harvie et al., 2021). Due to these reforms, British universities nowadays function more and more like entities in the corporate world. Administrators have dealt with these pressures through casualising the workforce and intensifying work, as well as through fierce competition for students – especially international Master’s students who pay much higher fees. In the absence of any regulation, this means a zero-sum game: for every “winning” institution there must be corresponding “losers”. Although university income as a whole has soared, leading to handsome surpluses, these surpluses are spread highly unevenly across the sector. While some employers – particularly the twenty-four “leading universities” in the Russell Group – could easily grant their employees the pay rise UCU demands, some UCU activists worry that any victory over pay could result in layoffs or erosion of working conditions by other means at other institutions without meaningful re-funding of the sector by government.

At the same time, marketisation and the growing treatment of students by university administrators as customers has had important repercussions for the union’s industrial action strategy. Until summer 2023, across six years of action, the union sought to disrupt business-as-usual through weeks-long work stoppages during term time, along with a policy of work-to-rule. Yet, despite the impacts on students’ learning, universities generally chose to ride it out, taking only minimal steps to mitigate the effects of our action, thereby calling into question the effectiveness of this form of leverage. For this reason, we, along with many other activists in the union, argued previously (Fox-Hodess et al., 2023a, 2023b) that industrial action during the critical summer exam period would likely be a stronger form of leverage by preventing our employers from delivering their chief commodity (degrees) to fee-paying customers (students). Experience from the summer suggests that our employers did see the marking and assessment boycott (MAB) as a far greater threat than term-time work stoppages, as evidenced by unprecedented mass efforts to enlist both permanent and casual staff as strike-breakers and circumvention of universities’ own long-standing policies on marking procedures and ‘quality control’.

So why wasn’t the MAB successful? To explain its failure and our current impasse in terms of the undeniable problems of member burnout, “quiet quitting” and under-the-radar strikebreaking is simply to reframe the question. Some clear strategic mistakes were made by UCU’s Higher Education Committee (HEC), which called the MAB, including the short notice given, allowing branches insufficient time to prepare. These problems were compounded in bargaining by the lack

of sufficiently concrete demands on three of the four fights. Most important, however, is the critical though unaddressed issue of substantial declines in participation in strike action over time, following a series of strategic missteps and breakdowns of communication with the national union which have resulted in many members losing faith in our ability to win. This was not the MAB that we and other UCU activists had advised (Fox-Hodess et al., 2023b; Newman and Mozzachiodi, 2023). While our North American counterparts have focused on grassroots organising to build mass participation in strikes and a united front (see, for example, Bienenfeld et al., 2023; Cloud and Kumar, 2023; Davies and Mason, 2023a, 2023b), a culture of motion-based activism, top-down decision-making and toxic infighting have prevailed in UCU, undermining our ability to build sufficient support for industrial action and develop effective long-term strategy. Debates over strategy have become unhelpfully concentrated and polarised at the national level and distant from an increasingly alienated membership.

In a healthy union organisation, activists with different views on strategy might at least agree that widespread strikebreaking and declining membership numbers and participation require urgent attention through concerted organising efforts. In UCU, however, this issue has itself been politicised. Thus, speaking the reality of low membership density and low participation is, in some quarters of the union, treated as tantamount to capitulation to the employers. At the very least, too many activists consider low engagement a distant concern compared to the need to engage in continuous mobilisation no matter the number of participants.

In fact, UCU's formalistic approach to meetings and hierarchical structures preclude the possibility of open and honest debate and formulation of strategy "from below". There is an urgent need to create such spaces, which could host discussions over tactics, as well as broader questions of strategy and priorities. There is much to be discussed. In particular, we need a richer understanding of how the modern university functions in all its complexity (lectures, classroom teaching, assessments, admissions, research work and publications, work with external public and private partners, IT, logistics, maintenance, etc.), in order to enable identification of choke points and more effective timing of industrial action(s). We also need to know which of many issues matter most to our members, especially those who are most vulnerable. And, of course, as well as spaces to facilitate deliberation, we need democratic structures that permit better decisions to be made – decisions that are supported by as many members as possible, that inspire other workers to join the union and that are most effective in achieving our aims vis-à-vis employers. With the above, UCU has the potential to go beyond the bounds of workplace disputes to address, through a long-term industrial strategy, the inequitable and increasingly unworkable funding model of British higher education. Without these spaces, we are left to rely on the fantasy that organising momentum can be conjured out of thin air through inflated rhetoric, rather than through the hard graft and day-in, day-out work of grassroots organising.

Looking again to North America, we see inspiring examples of academic union comrades doing exactly this – and winning big as a result. UCU would do well to heed the example of our counterparts across the pond and adopt a long-term back-to-basics approach to rebuild and re-engage our membership, drawing on our collective wisdom to develop a workable strategy that gives members the confidence to take action and deliver clear wins benefitting both staff and students.

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