

Referenda on the Union's stance regarding renewed UCU Industrial Action

Date of Referenda: 2 – 4 May 2023

The purpose of this referenda is for students at Royal Holloway to collectively decide the Students' Union's position on the renewed UCU industrial action. Article 7 (and Byelaw B) of the Students' Union Constitution states a referendum (or preferenda) can be called by a majority of the Officer Group – official notification for this preferenda was sent out on Monday 17 April 2023.

A. Context

1. The University and College Union (UCU) are one of the largest trade unions in the UK higher education sector, they lobby for the rights of trade union members. The UCU launched the campaign 'UCU Rising' which included a ballot on industrial action pertaining to two separate legal disputes, one on pay and working conditions and one on pensions.
2. Across the UK, 63 higher education institutions are striking on both disputes. Whilst five institutions are striking on just the pensions dispute, and 84 are striking on just the pay and working conditions dispute.
3. Overall, 84.88% of UCU members across the UK who voted backed strike action in the ballot over changes to pensions, 81.14% of UCU members across the UK who voted backed strike action on pay and working conditions.
4. The overall turnout in the ballot around pensions was 60.23 % and on pay and working conditions it was 57.71%. This means that the ballot passed the minimum threshold requirement.
5. Action short of a strike (ASOS) is defined by the UCU to potentially include: working to contract (only the hours defined by their contract, e.g. 9am-5pm), not covering for absent colleagues, not rescheduling lectures or classes cancelled due to strike action, not undertaking any voluntary activities, or a marking and assessment boycott.

B. Pay and working conditions

6. The UCU Rising campaign identifies specific areas of concern are pay, equality, workload and casualisation.
7. The final offer made by the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) sits at 3% which is below inflation (RPI 11.8% as of June 2022). The value of pay in higher education fell by 17.6% relative to inflation between 2009 and 2019. Based on the employers' offer and the most recent inflation data, that figure is now approximately 25%.
8. UCU is proposing a pay uplift of 12% or Retail Price Index (RPI) plus 2% on all pay points, to keep up with the cost of living and to catch up with pay lost over previous years.
9. UCU completed a workload study in 2021 and found that academic staff in higher education work on average 51.3 (full-time equivalent) hours per week, and academic-related professional service staff are working an average of 44.4 (full-time equivalent) hours per week, while both are

contracted to work 35 hours per week. UCU would like Universities to actively reduce the workload of academic staff.

10. UCU is proposing agreed action to address excessive workloads and unpaid work; to address the impact that excessive workloads are having on workforce stress and mental ill-health; that workload models and planning take into account COVID pandemic-related changes in working practices.
11. UCU is also proposing that the standard weekly full-time contract of employment be 35 hours per week at all higher education institutions with no loss of pay.
12. Across the sector, the pay gap between Black and white staff stands at 17% and the disability pay gap is 9%. The mean gender pay gap is 16% and at the current rate of change, the gap won't close for another 22 years.
13. UCU proposes an end to pay injustice: meaningful, agreed action to tackle the ethnic, gender and disability pay gaps.
14. According to a UCU report, around one-third of all academic staff are employed on fixed-term contracts. UCU's previous research showed that 42% of staff on casual contracts struggled to pay household bills. In UCU's 2019 survey of 3,802 casualised staff in higher education, 71% of the respondents said their mental health had been damaged by working on insecure contracts and 43% said it had impacted their physical wellbeing.
15. UCU propose that employers agree to a framework to eliminate precarious employment practices and casualised contracts.
16. The turnout of UCU members voting in the ballot was 57.71%, reaching the 50% threshold required by the Trade Union Act 2016 to pursue action based on the outcome.
17. For the question 'Are you prepared to take industrial action consisting of strike action?', 81.14% of respondents said Yes and 18.86% said No.

C. Pensions

18. The Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) is the largest pension scheme for academics and professional staff of British universities. There are 400,000 members across 350 institutions. The USS reported a technical deficit of £17.5 billion in July 2017 – which means more money is needed to ensure university staff with USS pensions can receive benefits in retirement.
19. There are USS members that are not UCU members, and there are UCU members that are not USS members. At Royal Holloway around 400 staff are members of UCU.
20. In 2017, the USS proposed the closure of their defined benefit scheme entirely due to the growing deficit – this resulted in 14 days of strike action by the UCU in 2018. As a result of this, the defined benefit scheme element was not closed.

21. USS conducted a valuation in March 2020 and claimed that contribution rates needed to increase very significantly from the rate of 30.7% of salary (9.6% for members, 21.1% for employers) that was established under the 2018 valuation.
22. In August 2021, UCU's elected negotiators and professional actuarial advisers tabled a set of fully costed alternative proposals for addressing the 2020 valuation, which USS confirmed could be implemented.
23. UUK later agreed to major cuts to the guaranteed defined benefit (DB) element of the scheme to prevent employers from having to pay higher contributions. These cuts were formally voted through in February 2022 and came in from April 2022.
24. New research shows that the 2022 cuts lead to a global loss across current USS scheme members at £16-18bn, with those under the age of 40 losing between £100k-£200k each in retirement. It also shows that 196,000 staff will lose between 30%-35% of their guaranteed future retirement income.
25. UCU is demanding that vice-chancellors order their employer body UUK to revoke cuts and put pressure on USS to restore benefits to 2021 levels.
26. The turnout of UCU members voting on the ballot was 60.23%, reaching the 50% threshold required by the Trade Union Act 2016 to pursue action based on the outcome.
27. For the question 'Are you prepared to take industrial action consisting of strike action?', 84.88% of respondents said 'Yes' and 15.12% said 'No'.

D. Contemporary resolution

This vote will form a contemporary resolution that will relate to this specific issue for the time it is live. The Union's position will be determined by students through a cross-campus preferenda ballot.

As the two disputes balloted by the UCU are combined into the same period of industrial action, these positions refer to both the pay and conditions dispute and the dispute on pensions. Whilst we understand that students may have different opinions regarding the two different ballots, UCU has received a mandate via the members' ballot to undertake industrial action on both causes so they will both be covered by the one position.

i. Timing

The UCU has received a mandate via the members' ballot to undertake industrial action on both causes through to April and as such we ask our members to vote regarding all action within this period. This means the resolution will run until April at which point it can be renewed or a new vote can be called on any further UCU industrial actions.

ii. Question

"What stance should Royal Holloway Students' Union adopt towards the renewed UCU industrial action?"

- a. To support the UCU's industrial action and its stance in its entirety, up to and including any further strike action.
- b. To support the UCU's stance regarding 'action short of strike', but reject the decision for wholesale strikes.
- c. To reject industrial action in its entirety

iii. Outcome

The preferenda will be counted using the Alternative Vote system and the option that receives the majority required will form the Union's view on this matter for the time specified.