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University of Brighton Branch Newsletter

November 2019

Our pay ballot results:

National result:

65.5% in favour of strike action on a 28.8% turnout

University of Brighton result:

78.1% in favour of strike action on a 51.4% turnout

First of all, thanks to all our members who voted. We recognise the efforts that many of you made, calling up to get a new ballot paper and encouraging others to do so. Our stewards worked hard to get the vote out when the anti-trade union laws make this a really difficult thing to manage.

We're all very pleased that we managed to beat the 50% turnout threshold, which demonstrates that our members are still very unhappy about a situation where a real-terms pay cut is imposed on us. The vast majority of those who voted wanted to follow our recommendation and take action to campaign for pay justice.

Clearly we're very disappointed that the national turnout was so low. We required a national turnout of 50% to take action across the country, since the ballot was done on an aggregate basis.

This result means that even though we managed 51% here, we won't be able to take legal strike action on a national basis.

However, this battle is not over, with UCU members voting on a disaggregate basis at 60 universities to strike over pay and/or pensions.

We offer them our full support!

There's more on the pay ballots inside....

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2019 -20 Pay Ballot: The Positives

1. A 78% vote in favour of action on a 51% turnout is a great result



We're very pleased that so many of our members made an effort to vote and trusted our judgement that striking (or at least threatening it) was the only course of action open to us if we wanted a better pay offer.

Our activists talked to members and did everything they could to get those postal votes returned, in spite of all the practical difficulties.

Whilst we've been relatively confident in the past that we would be able to reach the necessary turnout, this is the first time that we have had official confirmation that we've managed it.

The law is blatantly designed to prevent trade unions from carrying out a democratic mandate of its members. Being required to work around this does focus the attention and made our campaign much more about people locating, completing and posting bits of paper than the real issues of decent pay at stake, which most of our members already recognise as a massive injustice.

Knowing that we are able to deliver a 50%+ turnout will be a massive boost in confidence for our branch and our members. We know that major challenges are ahead, and we will not be stepping back from further ballots for action if jobs are threatened.

The University's management is working on the principle that there is no money available for jobs, decent pay and new buildings. If that's the case, we say join with us in campaigning for proper resources for higher education, rather than imposing cuts brought about by funding freezes and enforced marketisation.

2. UCU are to strike over pay

Our comrades in UCU are to take action for eight days unless further serious pay talks are convened. UCU members voted 76.3% in favour of action on a 59.2% turnout. Since the UCU ballot was organised on a disaggregate ballot, over 50



UCU branches now have a legal mandate for strike action at their universities and will strike from Monday 25th November until Wednesday 4th December inclusive.

Whilst UCU's dispute is over the four issues identified - pay, job insecurity, workloads and pay equality, UCU members will be taking action over an issue with which UNISON are still in dispute with the employers.

If UCU force the employers' organisation to be willing to talk about an improved offer, this potentially benefits all our members.

Obviously, as fellow trade unionists who have voted democratically to take strike action, we would be supporting UCU anyway, but the fact that they are striking over a common issue makes this more of a cause for us to support.

We will be looking to make sure that all UNISON members who want to support UCU strikers can do so legally. We'll be making sure that all UCU members and activists appreciate that their fight is our fight.

2019 -20 Pay Ballot: The Lessons

1. Ballot tactics matter

The debate over how and when to ballot has been going on for some time within different parts of the trade union movement. UCU have learnt through experience that an aggregate ballot will not necessarily deliver a result that allows the branches which want to take action go ahead and strike.

As we have seen, an aggregate ballot of UNISON branches across the country did not result in action since the turnout fell well below what is required by law. Whilst this is blatantly undemocratic, since members who voted were two to one in favour of action, as long as the law stays as it is, it will take a significant change to turn this around in our particular union.

Of course the law may not stay as it is for too much longer if Labour win the election and if the anti-trade union laws are repealed, but there are many reasons to be doubtful of this happening soon, as much as we'd like it to. We shouldn't wait.

The immediate task for trade union activists is to look at how we failed to secure the turnout on a national basis and what should be done about it in future.

Many activists have advocated a disaggregate ballot, which would at least theoretically allow some branches to take action, depending on the precise outcome.

As UCU have shown, they are taking action where they can, but on the basis that this is still a national campaign with a nationally agreed outcome - renegotiation at a national level on all four of their grievances.

Time will tell over how successful this will be, but at the time of writing, Vice Chancellors will be putting pressure on their employers' body to talk to UCU since they will not want such a level of disruption, followed by a work to rule.

2. A vibrant and persistent campaign can get results

Setting ourselves a target of talking to all our members and checking that they had voted was partially achieved. Clearly some of our members are hard to get hold of, but the vast majority of those we spoke to recognised the importance of voting and made an effort to do so.



We knew that relying on emails and electronic or printed newsletters would not be enough. Thanks for reading this, but we'd be seriously deluded if we thought that more than the most dedicated of our members did. (Since you are reading this, have you thought of getting more involved and becoming a steward or branch officer?)

Anyway, many higher education branches will not have the strength and depth of activists to deliver a decent vote when the outcome is so dependent on the national one.

If the ballot had been done on a disaggregate basis, it's reasonable to assume that Brighton would have joined other UNISON branches alongside UCU in taking action.

Hopefully, UNISON's higher education activists will draw appropriate lessons from this.

Global Climate Emergency

Friday November 29th is the next youth strike for climate day.

Once again, young people will be out campaigning for serious and sustainable action to tackle climate change, not just better recycling.

The fact that this is ongoing shows that this is not just about a handful of students letting off some steam, but young people showing that unless significant change happens, they're not going to stop campaigning.



We've written elsewhere about climate change and the trade union approach. We think linking campaigning of young people to the idea of organised workers striking is the way forward, bearing in mind we can't take legal industrial action without a ballot and jumping through endless legal hoops.

(This has not stopped multiple occasions where workers have taken action and employers have not felt confident enough to enforce the law against a group of workers for fear of escalation and making the law appear what it is - a way for conservative trade union leaders to hold back their members.)

We've asked the University to take this month's protest more seriously by formally supporting it, as they have done over LGBT+ rights, and allowing members of staff to properly participate. Since UCU are likely to be striking anyway, this is an opportunity which should not be missed.

Securing Whose Future?

We're losing count of the number of areas "under review". Schools are, Academic Services are, Information Services and Estates are (at least in terms of saving money). All support jobs apart from senior ones (you need to get the right people) are temporary, in case they really turn out to be not really needed (!) We're not really sure who's excluded from all this.



The reality is that the leadership of the University are seeing falling student numbers and league places and don't really know what to do. The latest round of reorganisations and cost-cutting exercises is about reducing staff numbers again (because that makes us more efficient, right?) and making processes more streamlined. That is, done by fewer people because having more people doing the work must mean that we're inefficient.

Both assumptions are flawed, but at least they're trying something, which fits into the belief that whatever happened at wherever they used to work must be the best way of doing things.

Part of this whole exercise is the continuation of centralisation where autonomy in schools is replaced by central groups, ideally located in inadequate, unhealthy offices in Moulsecoomb. This way of working, is designed by people who are obsessed with the fear that a worker with five spare minutes is not being sufficiently efficient, and by being able to keep an eye on them, they can be 100% productive.

There are many problems with this approach, one of which being the studies which have shown that poor office space and a lack of clarity over responsibilities and priorities leads to increased work-related stress. The way they want us to work is going to increase sickness absence and fail to improve the "student experience."

This is currently being provided by an army of fixed-term staff with an understandably lower interest in the long term interests of an individual student given that their employer can't offer them anything by way of long-term commitment. An attempt to fix the problem, securing the future of the University, is actually contributing to making everything worse.

It is in the interests of all of us that the University of Brighton thrives. What matters to us, and perhaps not the people making the proposals, is that we have employees with decent careers and consequently a long-term commitment to making the University a better place.

If the idea of securing our future morphs into securing the future of some of us at the expense of the jobs of the rest of us, then clearly we will have to ask our members to support determined resistance to such a disastrous plan.