



SOME COMMENTS ON THE NATIONAL DISPUTE

For Imperial UCU members following recent events

March 2023

Purpose and overview

- Several members have asked me to provide some comment and clarification on recent events regarding the national UCU dispute
- There is a lot to be said, so I'm trying a video rather than a lengthy written discourse
- A lot of what has happened has evoked strong opinions, and divided opinion; I shall try and report factually & neutrally for the most part, but shall occasionally provide a view, highlighting if it is not shared by all persons involved
- I attempt to make this as simple as possible, but no simpler

High level overview of the national disputes 1/2

- UCU members at higher education are involved in two long-running disputes with employers:
 1. A dispute over pay and working conditions, sometimes known as Four Fights (pay, workload, equality & casualisation)
 2. A dispute over cuts to the USS pension scheme
- Roughly 150 institutions are involved in Four Fights – but not Imperial and a handful of other places. Imperial is not involved as it is not involved in national pay bargaining. Of course, things are not much better here as we have a local pay dispute.
- About 70 institutions are involved in the pensions dispute – this includes Imperial

High level overview of the national disputes 2/2

- Only four institutions are involved in the national pensions dispute but not Four Fights
- UCU members in affected institutions were balloted on whether to take industrial action over the disputes relevant to their institution in late summer 2022, seeing a resounding YES vote for both disputes, meaning the union had a six month mandate to take industrial action in terms 1 & 2
- The current round of 18 days of strike action were called for February and March 2023

The two national disputes are “coupled”

- The two fights have been coupled since the outset meaning and designated day of strike action is not specific to one dispute nor the other.
- This is arguably problematic for institutions involved in just one of the disputes
- UCU policy dictates that they will "maintain the link between the two disputes until sufficient progress is made in one or both to justify separation."
- Imperial passed motions in October 2022 and January 2023 asking for the disputes to be uncoupled – the UCU was sympathetic to the requests, but could not grant them as they were contrary to recent national committee and conference decisions

The Pause in week 7 of term

- Three days of national strike action were called from 21st – 23rd February
- Late on the afternoon of Friday 17th the union announced, unexpectedly, that this week of strike action was paused in order to focus on negotiations with the employer
- This was a contentious decision, which rendered many union activists extremely angry – much of this ire was directed towards the General Secretary and some other elected officials
- The General Secretary visited our branch, at one of our local pickets to promote the reballot and faced some tough questions from our members

The current USS pensions dispute

- The grounds for the current dispute on pensions are:

'Our two grounds for dispute are:

- that our pension benefits be restored to the position before the cuts were imposed in April 2022
- that a prudent and evidence-based valuation of the scheme is conducted.

Wednesday 15th March: the proposals on USS pensions and national pay & conditions

- UCU members were contacted mid-afternoon on Wednesday 15th March with information advertising positive developments in the disputes
- Regarding the USS pensions dispute the employers have apparently agreed to the two demands of the UCU in the disputes, as well as reducing pensions scheme members contributions – i.e. essentially meeting the union's demands in the dispute, plus a little more
- Caveats are that there is no guarantee that the employers will stick to this, the time frame for implementation is protracted over several months
- Opinions vary as to how good a deal this is but it is certain that it would not have been obtained without industrial action

Why it is essential to vote YES in the reballot on USS pensions

- The employers could renege on their promise
- The current mandate for strike action expires in April
- We need to be able to go out on strike again should the employers go back on their word

Wednesday 15th March: the informal e-ballot

- Along with the information on 15th March all members were given the opportunity to vote in an e-ballot with one question: **"Do you support UCU members now getting a vote on the negotiated proposals that have been reached, and pausing strike action (ASOS would continue) whilst this consultation takes place?"** Yes/No
- This was an extraordinary feature to include in the communication, with the content, delivery, and mere existence of the poll being the subject of some severe criticism from various angles
- As well as individual members being asked to vote, reps from branches were invited to a branch delegates meeting (BDM) on Thursday 16th March to discuss their branches' opinion on the question and give a branch specific vote on the question

Thursday 16th March: Imperial UCU all members' meeting

- We held an Imperial UCU all members' meeting following the picket on Thursday 16th March. This had just over 25 members present for most of the meeting.
- A motion narrowly passed to take to the UCU annual congress to censure the General Secretary for conduct during the past few weeks – this was one of several passed by branches saying a similar thing
- At the end we had a discussion on the e-ballot and what how reps should vote at the BDM regarding a branch position on the e-poll – there were 0 votes for YES, 11 for NO and 10 abstentions

Thursday 16th March: the branch delegates meeting (BDM)

- The purpose was to discuss the proposals, gauge branch feelings about them, see how branches as a whole felt regarding the e-poll, and have branches vote on the poll question
- The meeting was not pleasant for various reasons, but it was very clear that there was widespread dissatisfaction with the e-poll for various reasons
- At the behest of delegates attendees were asked to vote on split questions:

Whether the proposals agreed with UCEA and UUK should be put to members in a formal consultation.

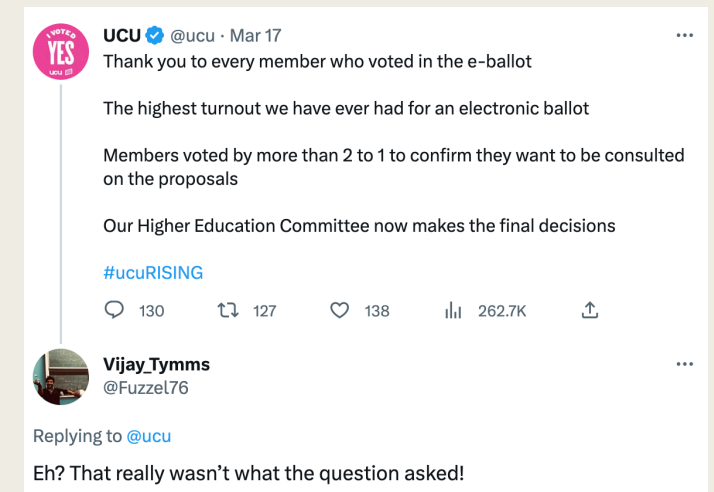
- 52% were in favour of consulting members
- 32% were opposed to consulting members
- 16% abstained from the vote

BDM attendees were also asked whether the action planned for 20, 21 and-22 March should be suspended.

- 70% were opposed to suspending the planned action
- 16% were in favour of suspending the planned action
- 14% abstained from the vote

Friday 17th March: the higher education committee (HEC) meeting 1/2

- The HEC is a high level subcommittee of the UCU, made up of 42 elected representatives from across the HE sector
- It is a decision making body whose role it is to make critical calls on what the union does in HE matters
- It is the HEC that made the decision on how to use the results of members' e-poll and the branch delegates' meeting to inform what the union does next
- The members' poll saw 36,000 votes and the result was:



Friday 17th March: the higher education committee (HEC) meeting 2/2

- The HEC voted this way:

Question 1: Should the proposals agreed with UCEA and UUK relating to the USS and Four Fights disputes be put to UCU HE members in a formal consultation?

[For: 19; Against: 22; Abstentions: 0]

Question 2: Should the strike action called for 20th – 22nd March be suspended?

[For: 7; Against: 20; Abstentions: 10]

- Many members of the HEC have publicly declared how they have voted, and provided their own rationale for this
- There is no question that the HEC have done what is within their remit, acting entirely with UCU policy and procedure in reaching this decision

Friday 17th March: following the HEC decision

- The General Secretary emailed all members on Friday informing them of the results of the e-poll, and the HEC's decision

What happens now?

- We're on strike for one more day tomorrow as part of the current mandate so please come along!
- Please vote in the reballot
- The HEC meets again on 30th March and there should be another branch delegates meeting before that to inform the HEC so Imperial can put members' thoughts through to that
- There is an open letter to the HEC asking for membership consultation that members can choose to sign if they wish

Links

- Affected institutions: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/12474/Institutions-affected#note>
- UCU current USS pensions dispute timeline: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/strikeforuss>
- The 15th March proposals transcript: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/13639/ucuRISING-proposals-podcast-transcript-15-March-23/pdf/ucuRISING_podcast_transcript_15Mar23.pdf
- Example piece on reasons to be cautious about the pensions deal: <https://reverseuss.wordpress.com/2023/03/19/have-we-won-on-uss/>
- List of HEC members (UCU login needed): <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/2677/Higher-education-committee>
- Example piece from an HEC member on why they voted against consultation: <https://vickyblakeucu.uk/2023/03/20/whats-going-on-and-why-did-hec-vote-against-consultation-on-the-disputes/>
- Open letter to the HEC to consult members: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vw2OTdPeGQrSqPDFIKUZqT-L8pc2JzriafbG_p3J--A/mobilebasic