

Pre-strike negotiators' briefing for members – four fights

How long have negotiations been going on?

The union began discussing these issues with the employers back in July 2019. However, UCEA only agreed to begin negotiating in earnest in November 2019 following the decision to vote for strike action by UCU members in 57 branches. The offer finally made by the employers in January 2020 was the product of six weeks intensive discussion of both UCEA's proposals and counter proposals made by UCU – and represents the latest of several iterations, each improved through negotiation by the union.

What does the union want the employers to agree to?

The union's aim is to achieve clear and effective agreements with the employers which establish limits to casualisation, properly manage staff workload, reduce pay inequality and improve their below-inflation pay offer. We believe this would be good for staff and their employers. Importantly we expect the employers to commit to implementation agreements in order to guarantee action on any offer made.

Who is negotiating with the employers on UCU members' behalf?

UCU's negotiators are elected by the Higher Education Sector Conference to represent members' interests. The negotiators include three pre-92 academics (Robyn Orfitelli, Sean Wallis, Joanna de Groot), two post-92 academics (Mark Abel and Marian Mayer) and two academic related/professional services colleagues (Vicky Blake and Jo McNeill). Paul Bridge who is the UCU's Head of Higher Education supports the negotiators in making their case and discussing the issues with employers who themselves are represented by the Universities and Colleges Employers' Association (UCEA). The UCU negotiators are experienced in dealing with their own employers as well as working together nationally.

What is the union's strategy?

The union's aim is to achieve effective agreements which limit casualisation, properly manage workload and reduce pay inequality. We have made significant progress. Against the predictions of many, we persuaded the employers to discuss these issues seriously following UCU's ballot results. During the negotiations themselves we have made significant progress in, for the first time, persuading the employers to recognise the

importance of these issues to staff. Our strategy is underpinned by the belief that without the threat of strike action the employers would not have entered talks and that without the threat of further action, no more progress will be made.

What progress has been made so far?

All the negotiators believe that substantial progress has been made. UCEA are now prepared to talk about creating positive expectations upon employers about casualisation, pay inequality and – to a lesser extent – workload. However, three key problems remain. First, there is no formal mechanism to turn the fine words in the employers' offer into reality for staff on the ground, nor oversight of national progress towards our goals. In essence the current offer would allow existing practice to continue. Second, some of the proposed expectations themselves remain too weak, particularly about the need for all staff to have a fair and effective workload model. Third, the employers refuse to increase their overall pay offer of 1.8% even though it completely fails to address the long-term decline in staff salaries since 2010.

What are the negotiators' views of the latest offer from the employers?

The negotiators' unanimous view is that the latest offer does not represent the best deal that can be achieved for UCU members.

Has UCU been prepared to compromise in the negotiations?

Yes. UCU's preference is that there should be national agreements which cover casualisation, workload and inequality. However, because we recognise the employers' wish to retain institution level flexibility we have said that we are prepared to simply agree a national framework for the issues with each university able to implement this in its own way working with their local trade unions. Despite many hours of negotiation since November the employers have not yet been prepared to agree to this.

Why has the union called fourteen days strike action?

Sadly, the employers only agreed to properly discuss casualisation, workload and inequality arising from our decision to strike in November 2019. While their offer does represent progress, it is not enough, and they have now said their latest proposal is final – just as they did last May! In these circumstances the union can either accept a substandard offer and miss this historic opportunity to achieve change or we can use strike action to persuade the employers to once again re-open talks.

What will the union do if the latest strikes don't produce more concessions?

Strikes are not easy for anyone, but members should be in no doubt that without the last round of action in November 2019, the current offer would not have materialised. If the employers do not re-enter talks arising from the latest strikes, UCU is committed to re-balloting its members so that further action can take place later in the academic year. This is because we are fully committed to getting long lasting progress on these issues for the tens of thousands of members who struggle with work overload, job insecurity and unequal pay.

What did the Higher Education Committee decide to do with the offer?

The HEC agreed to the negotiators' proposal to reject the offer and to propose to UCEA that talks continue with a view to reaching a settlement. Given the employers disappointing statement to the effect that this inadequate offer was their 'final' word, HEC agreed to fourteen days of strike action in February/March.

How important is the forthcoming strike action?

The action which starts on 20 February in many institutions is crucial if we want to see further negotiations on these issues. Members have voted in very large numbers for action with 13 branches joining the original 57 who took eight days strike action in November. Nobody likes taking strike action but if we want progress, we will have to work together to do it.

Is UCU prepared to negotiate?

Yes, UCU wants to negotiate. We have spent many hours since November moving the employers to their latest position. We are fully prepared for further talks to resolve the dispute and provide the clear national frameworks for casualisation, workload and pay equality that members want.

Why are negotiations confidential?

Most national negotiations are confidential on both sides to enable open and honest dialogue to take place. UCU's negotiators have honoured the confidentiality of the process in order to create the maximum opportunity for a settlement but are now in a much clearer position to explain to members what is happening and how we got here.

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