

Four Fights branch briefing

On 1 April UCEA, the employer representative in our Four Fights dispute, tabled a revised version of the offer which they originally tabled at the end of January. You can find the revised offer here: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10905/UCEA-JNCHES-settlement-proposal-Apr-20/pdf/UCEA_revised_1apr20.pdf. (For the original offer, click here: <https://www.ucea.ac.uk/our-work/collective-pay-negotiations-landing/Current-pay-negotiations/without-prejudice-text-shared-with-trade-unions-on-27-january-002final.pdf>)

The revised offer covers casualisation, equality, and workload, although as before, there is no movement on the employers' initial offer on pay, of an overall 1.8% salary increase.

Following resolutions by the higher education committee (HEC), the HEC chair has triggered an advisory branch delegates' meeting, to take place on 26 May and be followed by a special meeting of the higher education committee (HEC) on 27 May. It is ultimately the responsibility of the HEC to decide how to respond to the offer, but its deliberations will be informed by that branch delegates' meeting.

Your branch needs to decide what views and positions your delegate will take to the meeting on 26 May. For guidance on branch delegate meetings, including how branches should aim to consult their members in advance of them, please click here:

https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10885/Branch-delegate-meetings/pdf/ucu_branch-delegate-meetings.pdf. The purpose of this briefing is to inform each branch's discussions amongst its members about the offer.

What is in the revised offer?

Throughout negotiations, UCEA have insisted that they would not agree or enforce any specific commitments regarding the three non-pay areas of the dispute that would apply across the whole sector. Our Four Fights negotiators therefore chose to push instead for an alternative type of deal which UCEA said they would be willing to sign up to: namely, a set of sector-wide 'expectations' and 'recommendations' for employers to follow.

These 'expectations' and 'recommendations' are intended to apply to the whole sector, but the details of how they should be met will be left to individual employers, in consultation or negotiation with trade unions. For instance, UCEA 'expects' that employers 'will commit to developing programmes of action to resolve' the gender pay gap and related matters, and

'to work with their recognised trade unions' to do so. The details of those programmes are to be worked out at a local level, between your branch and your employer.

Certain aspects of the expectations, recommendations and other commitments UCEA are offering have been strengthened since the offer was first tabled in January. Areas that have been improved include:

- zero-hours contracts (section 1.2)
- hourly paid work (1.2)
- workload models (2)
- mental health issues (2)
- gender pay gaps (3.1)
- ethnicity pay gaps (3.2).

What progress has been made since the industrial action started?

The original offer tabled in January represented a step forward, as the Four Fights negotiators and the general secretary stated at the time. Before the union obtained a strong mandate for industrial action, UCEA had always refused to go so far as to agree sector-wide expectations or recommendations regarding these issues.

This revised offer represents a further step forward, because it provides clearer commitments in specific areas and a clearer route for those commitments to be carried forward by employers and UCU branches.

What happens if we accept this revised offer?

Every year UCU undertakes a round of collective bargaining with UCEA over pay and the three other 'Four Fights' issues, in conjunction with the other campus unions. If the union accepts this offer, it will still be possible to enter into national disputes over the Four Fights in future. In other words, UCU will continue to prioritise national campaigns in pursuit of sector-wide agreements will continue as before, assuming that is what members opt to do via our democratic processes.

At the same time, accepting the offer and resolving this dispute would enable UCU branches to start consulting or negotiating with employers on a local level about their plans for implementing the expectations set out in this agreement. These local bargaining activities should lead to improved conditions for members compared with the current state of affairs, where individual employers can be unwilling even to enter into serious local discussions, let alone take meaningful action, on issues like pay inequality or precarious employment.

Local bargaining can take place in advance of, and/or at the same time as, any future national disputes on the Four Fights. Ideally the two approaches, local and national bargaining, can complement each other. Gains made locally by branches will allow the union to push UCEA to recognise those gains as examples of best practice, and consolidate them as standards for the whole sector. If the offer is accepted, UCU will of course provide extra support to help branches pursue local implementation of every aspect of it. The branch delegates' meeting will provide an important opportunity for branches to comment on what the union would need to do – in future national disputes and in local bargaining – to build on the offer as effectively as possible.

What happens if we reject the offer?

If the union rejects the offer, the national Four Fights dispute will continue and branches will be rebaloted for industrial action, starting at the end of June or as soon as practically possible after that, and ending in September – in line with decisions taken by the last two meetings of the HEC. While this dispute continues, the scope for local bargaining on equality, job security and workload will be the same as it was before this dispute started: it will be up to branches (supported, as always, by UCU staff) to apply pressure to their employers to make improvements in these areas wherever they can. There will not (yet) be any new sector-wide set of standards or expectations for branches to hold their employers to.

To continue the dispute and effectively pursue an outcome that satisfies members, the HEC and UCU's elected negotiators will require more democratic input from branches on what the union should be doing. If the offer currently on the table is not acceptable, the union will need feedback from branches on what kind of deal would constitute an acceptable outcome for their members, and what kind of industrial action members would be willing to undertake to get it. These questions will be a crucial part of the consultation process if the offer is rejected and the dispute continues. Branches should expect their delegates to discuss them at the branch delegates' meeting on 26 May and should consult their members with them in mind.

Further resources

- **General Secretary's email regarding the original UCEA offer, 28 January 2020**
- **Four Fights negotiators' pre-strike briefing for members, 11 February 2020**
- **General Secretary's update on Four Fights negotiations, 5 March 2020**
- **Four Fights negotiators' briefing on ongoing negotiations, 5 March 2020**
- **Full text of the joint unions' claim for the 2019-20 bargaining round with UCEA** (the claim on which the current Four Fights dispute is based)
- **Accessible breakdown of the key elements of the joint unions' 2019-20 claim**

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