

Covid-19 health and safety: press work

As part of the union's campaign to protect our members health and safety during the Covid-19 crisis we are trying to highlight any examples of bad practice from employers, as well as any wins branches gain locally. Below are some quick tips for branches considering media work to back the campaign, or want to draw attention to problems locally. Please contact the press team at press@ucu.org.uk for further information.

Seeking press coverage

A realistic approach to press work is absolutely essential to give ourselves the best chance of getting good coverage. You need to consider what will bring the story to life and resonate with a wider audience.

Is it news?

A press release is not news and we wouldn't send a press release for the sake of sending one. Ask someone removed from the issue if they find your story easily accessible and interesting. If they don't, but it is something members need to know, then it is probably a members' message or one to push through social media.

Contacting the UCU press office

When you contact the press office with your story, we will be keen to try and draw out the most newsworthy elements. Have a think about these questions that we will probably ask in advance:

- who is doing what?
- what are they doing?
- where are they doing it?
- when are they doing it?
- why are they doing it?
- how are they doing it?
- what will the impact be?
- why should anyone care?

Contacting you

Have a think about who is happy to act as the local press contact. Most importantly they must be happy to give out their email and a mobile number. Journalists will only run with your story if they can easily contact you for further information.

Local importance

How universities and colleges approach health and safety during Covid is rightly seen as a big deal. Journalists want to highlight any examples of dangerous behaviour from employers that could exacerbate the pandemic.

It is also always a good tactic to explain what the local Covid rate is, what other employers are doing locally in comparison to yours, and what impact the employer's behaviour will have on staff, students and the wider community.

Political support

Getting local MPs to support you will always help generate press coverage. Approach your local MP about how your employer is putting your health at risk and see if they will support your branch's position. No principal or vice-chancellor wants to upset the local MP. If you can get a quote from them for your release – or a follow-up release which says 'local MP tells university to move online now' - that will work well for the local press and put pressure on the institution.

Knowing your audience

Familiarise yourself with your local media and its staff and make a list of the names of the reporters who write stories on things like education or union matters. Make sure you are following them on Twitter via the branch's Twitter account and keep an eye on what they're writing/covering. When we do approach them or the paper/station with your story we will know who we're after.

Social media

Like other press work, only say something if you have something worth saying. A good tweet is short clear, authentic, new and interesting. Avoid jargon and insider language.

Use the UCU Twitter account. We have 50,000 followers so make sure you are copying us in, or contacting the press team so we can give you a boost by retweeting stuff. Include other relevant handles. Don't be rude, but do mention the institution if putting a tweet link to your press release.

The same goes for Facebook posts. Facebook is underused by UCU branches compared with Twitter, but it can be great for reaching different parts of your membership and the wider community. If you want us to share something with our 16,000 Facebook followers, tag our page in your post by typing '@' followed by 'University and College Union' - autocomplete should do the rest.