

Postgraduate Researchers

YOUR GUIDE TO THE UCU STRIKES

We believe postgraduate researchers should be considered as staff for all their work.

UCU members, including postgraduate researchers engaging in teaching work, are currently taking industrial action in the form of striking and other forms of action called 'action short of striking' (ASOS).

This guide is intended to enable you to properly engage in and support the action.

OUR FOUR FIGHTS

We demand fair treatment for all staff and action to tackle pay erosion, unmanageable workloads and the widespread use of insecure contracts:

1. Pay

The employers' recent below inflation pay offer (1.5%) means another real terms pay cut for all staff including employed postgraduate researchers and the value of our pay is now over 20% lower than a decade ago. With inflation forecast to keep increasing, our salaries will continue to fall further and further short of the cost of living.

Our demand is for a £2,500 uplift on all pay grading points as well as a £10 minimum per-hour wage for all contract types

2. Casualisation

Around half of teaching-only staff and 68% of researchers are employed on fixed-term contracts, while many more have contracts which are dependent on funding. A third of all academic staff are employed on fixed-term contracts. Casualisation is of particular concern to postgraduate researchers and that's why we're campaigning for a national GTA contract and a framework to eliminate precarious employment practices:

- a workload allocation model which sees GTAs adequately paid for all the time they work
- a guarantee that they're paid at the appropriate grade and on a fractional rather than hourly basis

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- paid time off for training
- the same rights and entitlements as permanent members of staff (e.g. sick leave, access to pension schemes, paid time for trade union activities).

3. Unmanageable workloads

The average working week in higher education is now above 50 hours, with 29% of academics averaging more than 55 hours. Our recent survey saw 78% of respondents reporting an increased workload during the pandemic. The average working week for PGRs is 47 hours. As well as damaging our physical and mental health this means that PGRs often work for less than minimum wage.

We want a national workload action plan with 35 hours being the standard weekly contract.

4. Intersectional pay inequality

Our sector is blighted by inequality with a pay gap between Black and white staff of 17%, a disability pay gap of 9% and a mean gender pay gap of 15.1%. Employers are failing to tackle this situation and that's why we are demanding national action to monitor and end pay inequality.

USS PENSIONS

Following a valuation in 2020, the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) is claiming that contribution rates need to increase very significantly. Both UCU members and the employers (Universities UK (UUK)) argue that these increases are not necessary and have not been properly justified.

However, instead of continuing to challenge the increases, UUK has pushed through major changes and cuts to the guaranteed, defined benefit (DB) element of the scheme to prevent employers from having to pay significantly higher contributions. The employers' cuts will:

- drastically reduce the level of guaranteed retirement income provided (a cut of 41% for a typical lecturer salary according to the USS's own modeller)
- particularly impact those nearer the start of their careers
- come on top of previous cuts between 2011 and 2019 that will make a typical member of staff £240,000 worse off over the course of their career and retirement.

Our demands

- Employers must revoke these massive cuts and negotiate an alternative resolution to the 2020 valuation with us.
- Protect members' benefits as far as possible and ensure that lower paid and precariously employed staff can afford to join the scheme at an affordable contribution rate.
- Support our call for the USS to conduct a new, moderately prudent, evidence-based valuation as soon as possible.

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TAKING PART IN INDUSTRIAL ACTION

Your membership

PGRs play an important part in this industrial action and your involvement is crucial in order to cause the greatest disruption possible to employers. You can take legally part in industrial action (striking or ASOS) for research, teaching, and other work that we do outside of being PGRs (i.e. as graduate teaching assistants, research assistants, or professional services at or above grade 6) which you are contracted to do as a worker. You cannot legally take part in industrial action from your postgraduate research work, or from work that is done without a formal contract or that is done for an employer without a trade union recognition agreement, however you can and should still support this action.

In order to maximise the role that you can play in our industrial action, you should therefore ensure that you are on the correct membership, and if you have any questions about your employment status you should ask UCU members in your branch.

Postgraduate researchers who are not employed at the institution are eligible for the free student membership.

Postgraduate researchers employed to do teaching or research work (outside of their capacity as postgraduate researchers) at the university at which you are registered for your PhD are eligible for free full membership.

To legally take part in strike action and ASOS you should be a full member. If you initially joined UCU on the student membership and are now engaging in contracted teaching or research work then you should switch to the full membership category in order to fully take part in strike action and ASOS. You can do this on My UCU: https://my.ucu.org.uk/app/utills/login_form/ and be eligible to vote in ballots.

PGRs can join at any time here: https://my.ucu.org.uk/app/membership/member_quote

STRIKE ACTION

What is a strike?

Striking means that we do not do any work on the days that we have specified as a union. This includes not engaging in any activity which is part of your work such as teaching, administration, meetings, emails related to work, marking, research or conferences.

What is a picket?

Picketing outside workplaces is a way to demonstrate support for our campaign and show the disruption that the union is able to cause. Picket lines are friendly forms of protesting through which we express solidarity with one another by not crossing. They can often be spaces of refreshing discussion about the workplaces that we have and those that we are trying to build.

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Do I have to notify my employer?

You are under no obligation to inform management in advance as to whether you will be taking part in the action. Once you are back to work, you should respond truthfully to any query from your employer as to whether you have taken or are taking industrial action. You are not legally required to inform your employer about ASOS and you should not do so in the format that managers request.

UCU members who are involved in disputes are support through the fighting fund, which provides strike pay (payment that is intended to help members meet their basic needs). You can apply to the fund after having engaged in a second day of withdrawing your work.

Digital picketing

A lot of university work is carried out via email and online, especially during the current pandemic, so in order to withdraw our labour and disrupt the activities of our institutions and we should avoid:

- answering work emails
- electronic admin/marketing
- writing papers or grant applications
- publicising work events
- any other electronic work.

We have a range of online graphics and resources to show that you are supporting the digital picket: <https://ucu.org.uk/article/11898/Resources>

RECLAIM OUR TIME: ACTION SHORT OF STRIKING (ASOS)

In addition to strike action we should also be engaging in indefinite ASOS as part of the 'reclaim our time' campaign. This aims to expose how much of our own well-being and free time is regularly sacrificed just to keep the system that exploits us afloat. To do so you should simply work to contract. In particular, this includes:

- only working the amount of prep or marking time that you are formally allocated
- not doing activities that are expected, but may not formally be included in your contract (e.g. replying to student emails, uploading registers, providing feedback in addition to marks)
- explaining to course coordinators and students that you cannot do more than you have done due to the ASOS action
- not rescheduling work
- not volunteering for additional work
- not covering for other people's work.

As part of the Reclaim Our Time Campaign, you should submit a spreadsheet to your line manager which details the work you have and have not done. Full details can be found here:

<https://ucu.org.uk/reclaim-our-time>

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SUPPORTING INDUSTRIAL ACTION AS A PGR

If you are not able to withdraw your labour as a member of staff, you can still support the campaign as a postgraduate researcher by:

- sending messages of solidarity to staff
- communicating to your PGR colleagues and on social media about the strikes
- contacting your branch committee and organising other activities around strikes (teach outs, direct action, solidarity visits from local community groups, etc.)
- joining pickets
- not crossing picket lines and working from alternative venues
- not agreeing to cover teaching work for others undertaking industrial action if approached
- not engaging in voluntary activities outside the formal requirements of completing your postgraduate research work and explaining to others that you are engaging in this protest

THE UCU FIGHTING FUND

UCU members who are involved in disputes are support through the fighting fund, which provides strike pay (payment that is intended to help members meet their basic needs). You can apply to the fund after having engaged in a second day of withdrawing your labour.

In order to make a claim to the fighting fund you need to:

- be paying subscriptions at the correct rate (if any subscription is payable)
- have participated in official strike action for which officers have agreed to make funds available
- provide evidence of deduction from your salary or loss of earnings for strike action. This is often more complicated for hourly-paid staff but can usually be provided through screenshots of previously authorised weekly timesheets in addition to those authorised from strike days. This would indicate that you did not claim work on strike days and that your hours for that week were reduced.
- submit relevant pay slips.

For the full guidance, please visit: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/fightingfund>

Some local branches also collect strike funds that you might be able to access. These often prioritise casualised staff and may be more appropriate to apply to if in need of funds more urgently.

CONCERNS AROUND VISAS

There is no specific prohibition on you taking part in industrial action as a PGR with a Tier 4 visa, nor any requirement for a sponsor to withdraw sponsorship on that basis.

Where someone on a Tier 4 visa is employed and taking part in lawful strike action that prevents them working as normal, the restrictions on absence that relate to Tier 2 migrants do not apply.

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In short, those on Tier 4 visas should observe the visa requirements that relate to their role as a student.

Since Tier 4 leave does not usually count towards settlement, there is no equivalent of the Tier 2 concern about periods with gaps in earnings not counting towards settlement.

CONCERNS WITH LINE MANAGERS

PGRs employed as GTAs, Research Assistants, or as other casualised workers can sometimes feel anxious at the idea of taking part in industrial action as a result of concerns about bullying or being pressured to work by line managers. Industrial action should be a collective endeavor and if you are worried about treatment you may face then you should voice these concerns with your departmental UCU reps, other UCU members (particularly fellow PGRs) or your branch committee officers, who will appreciate these being raised and offer to support you.

UCU'S 'PGRS AS STAFF' CAMPAIGN

In 2020 UCU members launched a campaign for PGRs to be recognised as staff by employers in their capacity of being PGRs. The manifesto to this campaign lays out a series of principles around research and teaching work that universities should enact. It can be viewed here:

https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/11623/Postgraduate-researchers-as-staff-manifesto-2021/pdf/UCU-PGRs_as_staff_manifesto_Jun21.pdf

The manifesto demands relating to teaching form the basis of the national GTA contract that is being fought for as part of the Four Fights dispute.

Additionally, UCU members are currently lobbying around the government's 'New Deal for Postgraduate Research'. More information around the process for the government's consultation can be viewed here:

<https://www.ukri.org/our-work/developing-people-and-skills/new-deal-for-postgraduate-research/>

Taking part in and supporting the industrial action will further the aims of this campaign. However, members should also place additional pressure on universities to implement its principles, as not all of them can be legally included within our current disputes. We should also be seeking to implement as many forms of leverage as possible. You should therefore look to lead local campaigning in your branch around this manifesto. In doing so, you will be supported and you will be standing alongside active campaigners in other branches.

To find out if campaigning is currently underway in your institution then please contact your branch's anti-casualisation, PGR or GTA committee officer. If you do not know who they are, or wish to start campaigning in your institution then please contact akirbyreynolds@ucu.org.uk or emunro@ucu.org.uk

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