



# A DISCUSSION DOCUMENT FROM THE GENERAL SECRETARY







**Yesterday, our union made history. A victory that belongs to every single UCU member. The reality though, is that the dispute has only just started. Winning the ballot was one step towards the ultimate goal – changing our sector.**

I want the transparency, inclusivity, and engagement levels developed throughout the ballot period to be the new standard of how we work every single day. This is why we asked the opinions of every member on the next steps in the dispute.

It is through a combination of listening to our members, leadership, working with other trade unions, and continuing to innovate that we will win this dispute.

This document aims to set out how I believe we can achieve those aims. We have 70,000 UCU members in this dispute. We have 70,000 at the starting line prior to any action. We must have 70,000 (or more) at the finish line when we win this dispute. This is why, I believe we must set out a programme of extensive strike action, membership engagement, action short of a strike, and fundraising – every single employer in the UK must know we are in this for the long haul. We have to take them to a place they have never been before.

What this does not mean is putting our heads down and running at it. We must be thoughtful, tactical, and ruthless, in every single step we take. We must also aim to deliver a strategy that keeps the whole membership together. I know in a union of 70,000 members there will 70,000 different views in how we take this dispute forward. Our Higher Education Committee (HEC) will ultimately make the decisions, but having analysed the survey results, lived and breathed this campaign for months now, travelled the length and breadth of the UK, I wanted to set out my views.

#### **SURVEY**

We asked members a number of key questions with regards the next steps in this dispute:

- period of calm to allow for negotiations
- timing and extent of strike action
- marking and assessment boycott.

The results of the question on whether we should give our employers a time limited period to negotiate were emphatically positive. It is clear members believe we must build this into any strategy. I believe this too. Let me be clear, this is not about delaying strike action, it is about attempting to reach an agreement. We will not hesitate to call action if the employers are not serious in negotiations.

The results around the timing of action were less clear, but there is a clear feeling that we cannot allow employers to string out the process – this is made even more important due to the 6-month validity of the strike ballot.

Members views on the marking and assessment boycott were also mixed. This reflects the complexity of the situation. We must find a strategy with this that keeps the union together. We must also find a strategy that means, if and when we call a marking and assessment boycott it is as effective and powerful as possible.

## THE STRATEGY

The UCU has never been in a stronger position than the one we all find ourselves in today. No more fighting on a workplace-by-workplace basis. They come for one, they come for all. We are only the third union in the country to win a national ballot. The others are our friends in the RMT and the CWU. We took inspiration from them during the ballot period, and we now find ourselves in a very similar situation with regards to calling action in sector defining disputes.

Both of those unions have taken an approach of escalation when it comes to calling strike action. They have also made sure that strike action isn't the only component of their campaigns. Media work, political pressure, and fund raising have been vital in keeping both disputes going. And more crucially, keeping their memberships behind them. This is what we must do at UCU.

On that basis, my view on the next steps we should take are as follows:

- ***we should call 2 days of strike action across the UK during W/C 21st November.***
- ***we should agree to escalate the strike action significantly in February (and beyond) when all universities are all back and teaching has recommenced***
- ***we should call a marking and assessment boycott to target final assessments***

## RATIONALE

There are pros and cons to calling November action. Any later than this would be completely ineffective because teaching has all but finished in Scotland and in other areas – we have not called a national ballot to not have national action.

That said, I believe, heading into potential negotiations, it is vital that we have an early pressure point on the employer. It is also clear that many other unions will be potentially taking action during this period of time (including our sister campus unions). Confidence has been gained by working people all over the UK as a result of some of the strike action that has already taken place. I believe the UCU joining this at the end of November (potentially with our sister campus unions) will inject that confidence in our union, put pressure on our employers, and provide us with the perfect platform to take escalated strike action in early 2023, if needed.

Another powerful reason to build the dispute is that many of our members at many universities will be taking strike action for the first time ever. I believe we will deliver the biggest and strongest picket lines in UCU history if we take our members with us every step of the way. Alongside the plan set out above, UCU HQ will put together a strategy document as comprehensive as the one we put together to deliver the ballot result. Which will contain a mixture of strike training, fund raising guidance, merchandise, legal advice, and media training – we are going to get the union ready to take whatever level of strike action is necessary to win the dispute – but we are going to do it properly.

The thought process behind escalating and building the dispute is beyond question in my view. It is what every other successful union does and is currently doing. It is also how you take people with you. It is also how you keep people together. We will build and escalate the action so that it builds pressure relentlessly on the employers. They will know in advance when we are taking action – any refusal to negotiate will place the blame for disruption firmly at their door. Members will know when action is being taken – the transparency we showed during the ballot campaign will be matched during the action campaign

The recommendation I am putting forward on the marking and assessment boycott is based on the exact same logic as above. There is no point in calling any form of action if the aims of it are not clear, the rules of it are not clear, and the actual impact of the action will not bring the employers back to the table. We have seen the callous approach from employers who have docked thousands of pounds from members pay, simply for engaging in marking and assessment boycott – we will not fall onto that punch.

We are going to be smarter in the way we approach this dispute. That is why we will deliver marking and assessment boycott training in every branch in the UK. We should call a marking and assessment boycott when 1) the whole union is ready, trained, and prepped to deliver it, and 2) when it will have maximum impact on the employer.

## OTHER ISSUES TO CONSIDER

**Reballot** – the anti-union laws mean that our strike ballot is only valid for 6 months. This can be extended to 9 months with the agreement of the employers. Obviously, if negotiations are progressing well this may be something that happens, but we cannot plan or rely on this. We have also been clear this is a sector defining dispute. This is why we must be prepared to stay the course, which means we have to start thinking about the potential of reballoting in early 2023 to ensure we have a legal mandate to take action to the summer of 2023.

This is yet another reason why escalation is exactly the right tactic in this dispute. We cannot run our members into the wall by the end of 2022 when we are facing a dispute that could potentially run well into 2023.

**Recruitment** – We have recruited an incredible 4,000 new members during the UCU rising ballot campaign. If we are to deliver the victory we want, and our member deserve, then this cannot stop here. We cannot hide away from the fact that greater density would give us great bargaining power. This is why, as part of the next steps in the campaign, UCU will be launching the biggest ever recruitment drive across the union. When we take action we want the biggest picket lines in our history, and we want to send a message to our employer that when we withdraw our labour, our sector comes to a standstill.

**Building** – we need to make sure the union is stronger going into this campaign and stronger coming out. We will invest in training and organising to support branches to mobilise members as effectively as possible.

**Fundraising** – The UCU fighting fund will be there to help our members during this dispute. But, as you know, is not a bottomless pit. This is why rather than sit and wait for it to be emptied we will launch an extensive fund raising campaign on social media, and across our movement to ensure no member is starved back to work. I repeat, 70,000 at the start line, 70,000 at the finish line.

**Media** – Coverage of any action we take has to be part of the leverage we apply to employers. We need to expose them. To do this, every branch will receive comprehensive media training and support from UCU HQ. This will ensure that the pressure is applied nationally but also via regional media – we cannot give them an inch.

## SUMMARY

Our Higher Education Committee (HEC) will of course, in line with our democratic processes, make any final decisions in how and when we take strike action. The aim of this document is to help inform that discussion.

We all want change in our sector. Some of us want that by mass strike action, some of us want that by no strike action. Many will want a middle ground. What I have set out above, is a reflection of the survey results, my conversations that have taken place across the UK, and the experience I have gained from speaking to other trade union leaders and analysing the tactics of other successful disputes.

We collectively have set out to win a proper pay rise, take back our pensions, eradicate casualization, and end unfair workloads – that is exactly what we are going to do.

Share the document, let me know your views, let your branch know your views, and whatever the outcome of the HEC meeting, we will move forward as one.

*Yours in solidarity*

**Jo Grady**

UCU general secretary

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