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Ominous Start to 2012/13 Pay Talks

There has been an ominous start to this year's pay negotiations which opened on May 17 at a Meeting of the National Joint Forum between the Association of Colleges and the Joint Further Education Trade Unions. AoC representatives refused to make any offer on a pay increase until the trade unions accepted as part of any settlement that colleges could freeze or discontinue incremental progression on pay scales. In addition the employers also wanted the unions to sign up to allow further 'flexibility' locally on working hours and conditions of service.

Unsurprisingly, all the trade unions rejected outright such an outrageous opening position from the employers. The ending of incremental progression would mean massive pay cuts for huge numbers of staff, effectively tearing up national pay scales and would expose colleges to equal pay and discrimination claims from unfair spot salaries. The employer representatives were firmly informed by the trade union side that it was an unacceptable negotiating practice to seek to impose such conditions before making any offer whatsoever.

The employers had received the unions' claim for 2012/13 a month before the opening round of negotiations. The claim included:

- 5% increase on pay and allowances with a £750 underpinning

- Action to stop use of zero hours contracts
- Action to promote adoption of the joint agreement on excessive working hours
- Negotiations on a national agreement on lesson observation procedures

Full details of the joint unions' claim can be found at www.ucu.org.uk/fepayengland

In presenting the claim to the meeting the union side reminded the AoC that this year's funding allocations had not been as dire as earlier predictions and that more flexibility was now available to colleges to balance their books within different funding streams. Latest figures show that the number of colleges in serious poor financial health has declined while at the same time some colleges are squandering millions of pounds on unnecessary VAT payments and fees by employing staff through agencies instead of directly.

If it wasn't enough that the AoC attempted to place conditions before making any pay offer they also flatly rejected most of the non-pay elements of our claim. They refused to entertain any negotiation on lesson observation or taking any action over zero hours contracts.

The trade union side advised the AoC to rethink its position for the next meeting which is on 1 June.

Pay Cuts and Workload

Unfortunately, as predicted, college managements are increasingly responding to the financial squeeze not only with job cuts but now with draconian attacks on pay and conditions of service. At present there are 3 prominent examples of this all of which are being strongly resisted by local UCU branches.

Gateshead College

Members at Gateshead College were faced with proposals to reduce the top of the pay scale for qualified lecturers to £27k, affecting around 2/3 of members. On top of this, the college, in a move familiar to anyone working in the sector about 20 years ago, proposed to remove all contractual safeguards on work loading except a 37 hour working week.

The branch response was to organise a ballot for industrial action up to and including indefinite strike action and organised a rally of 100 members one morning and slow handclapped senior management into work.

The ballot result was tremendous, on a turnout of nearly 60% some 94% voted yes! But even prior to this, management, clearly concerned that OFSTED would suffer the same slow hand clap treatment at an inspection the week before the ballot result, entered intense negotiations.

The result was an offer that was overwhelmingly accepted by branch members as a basis for suspending the industrial action.

City of Sunderland College

At the same time as the action at Gateshead College the neighbouring college at Sunderland announced, on external consultants advice, proposals to demote about 70% of main grade lecturers to Associate Teacher status (known as lecturer A in the college) resulting in a pay cut of about £10K!

Again the branch took a powerful response and decided to ballot for strike action up to and including indefinite action and, in a similar turnout to Gateshead, voted 88% yes.

While no offer has yet emerged, more meaningful negotiations have now started with senior management.

Chesterfield College

On top of plans for 39 teaching staff redundancies members at Chesterfield College face a threat to cap annual salaries at £30,462. i.e. cut by some £5000. In addition, the college is threatening to reduce salaries for hourly-paid staff by 20% and to move learning support tutors on to inferior contracts.

The branch decided to ballot for strike action and had a brilliant response from members with 88% of members voting yes on another high turnout. Negotiations are continuing and there are clear signs of progress. However at present no acceptable offer is on the table and the members will be taking strike action on Tuesday 29 May if there is no further movement from the college.

Win at Warwickshire

After voting for industrial action and maintaining a two month long campaign of boycotting lesson observations UCU members at Warwickshire College have voted to accept a pay agreement which implements the 8 point national pay scale! This victory shows that even at a time when AoC negotiators want to take away the 8 point scale, by sticking together UCU members can still secure a fair deal.

Closing the Gap

UCU has produced a new campaigning flyer which explains the recent history of pay in FE and sets out a charter for UCU's campaigning on pay over the next few years. UCU will:

- FIGHT cuts in funding, and demand pay increases which reflect increased inflation and close the 7.5% gap with school teachers salaries
- DEFEND national pay scales and oppose the introduction of regional pay in FE
- CAMPAIGN for fair pay for all, irrespective of gender or ethnicity and oppose pay excess at the top
- ARGUE for fair contract terms including instructor/trainers, part-timers and hourly-paid staff.

Download the flyer at:

www.ucu.org.uk/fepayengland

New Equality Joint Agreement

The new Joint Agreement on Guidance on Equality in Employment in Further Education replaces existing agreements on guidance for disability, age, gender, transgender, race, religion or belief and sexual orientation equality in employment in further education colleges.

Following the implementation of The Equality Act 2010 and the creation of a new public sector equality duty to replace the previous duties for race, disability and gender, the AoC proposed combining a number of the existing joint equality agreements into a single equality agreement to mirror the new Act. Before agreeing, the joint unions secured agreement that the process of combining the agreements into one agreement would not result in any diminution of existing provisions in the separate agreements.

UCU will be using the launch of the new Equality Agreement as an opportunity run a campaign in the autumn term to reinvigorate local discussions on equality and to monitor the adoption of the new agreement. The new agreement can be found on the UCU website at:

<http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=1968#equality>

Lesson observations update:

Boycott dispute escalates at Southwark College

UCU members at Southwark College have been boycotting lesson observations in a dispute over management's decision to tear up an existing agreement and impose a more punitive scheme. College management have responded to the lawfully balloted action with deductions of wages and by taking disciplinary proceedings against members who refuse to be observed as part of the boycott.

This week the college chose to issue final written warnings to members put through the disciplinary procedures over their boycotted observations. The branch will be meeting next week to consider their response.

Branches are encouraged to send messages of support for colleagues at Southwark College to: pascale.herreman@southwark.ac.uk.

95% yes vote for action on punitive lesson observations

UCU members at South Tyneside College have sent a clear message against their management's decision to invoke capability procedures for any lecturer receiving a grade three in two consecutive lesson observations. The branch mounted a campaign against the change in procedures and was given no option but to notify a dispute when managers said that the decision "was not up for discussion". This week the result of a ballot of members on action short of a strike was 95% in favour of action. The next steps will be announced shortly.

The Manchester College to scrap graded observations

Meanwhile in a move in the right direction The Manchester College have indicated their intention to move toward a more supportive and developmental system of observations by scrapping graded observations and unannounced observations with a emphasis on observing the learning.