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### Are you getting all the info?

This January 2015 newsletter has been distributed to all SW RMB members, by email if we have your email address, and by post if we don't.

If UCU HO has your email, then you should also be receiving regular updates on campaigns from UCU head office – the ones sent by Justine Stephens. You should also get occasional messages from Sally Hunt, UCU.

If you are only getting our newsletter, then let me know at [ucu.swest@gmail.com](mailto:ucu.swest@gmail.com) and I can amend your UCU members' database, which will correct the problem.

### 1. Branch meeting - AGM

**Monday 15<sup>th</sup> February 2016**

**12.00 a.m. – 2.30 p.m.**

**Still The Enemy Within.**

A second extract from the film with a discussion. Venue: UCU Office. Labour Party Rooms

26b Clifton Hill, Exeter EX1 2DJ

**A buffet lunch will be provided if you let us know a week in advance.**

**[ucu.swest@gmail.com](mailto:ucu.swest@gmail.com)**

After the business of the October branch meeting we had time to watch 30 minutes of Still The Enemy Within, which is a unique insight into one of history's most dramatic events: the 1984-85 British

Miners' Strike. Thirty years on, (yes 30) this is the raw first-hand experience of those who lived through Britain's longest strike. We hope that the business of the AGM, 15.2.16, will be finished in time to see more of the film.

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*This newsletter is, in part, that of the East Midlands branch who unselfishly share their expertise with all the Retired Members Branches (RMB). Your contributions for our next newsletter welcome.*

Email them to [ucu.swest@gmail.com](mailto:ucu.swest@gmail.com)

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### 2. OU to close seven regional centres.

Members of the University and College Union (UCU) are taking industrial action over the plans to close seven regional centres putting over 500 jobs at risk.

The plans were approved at a meeting of the university's council on November 24, despite

widespread opposition from staff, students and politicians. <http://ucu.open.ac.uk/sitemap>

The Bristol strike was part of a series of regional one-day walk-outs following a national strike on November 25. The strikes are the first time staff have walked out over a



local dispute in the university's history.

The seven centres earmarked for closure are in

Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Leeds, Gateshead, London and Oxford.

UCU said that the closures would cause chaos for students and mean the loss of the university's visible presence and local expertise in several English regions.

The university's senate rejected the plans as "very high risk", saying that they "failed to support the academic mission of the university".

UCU Open University branch president **Pauline Collins** said: "Closing seven regional centres will lead to chaos for students and staff alike. "We are deeply concerned that the university will lose not only a visible presence in many regions, but also the local expertise which has been built up by staff working in the regional centres. "Nobody wants to take strike action, but we have no alternative. These closures are opposed by staff, students, and politicians alike. "The university needs to listen to our concerns and urgently reconsider its position."

Please sign the petition <http://bit.ly/ouclosures>

### 3. Pension triple lock applied

Prices -0.1%, wages +2.9%, backstop +2.5%.

This is good news for 13 million state pensioners. The so-called 'triple lock' has produced a rise in pensions of 2.9%. With

inflation at minus 0.1% that is three clear percentage points ahead of the rise in prices. The basic pension will rise in April by £3.35 to £119.30 a week. It could never have been less than a £2.90 rise - that would have been achieved if the backstop 2.5% figure had been used. But the triple lock rule is that the pension goes up by the highest of those three figures. So in the 2016/17 round, wages win. That extra 45p a week to 13 million pensioners will cost the Chancellor around £300 million in 2016/17.

The 2.9% wages rise will also be instrumental in working out the level of the so-called flat rate new state pension which will be paid to new pensioners from 6 April 2016.

EM from Money Box 16<sup>th</sup> October

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### 4. The Triple Lock in Danger

The message that pensioners are too rich and too greedy is beginning to be heard. The triple lock on the State Pension guarantees that the state pension will rise with earnings or prices or 2.5% whichever is the highest. The present Government is committed to keeping it until the April 2020 rise. The habit of pensioners voting is well understood by our politicians and is likely to survive the present attempt to prune the electoral list by individual registration. This lock is being singled out for particular opprobrium, despite the state pension in the UK being one of the lowest in Western Europe.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) Director Paul Johnson has pointed out that median pensioner income is £398 a week, £14 a week more than the £384 median for working age people. Those figures take account of dependants and housing costs and are to a certain extent artificial. This change is partly due to the triple lock that has protected pensioners from the freezes and cuts in the state benefits paid to people

under pension age. The older group is also far more likely to own their home than younger people and to benefit from work or private pensions.

The result is that a large proportion of those retiring now will be better off in retirement than they were during their working life. Thirty years ago pensioners were at least three times as likely to be poor as non-pensioners. Now they are less likely to be poor. IFS High levels of income for current retirees shouldn't blind us to future challenges.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) points out that the median income for retired households is now £1800 a year higher than it was in the economic downturn of 2007/08. But non-retired households were still £800 a year worse off than they were in 2007/08. The ONS also said that was due in part to the triple lock.

The Government Actuary's website is warning that the guaranteed rise in the state pension will cost £6bn this year and over time would become unaffordable. Obviously, wars in the Middle East and our nuclear deterrent (a hi-tech status symbol analogous to the Tudor cod-piece) are so essential that their costs must not be put under scrutiny. The website concluded that it may be useful to investigate different economic scenarios before committing to maintain the policy for longer. Pensioner poverty still exists and seeing its reduction as a cause for alarm is perverse. About as stupid as cutting real wages and expecting the economy to thrive on reduced demand.

Julian Atkinson EM

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## 5. Further Threats to USS

Rising liabilities focus attention on whether Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) assumptions are

'unreasonably pessimistic'. The prospect of further cuts to the sector's largest pension scheme has been raised after its **deficit rose sharply** despite savings from the closure of final salary pensions.

The latest USS annual report and accounts say that removing the link to final salary and other changes being brought in next year will cut about £5.2 billion from the Universities Superannuation Scheme's deficit. However, those savings have been more than offset by adverse market conditions that have pushed up liabilities by a total of £10.7 billion since 2011. It means that the £2.9 billion deficit in 2011 almost doubled to £5.4 billion at the 2014 triennial valuation, despite assets increasing from £32.4 billion to £41.6 billion. The scheme, which has about 147,000 active members mainly at pre-92 universities, was 88 per cent funded in 2014 compared with 92 per cent funded in 2011. That fell to 86 per cent funded in 2015 as the deficit worsened to £8.3 billion as a result of difficult market conditions, the report adds.

Asked if further changes to USS may be required to address the growing shortfall, a spokeswoman said that its "trustee is alert to the continued challenging investment environment and anticipates that the deficit will continue to be volatile." It will "continue to monitor all aspects of scheme funding closely. Its liabilities have increased due to the historically low yields on government bonds and the continuation of a more pessimistic outlook for long-term growth".

However, the massively increased liabilities are likely to prompt further scrutiny from the sector about how they are calculated. Many economists and statisticians have claimed that unreasonably pessimistic assumptions have been used by the USS to "artificially create a high deficit" and justify next

year's closure of the final salary scheme. Dennis Leech, emeritus professor of economics at the University of Warwick, believes that the way liabilities are calculated by the USS is "more or less arbitrary". "They are calculated by processes that are not rooted in reality, but based on fantastical theories about the economy," said Professor Leech. "The liabilities figure is going through the roof because it is computed using gilts, which are very low due to quantitative easing together with very unrealistic assumptions about the future the employers are insisting on imposing, such as unprecedented pay rises, unreasonably high mortality rates among members, high inflation rates, and – most shockingly – the assumption of a short employer covenant, treating old established universities in the same way as [businesses which may collapse]," he said.

"What is astonishing is that Universities UK (UUK) has apparently been prepared to go along with this reasoning applied to universities and not even post-92 institutions," he added. The UCU, which coordinated industrial action against pension changes last year, is holding a meeting with its branch pensions officers next month to start a campaign to persuade the employers to change the assumptions that underpin the liabilities calculation, Professor Leech said.

UCU is under the impression that UUK is becoming increasingly concerned about the USS trustee's approach to the valuation and de-risking of the pension scheme. UCU reports that UUK appears more receptive to exploring different approaches from USS's to valuation and de-risking than they have been in the past.

Part of the explanation is that employers had been under the impression that the major changes to pensions agreed a few

months ago would probably get us through at least the next valuation, without the need for another round of cuts to pensions arising from the 2017 full valuation. But there now appears to be a decent chance that, under USS's current method of valuation and strategy of de-risking, there will be another large deficit in March 2017, which will force further cuts. This is because the rise in the Bank of England rate and the winding down of quantitative easing keep on failing to materialize, and hence bond yields aren't recovering as people expected. Moreover, stock markets have been worse than expected since the last round of cuts were agreed.

If there is another large deficit as of 31 March 2017, then, under the terms agreed in the consultation, the default is that employer 18% contributions on salaries above £55,000 will be diverted to a greater subsidy of Defined Benefit (DB) below £55,000. First, the 1% match of voluntary Defined Contribution (DC) contributions will be eliminated. And then the 12% of these 18% contributions that go into individual DC pots would be reduced. This would have an especially bad effect on those who have already been made significantly worse off by the closure of final salary and the introduction of a DC scheme that is inferior to DB below the threshold.

taken from an article by Professor Michael Otsuka, LSE  
Russ Bowman EM

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## 6. UCU general secretary targets casualisation in parliamentary committee hearing.

In an appearance at the Business and Skills committee (1.12.15), **Sally Hunt** slammed the university sector for its exploitation of casual contracts and warned that delivering high quality teaching would not be possible until hard-working staff were employed on decent secure contracts. UCU's report on the everyday fight to make ends meet was [published in May this year and you can read it here](#).

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## 7. Getting victims to blame each other

There is little doubt that young people are having a difficult time. Student loans, jobs and housing have made life far harder than it was for us. Indeed, there exists the possibility that the upcoming generation might be poorer than ourselves. There has grown a divisive and false argument that in some way this is the fault of the “baby boomers” and that benefits should be taken from the old and given to the young along the lines of a zero sum game. This approach follows the well-worn path of divide and rule. Rather than facing up to the societal problems that cause inequality and poverty, there is an attempt to set native-born against immigrant, men against women, working poor against the unemployed and now young against old. The TUC has produced a very useful pamphlet “Young against Old. What’s really causing wealth inequality.” The report was written for the TUC by Strategic Society Centre director James Lloyd drawing on analysis of the UK Wealth and Assets Survey by Andrea Finney and David Hayes at the University of Bristol Personal Finance Centre.

[EM newsletter](#)

## 8. The nasty view on pensioners

A modest proposal revisited. The Taxpayers’ Alliance (TPA) is urging the government to go further with its programme of cuts. TPA director Alex Wild has told a Conservative Party conference fringe event that ministers should waste no time in making unpopular cuts to pensioner benefits.

This might be a risky electoral strategy considering older people are more likely to vote than the young. But there are two factors that mitigate that risk. According to the TPA director, it’s sensible to cut some pensioner benefits “as soon as possible” because by 2020 many of those hit by the cuts **will be dead!** “The first of which will sound a little bit morbid – some of the people... **won’t be around to vote against you in the next**

**election**“, Wild told the conference fringe event.

The rise in numbers of those suffering dementia also provides opportunity for the Government. Wild after making his first point continued: “So that’s just a practical point, **and the other point is they might have forgotten by then.**” Unlike Dean Swift, Director Wild is not a satirist; just a nasty bastard.

[Julian Atkinson EM](#)

## 9. TUC action in opposition to new Anti-Trade Union laws

In late October 2,500 trade unionists were at the lobby of parliament against the trade union bill. Even the police conceded that the TUC-organised event, with union members travelling from all over the UK to talk with their MPs in person, was the biggest lobby of MPs ever seen.

Despite this and strong opposition in the Commons, the amended Bill was given its Third Reading on 10 November, prior to scrutiny by the Lords and final enactment. Some of the concessionary amendments that were achieved are described as a “big climb down” by the TUC. Most importantly, the Government has now dropped its proposal to **make unions publish a protest and picketing plan 14 days in advance.** Also, it will not now go ahead with proposals to **create new criminal offences around picketing.** Crucially, the government has dropped its proposal for the picket organiser to have to carry **a letter of authorisation with their name and address on,** which would have to be shown to the police and any member of the public who asked to see it.



However this Bill, soon to become an Act, remains as a punitive further impediment on the rights of working people to defend themselves collectively. UK trade union laws

are already some of the most restrictive in Europe and beyond, but this Bill intends to worsen the situation.

The ballot thresholds in themselves single out trade unions for different treatment to other elections. A 50% turnout for industrial action will be required, including action short of a strike such as working to contract. For “important public services”, it must have the support of 40% of those entitled to vote. These measures effectively treat abstentions as active “no” votes. Keith Starmer QC states that the “International Labour Organisation (a special agency of the UN) has been critical of this on the very simple basis that it is undemocratic...and threatens the essence of collective action”. The government is arguably in breach of ILO international standards in drawing in a wide range of public services such as education into the 40% restriction.

The government persists in ending “check-off” facilities (affecting 3.8m public sector workers), yet has refused to accede to online balloting. It is also insisting on an opt-in to union political funds and a cap on them that requires declaration of anything spent over £2000. Most commentators agree that this is designed to seriously hamper funding of the Labour Party, but will also affect all non-affiliated unions (such as UCU) who must have a political fund simply to campaign on a wide range of political matters (including future opposition to bills such as this!). Prof Keith Ewing has stated that these anti-democratic measures take us back to the situation in 1927, post General Strike. John Hendry QC argues that this is an attempt “to exclude trade unions from civil society”. (Protect the Right to Strike, IER.) Additionally, a cap on time off for union representatives is envisaged, irrespective of negotiated agreements. Agency workers will now be allowed to be brought in to break strikes.

The extended powers of the Certification Officer are described as “extraordinary” by Ewing. They mean that that office can not only bring a complaint against a TU, but it

then decides on its veracity and imposes a fine.

This Bill stands at odds with Cameron’s stated intention of producing a “high wage economy”. It will limit workers ability to fight on pay, have the effect of limiting the power of public sector unions to resist pay restrictions and campaign against cuts and it will gag the political voice of organised labour.

Angus McLardy EM

Background reading:

<http://strongerunions.org/2015/11/10/tubill-surprise/>

## 10. FÉDÉRATION EUROPÉENNE DES RETRAITÉS ET DES PERSONNES



**ÂGÉES.** We regularly receive papers for the meetings of Ferpa; sometimes the papers are in French, sometimes English. The first article is for those I know who speak French, and the other in English. If you would like to receive these regularly, then email [ucu.swest@gmail.com](mailto:ucu.swest@gmail.com) and we will forward them to you.

### **18 décembre 2015, journée internationale des migrants.**

Chaque année, la journée internationale des migrants est l’occasion de contrer les préjugés et de sensibiliser l’opinion aux réels enjeux de la migration et aux politiques indispensables à mettre en œuvre.

**Ce 18 décembre 2015**, la plateforme de concertation autour du combat des sans-papiers - qui rassemble la coordination des sans-papiers, la FGTB, la CSC et différentes associations - **organise un rassemblement solidaire à 18h sur la place du Béguinage à Bruxelles, suivi d'une soirée de concerts et de témoignages au sein de l'église, à partir de 18h30.**

Y seront mises en avant les revendications partagées au sein de cette plateforme, à savoir :







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## 12. The NPC Parliamentary Lobby and the annual meeting of the UCU Retired members Branches 2015

In early November, there were two important events for retired members one after the other. Members of the National Pensioners Convention NPC lobbied Parliament on 4 November in support of universal pensioner benefits and to **arguments in favor of a National Care Service funded through general taxation, like the NHS**, and UCU held its annual meeting of retired member's branches on 5th.

Having attended both events I do not think the proximity of the timing of these two events was entirely coincidental. I discovered that Norman Jemison, Vice President of the NPC, is also vice chair of the UCU Retired member's national committee, and thus able to facilitate the coordination of the activities of the two organisations as appropriate. Some members had appointments with their MP whilst many others packed into one of the committee rooms to hear a range of speakers and to ask questions.

The lobby of Parliament was well attended, with Norman playing a key role, and being able to provide feedback to UCU members at the meeting the following day at UCU Head office, Carlow Street, London.

There were 18 delegates from 11 branches, and 3 UCU Trustees. Also present were Liz Lawrence, President, and Geraldine Egan.

### **Presidential address.**

The meeting began with an address from Liz Lawrence, UCU President in which she highlighted attacks on pensioners as being better off than working people, as part of the divide and rule tactics of the establishment, and the Trade Union Bill which was a direct attack on the trade union movement to organise in the face of austerity.

**The following officers** were elected:

Ken Childerhouse-chair

Norman Jemison-Vice Chair

**The following reports** were received

Report from the NPC lobby- Phil Burgess

The Finance Report- Phil Burgess

The NPC Health Working Group - Pat Roche

The TUC Pensioner's committee-Norman Jemison

### **Motions from Regional RMBs**

The meeting discussed 15 resolutions submitted by Retired member's branches.

The minutes and the President's address will be available at the branch AGM.

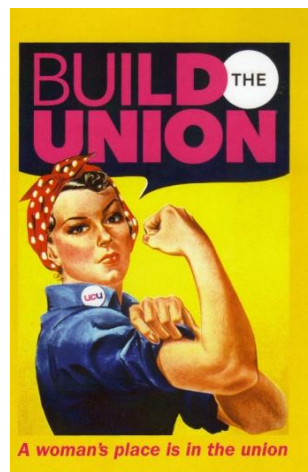
Tom Murray

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## 13. UCU Equality Annual Conference 12 – 14<sup>th</sup> November 2015, Eastbourne

What can I say? So many extremely knowledgeable, passionate people in one place! All eager to share their experiences and to build on them through well-managed, interactive workshops. It had been my intention to make copious notes in order to report back; however, I became so involved with the speaker's content and workshops that my note pages are almost empty! People like Elizabeth Lawrence, Quinn Roache, Alaa Elaydi and Wilf Sullivan, to name a few, gave us much food for thought and Sian James MP ensured that dinner went down very well!! Thank you to all the speakers and to those who worked in the back-ground to make the conference so enjoyable. I feel privileged to have been given the opportunity to attend.

Barbara Smith



### **Important issues were raised throughout the conference such as:**

\*While wishing to warmly welcome refugees, concern was expressed for migrants, asylum seekers and others whose access to education is being eroded by current policies, especially access to ESOL courses. There are also more restrictions on foreign students, who, while paying much higher fees for their courses, are also only allowed short-term visas and may have to go home and re-apply if wanting to

