The UCU: who we are

The University and College Union (UCU) has its roots in the early teaching unions, the first of which was formed in 1904. It is an organisation that represents staff in further and higher education, working to defend and improve employment conditions and learning conditions. Today UCU does this in universities, colleges and the prison education system. The UCU is a democratic, member-led organisation. Nationally UCU represents over 130,000 staff, and the Leicester UCU branch has about 800 members.

Why we are striking: The Four Fights

We are currently involved in a national dispute over pay, precarious working, workloads and equality. Because our employers are not listening to us, and because these issues are pushing staff to breaking point, and undermining the conditions in which students learn, we feel we have no choice but to take strike action.

Pay: in real terms, taking into account inflation, our salaries have fallen 17.6% since 2009. You may be surprised to know that £8.70 is the hourly rate of the lowest paid teachers in higher education. Despite this, last year our employers offered a 0% pay increase.

@UniversityofLeicester advertises for Teaching Fellows on short-term contracts of eight months to two years, for a starting salary of £35,326. They can easily work 50 hours a week preparing for modules they haven’t taught before, this can equate to £13.59 an hour. Most will have studied a minimum of seven years in higher education and many will have extensive student loans. Imagine the amount of work it takes to learn how to teach and mark a very specific module. And then, after eight
months, they’re out of a job. Is that fair to staff—or the students they teach? You are paying for this. Do you want better investment in teaching?

Casualisation: Across the sector, there are 3,545 staff on zero-hour contracts. These are contracts that don’t guarantee set hours of work, which are widely used in the fast food and care sectors. Additionally, 68% of research staff are on fixed-term contracts, that do not guarantee ongoing employment, and 41% of teaching academics are on hourly-paid contracts.

Holding a couple of degrees and a PhD don’t protect you from exploitation if you work in a university. Imagine trying to get a mortgage under these precarious conditions—or the stress of supporting a family when you are only employed for 12 months. Would you want to work in this profession?

Workloads: Many academics starting their careers are perturbed to discover the concept of indeterminate hours. This means that you must finish the tasks assigned as part of your job specification, even if it goes far beyond the standard 37.5 hours a week. Senior management claim this allows us to manage our own workloads—but in reality this means that staff feel pressured into excessive workloads.

@UniversityofLeicester two Colleges use the “workload model”, while the other finds it impossible to apply. Where this model is used, it means for you that officially your markers are given 22.5 minutes to mark your 15 credit exam and 45 minutes to mark 15 credit coursework. However, staff report that in reality they only have 15-20 minutes to mark your work. You know, the one you spent two weeks preparing. We hate that, and we think you should too.

Equality: the average pay gap between male and female staff in higher education is 15.1%. For Black, east and south Asian staff the pay gap is at least 17%. It is worse if you are from one of these groups and female too. Although universities often claim to be addressing these issues, progress has been painfully slow, despite unions campaigning over inequality for decades.

@UniversityofLeicester the gender pay gap in 2019 remained at 20%—well over the national average. Is this really being addressed? The redundancies in Leicester Learning Institute and the Library specifically hit women’s careers the hardest. And, as yet, we don’t really capture sufficient data on ethnicity to see what, if any, real progress is being made.

Our university has also been too slow to support disabled staff in their work. Some staff feel they have been put under undue pressure by managers, despite suffering depression and other mental health issues. During recent redundancy processes, staff who needed extra time to read meeting materials were given just 30 minutes to do so, despite the enormous stress they were experiencing. Staff with serious back problems, requiring suitable office equipment so they can work at home, have, in many cases, not received this support. Our staff have many, varied disability requirements. The institution could do more to support them.

These are the reasons why we are taking strike action. We invite students to come and talk to us on the picket line. We care about you and we care about the university. Higher Education can be so worthwhile, we want to ensure that we maintain students’ learning conditions. But that means defending our teaching conditions and we feel there is no way that we can make those running the
universities listen, other than by exercising our right to withhold our labour and participate in strike action.

What can you do to help?

- Sign the [National Union of Students (NUS) petition](#).
- We hope employers will return to negotiations—if our dispute with them is resolved to our satisfaction, then we will return to work and teaching events will go ahead as scheduled. So e-mail the vice-chancellor or your MP to tell them you are supporting our action, and let them know your concerns around low pay, precarious contracts, workloads and inequality. Ask them what they are doing to help to resolve the dispute.
- Please don’t cross our picket line. The [NUS has voted by 73%](#) in favour of supporting us.
- Continue your education in a different way by joining us on the picket lines—you’re very welcome—and coming along to one of the teach-out events we will hold.
- International students: some students (those without EU passports) may still need to “Touch Green to Be Seen”—to avoid jeopardising their student visa.
- PhD students: the strikes announced so far are for three working days so this should not impact on your attendance requirements for your funders—but please check this.

Thank you!

Leicester UCU