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# UCU Marking and Assessment Boycott - awaiting results

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After a renewed mandate for national industrial action earlier in the year, this April, members of the University and College Union (UCU) embarked on a Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB) as part of the union's 'Four Fights' dispute with the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA). Covering pay, inequalities, casualisation, and workload, the Four Fights has shone a harsh light on the urgent need for an overhaul of employment practices in the Higher Education sector. The dispute is not just about securing a pay increase for lecturers; the claim covers all university workers, across several unions and at all pay grades, not to mention the immiserating casualisation faced by increasing numbers of higher education sector workers. That said, the UCU predominantly represents higher pay grades, and strike action from other HE unions has been localised and uneven, resulting in further obstacles to a unified response to deteriorating conditions.

Following paltry pay offers and gestures at reform from employers after eighteen days of strike action in February and March, members then voted overwhelmingly to pause further action on the ongoing pensions dispute after Universities UK agreed to revoke pension cuts imposed in 2022. Despite significant divisions among members - along factional lines, between permanent and casualised staff and between universities with significant surpluses and those facing budget crunches and redundancies - at the launch of the MAB, UCU members found themselves at a pivotal moment in the Four Fights dispute. As seen from the local branch perspective at UCU Edinburgh (UCUE), what would make or break the action was whether UCU members could rally in solidarity to push negotiators at the UK level towards firmer commitments on ending zero hours contracts, reforming pay structures, and fixing a system where workloads are at permanent crisis point.

However, now that the MAB has been called off early - indeed, some would say prematurely, although this is a contested point that shifts across branches with highly variable MAB impacts - it is worth pausing to reflect on the MAB and its challenges, given the complex and shifting landscape it has had to contend with. It is important to bear in mind that localised MABs have a history of relatively recent success across the sector, with branches such as Liverpool and Queen Mary University of London winning local disputes on

redundancies and imposition of strike-breaking measures by management. The knowledge and practical experience these Branches have been able to share has been invaluable for enabling others to develop their own MAB strategies, filling in the inevitable gaps in a national union that represents member institutions with a highly variable range of conditions and resources.

UCU members at the University of Edinburgh led one of the most effective, well-organised, and well-supported boycotts in the UK. We were inspired by the creativity and resilience of comrades across other institutions. What we must do now is try to understand both the strategies that succeeded, and what led to some of the less disruptive - and often more divisive - MAB efforts at other HE institutions.

Initially, in spite of what appeared to be a gloomy picture from the outside, rank-and-file members found renewed pockets of energy to sustain the organising effort. Local Branches in universities, and even more localised units such as Schools and Subject Areas at the University of Edinburgh for example, took the initiative in developing networks and tactics that worked to their strengths in terms of membership density and institutional position, both within their local area and the university more broadly. To cause the necessary disruption required of a MAB, we needed to know and understand the conditions on the ground; know who our comrades are in our departments both horizontally and vertically. Only by doing this hyper-local organising were we able to build the capacity to sabotage the marking and assessment pipeline at the University of Edinburgh.

Accordingly, one of the most important dimensions of organising strategy that emerged when we began coordinating the MAB locally is the strategic value of indeterminacy and opacity. In an institution with a high level of devolved decision making between Colleges, Schools and Subject Areas, conditions between often siloed departments were variable and required a delicate balance of branch coordination and more laissez-faire local organising. We have found that the need to work locally has galvanised more members to get involved with organising efforts, developing new channels of communication and solidarity. And although there is a fine line between indeterminacy and confusion, these new channels have been essential in sharing guidance, tips, and strategies, enjoying some camaraderie, and

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building capacity for future organising efforts. This was made more straightforward thanks to an already well-developed Local Contact network, run by the Branch's designated Membership Secretary and organising tsar - though ironically, the success of this network has been facilitated by the need to ballot members repeatedly under existing anti-Trade Union laws.

Second, we have begun to see more and more potential for our local organising networks for the future thanks to new links forged between workers at different points in their work trajectories. We have more and better communication between permanent and casualised staff, for example. As a result, we also have more discussion of Subject Area level issues that we now know we can work on together in the future. In the likely scenario that individual institutions will be left to decide how to implement agreed frameworks on workload, pay equality, and casualisation, it is vital to have these networks in place and ready to mobilise.

Third, UCUE was able to sustain its 'MABbers' through a robust fundraising campaign, inspired by efforts of UCU comrades at the University of Birmingham. The 'MABbacker' campaign called on members with no marking or assessment responsibilities to donate a portion of their monthly salary to the branch Hardship Fund, spreading the burden of the 50 per cent pay deduction imposed on boycotters by the University of Edinburgh. These acts of solidarity ensured a measure of financial security for members engaged in the MAB, whilst also ensuring those without marking to boycott could be involved in the action.

Finally, overwhelming student support played a critical role in drawing attention to the MAB at the University of Edinburgh. This support is not something we can take for granted, however, neither in terms of the students who rallied behind staff, nor the consistent organising work that members at UCUE have put in over many years. Nurturing strong and solidary relationships that cut across the usual hierarchies and barriers between staff and students has been vital to building the power of industrial action at Edinburgh. This is an activity we must continue to prioritise in future.

While the intransigence from UCEA has been disheartening, the MAB has, to the surprise of some, been a kind of inoculation against some of the most grinding disappointments of the dispute. In spite of the uncertainty, for many of us at Edinburgh there has been, at times, a real sense of optimism borne out of working collectively and developing our organising strategies together. The connections and the organising power we have built will be invaluable in the current balloting period, as a new Get The Vote Out campaign begins to rally members for a renewed mandate. Whatever the national landscape in the coming months, however, members at UCUE have proven themselves

ready and willing to undertake careful, strategic, informed, and effective organising demonstrative of our collective power to disrupt HE business-as-usual. As the dispute progresses, it is essential that the kinds of conversations on strategy and capacity-building that have begun to take place at UCUE are held at branches across the UK. UCUE is an important addition to the list of MAB successes, in spite of a less rosy national picture. What it shows is that the MAB can be an effective form of action, but only if we take seriously the painstaking work of local analysis, strategy, organising, and commitment.

## PSE: where we stand

*Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in all sectors of post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.*

*For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.*

*Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.*

*Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.*