



Waging war on staff: where next for UCU?

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When the end of the Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB) was announced on 6th September, it was finally clear that the UCU had lost the struggle of the Four Fights over pay, workload, pay gaps and casualisation. Despite fifteen days of strike action across the academic year 2022/2023, as well as the MAB lasting from 20th April to 6th September, employers represented by the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) had not budged. Despite widespread disruption to graduations in the summer, with many students either not graduating or graduating with 'derived' - ie 'guestimated' - marks, employers refused steadfastly to negotiate, especially over pay. A derisory below-inflation proposal was presented as the best possible offer the sector could afford. Having lost large amounts of salary

during the struggle, staff had to return to work and mark scripts for which they had already had pay deducted due to the MAB. In this article I will explore the causes of the defeat, and reflect on the implications for the sector as well as for UCU's potential way ahead.

Poor national UCU 'leadership'

Many union members blame the national UCU leadership for the defeat. For example, Saira Weiner argues that: 'let us get one thing straight. Members are not to blame, nor are branch reps. Some may be 'tired', but very many are angry and extremely fed up - mainly at the lack of adequate support and the inconsistent

leadership from the top of the union' (1). Leading such a diverse union, split into several factions, is no easy task, nor is the development of a coherent strategy straightforward, considering the different exam periods and teaching terms across the sector. And yet two key mistakes can be identified, in my view. First, the strategy of calling strike action for several blocs of days was bound to fail. During the academic year 2021/2022, at the University of Nottingham and other universities participating in strike action then, it had already become clear that, unlike in 2018 for example, employers were no longer concerned about the impact of strikes on students as long as they could claim that all learning objectives had been met and students could graduate as normal.

At the national level, the Higher Education Committee (HEC) had decided in the autumn of 2022 to call for indefinite strike action from February 2023 onwards. Only indefinite action would imply that students could not graduate and that employers, therefore, had to move in response and start negotiating in earnest. Nevertheless, the national leadership around the General Secretary neither communicated nor implemented this decision (2). Instead, we ended up with the same strategy as before: blocs of strike days. It all started in November 2022 with three days of walkouts and subsequent action envisaged for the Spring semester. Past experience should have made clear that these three days in one semester would not move managements. The whole campaign thus started with members losing three days' pay for ineffective, tokenistic action. In a way, the tone was set for the rest of the disastrous strike action during the past academic year.

The industrial relations environment in the UK makes it very difficult for trade unions to take action. For example, mandates for industrial action only last for six months before another ballot must be carried out. The mandate secured in a successful ballot in April this year only lasted until 30th September 2023. Hence at the UCU annual congress in May a motion was passed to carry out a ballot over the summer, as this would ensure a direct continuation of the mandate from 1st October onwards. Again, the national leadership around the General Secretary did not follow through. This was the second major mistake. When the decision on a new ballot was eventually taken, in August, it was clear that there would be a gap in mandate from 1st October until at least mid-November. Against this background, unsurprisingly, members voted against the continuation of the MAB in early September in a consultation by UCU. As employers only had to wait

until 1st October before they could enforce the marking of any outstanding exam scripts, there was little point in carrying on with the MAB until then.

Having failed to secure a continuation of the mandate, UCU then launched a new ballot in August, with action potentially able to start in mid-November. In a mirror image of the past academic year, the mandate would have only lasted from around mid-November to some time next April, neither covering a complete semester nor including the exams period in the summer of 2024. Yet again, the timing of the national strategy was completely wrong. Unsurprisingly, many members responded by not voting. The ballot was soundly lost, with only 42.59 per cent of members participating. Members had simply not been convinced that the national UCU would offer a different, more effective leadership this time round. Members had lost too much money over the course of the previous two years to vote for renewed action without an alternative strategy on the table. Of course for UCU at the national level the lost ballot is a disaster, severely weakening the union, potentially for years to come.

Missing solidarity?

Nevertheless, it would be too easy simply to blame national leadership. We as staff at universities also have to look to ourselves. Quite a few members of staff participated in all strikes and the MAB. However, many also did not. At my own workplace, the University of Nottingham, I had many discussions with colleagues giving one or the other reason why, while they were 'fully supportive' of the union, they could not participate in action 'on this occasion':

'When there is a different strategy such as a MAB, then I will definitely be part of the action.' The MAB was announced in April 2023, but that colleague then found another excuse for not taking action.

'When I am on a permanent contract, then I will join the union and go on strike.' When that colleague was made permanent he briefly joined the union but never participated in any action. By now he has left the union again.

'When I am promoted to professor, then I will become an active union member.' That colleague was promoted but to date has not been part of any action. In fact, I have met several colleagues who decided to leave UCU the moment they were promoted to professor.

These examples should not make us overlook those colleagues who have been part of the action whatever their particular circumstances. We must

not forget the many colleagues on precarious contracts who were nonetheless on every picket line. We must not overlook the colleague who, in the middle of her application for promotion to professor, stood up to management nonetheless. As such, however, there has been a lack of solidarity amongst colleagues. As Lorna Finlayson has pointed out, 'the uncomfortable truth is that academics have been complicit, and often instrumental, in bringing about the present predicament' (3).

The changes in academia over the last decades have ultimately also changed academics themselves. There is an atmosphere of competitive individualism, with many colleagues having no problems with free-riding on the benefits of UCU industrial action such as the current restoration of USS pension benefits, while having never participated in any action underpinning that success. Many colleagues are not union members for a start, and those who are often take industrial action as a pick-and-choose exercise, participating in certain aspects of the action but not others. During the recent MAB at Nottingham University it was not only non-union members who stepped in and did the marking of boycotting staff; even some UCU members stooped so low and undermined the industrial action of colleagues.

Clearly the defeat is not only the responsibility of the national UCU leadership. We as individual academics have also contributed to it.

Waging war on staff!

The national leadership made mistakes and not as many staff members as we had hoped participated in the action. Nevertheless as I see it the main reason for the defeat was management intransigence. Instead of looking for a negotiated way out of the dispute, senior university leaders up and down the country took the dispute as a test of strength, with the ultimate goal to weaken if not destroy UCU. Not only did they not care about the loss of teaching for students, even the marking of student work was no longer considered to be important. Management sacrificed students' learning and well-being on the altar of their zealous war against their own staff.

George Boyne, vice chancellor of Aberdeen University and chair of UCEA, was shocked when he learned that staff at Aberdeen would start losing pay only in June. 'Nothing deducted until the end of June?' he asked. 'I'd prefer pain along the way - we can return their money if they change their mind and

do the marking' (4). In the struggle during the academic year 2021/2022, another vice chancellor was on record as stating 'I don't care if it's bloody, as long as the blood spills within the union' (5).

At Nottingham University, management first imposed a punitive salary deduction of 50 per cent for the period of 15th May to 16th June in response to the MAB. Instead of negotiating a constructive way out of the confrontation, this was followed up in July with an even more draconian threat of 50 per cent salary deduction for the period of 20th July to 30th September. The objective was clearly to break staff morale - staff who had only a few years earlier worked around the clock to facilitate the shift to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Past efforts did not count when it came to defeating the union.

In the end, support for the MAB dwindled over the summer. Especially after graduations had taken place and the biggest pressure point on management had passed, it increasingly became clear that industrial action would not shift managements. Several requests for negotiations by the national UCU were rebuffed by UCEA. At Nottingham University, in the face of the draconian threat of 50 per cent salary deductions over more than two months, even very committed staff felt that they had no alternative but to return to marking. Thousands of pounds were paid out from national and local UCU hardship funds, but ultimately the financial sacrifices could no longer be sustained.

Nevertheless, management would be mistaken if they revelled in their victory and thought they could simply return to normality. For a start, staff morale across the sector is at rock bottom, confidence in management at an all-time low. For a sector in which everything from teaching and research to administration relies heavily on co-operation and the goodwill of staff, this is potentially catastrophic. Moreover, the reputation of the sector is damaged, perhaps beyond repair. With more and more universities on the European continent offering degree programmes in English, often without or with significantly lower tuition fees, international students would be mad to come to the UK, where their studies are most likely to be severely disrupted. With many universities depending on the income from international students' tuition fees, the dramatic implications for universities are clear.

Finally, the fundamental structural problems of the sector have not been solved. Pay since 2008 has been eroded through below-inflation agreements by 25 per cent. Gender and ethnic pay gaps remain

large, workloads enormous and casualisation is widespread across the sector. It is only a matter of time until staff unrest spills over into new periods of industrial action. Management may glow in their victory for now, but the next strike wave is just over the horizon.

It does not have to be this way. Employers could use the moment for a fundamental settlement in HE, including proper pay and an end to gender and ethnic pay gaps, extensive workloads and precarious hourly-based and/or fixed-term contracts. Considering that most university leaders are, however, either free-market ideologues or simply careerists, I do not think that there is much hope for this to happen. It is much more likely that the downward trajectory of British HE is going to continue.

Where next for UCU? At the national level, the union needs to re-group and fundamentally rethink its strategy (6). The current elections for General Secretary are a first moment to choose between different strategies. It is difficult to see how the incumbent General Secretary, Jo Grady, can survive in this role after UCU's defeat. Whatever the outcome of the elections, it is unlikely that the union will be in a position to take national level industrial action in the immediate future.

Locally, UCU branches will have to brace themselves for further management attacks against the background of a dire financial situation. There are several branches which have demonstrated that local wins are possible if the organisation is based on a strong local network of reps across the institution. The branch at Edinburgh University is an example of how well-organised branches can deliver decisive action in moments of adversity. Its organisation of the MAB in 2023 is exemplary of what is possible. 'Only by doing this hyper-local organising', Cat Wayland writes, 'were we able to build the capacity to sabotage the marking and assessment pipeline at the University of Edinburgh' (7).

My own UCU branch at Nottingham University established a strong reps network across the institution in the summer of 2019, against the background of the victory in the 2018 USS pensions struggle. On that basis, we did not only secure ballot participation rates higher than 50 per cent on a regular basis, coming top across the UK with 72.9 per cent in the ballot of April 2023, but we also obtained a significant win in a local agreement with management in June 2022 to a MAB back then.

It is a rebuilding of branches from the bottom up

which will ultimately also strengthen the national UCU for the struggles ahead!

References

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