

# Organising to beat the Trade Union Act 2016

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**T**he focus of this article is my small-medium sized branch of the University and College Union (UCU) - Heriot-Watt University UCU (HWUCU) and how we beat the new voting thresholds of the Trade Union Act 2016 (the Act). The article tells the story of how we at HWUCU achieved the highest turnout of 147 branches in the autumn 2018 pay and equality ballot. What follows is a stage-by-stage account detailing the practical steps taken by our branch, representing key information branches can use to build successful Get the Vote Out (GTVO) campaigns.

## Capturing effective GTVO practice

In one sense of the word, the aim of our GTVO campaign was straightforward: working alongside the national UCU campaign, to encourage members to vote for industrial action, and vote in numbers sufficient to comply with the threshold requirements of the Act. However, as a branch we were determined to make sure the turnout for the pensions (USS) ballot in early 2018 (76 per cent) would be repeated in some way, despite the fact that pay and equality were unlikely to engage members in the same way and in similar numbers as the USS dispute. We knew that the ballot would be tough and that we would have to work hard to get the best from the GTVO campaign. Despite this reality, it was important to carefully draw on everyday member dissatisfaction, a long-term and widespread HE sector phenomenon, often taking on a local guise, as a sub-aim of the campaign (more on that later). Furthermore, given that the USS GTVO campaign was built on a means by which voting rates could be accurately measured on a regular basis (more of that to follow as well), a further sub-aim was to consider how hard or far to push the campaign. In other words, if 50 per cent plus turnout looked likely, how far should we as a branch push our GTVO campaign beyond that point?

UCU ran a national consultative ballot in the summer of 2018, resulting in a 48 per cent turnout, with 82 per cent rejecting the employers' final pay

rise of 2 per cent, and 65 per cent indicating a willingness to take industrial action. The result provided us with two key sets of information: key balloting issues (long-term erosion of pay and lack of employers' action on workload, equality and casualisation) were understood by members, and members were clearly in support of industrial action to address such problems. The information suggested our resources should be directed towards a single matter: getting members to vote, as the matters at stake and anger towards them could to a point be assumed.

Knowing the above is fine, but there was a feeling that wider knowledge was needed to replicate the earlier successful USS GTVO campaign. As such, the following member information was factored into our GTVO campaign. HWUCU members were characterised as follows:

- Very busy, especially at the start of the new academic year when the ballot would be taking place
- Fragmented and based largely in individual offices - no or limited common areas
- Based in multiple and sprawling buildings on multiple campuses
- Often working remotely
- Undertaking high levels of domestic and overseas travel
- Highly engaged / dedicated to job / strong occupational identity (generally stronger than trade union identity)
- More widely disgruntled / relatively engaged in UCU / trade union matters
- Distracted by other UCU ballots / surveys
- Many new members who had limited experience of statutory ballots
- Work outside of regular Monday-Friday, 9-5 regime
- Best contactable by email, phone or via internal mail (social media low reach and 'door knocking' high resource intensive)

Such knowledge was critical for two reasons: we had identified key barriers to voting and we could use this information to tailor our GTVO campaign to

maximise voter turnout.

The third and final key step before launching our GTVO campaign involved an assessment of branch resources. GTVO is in principle a mobilisation strategy based on longer-term branch-level organising, ie as a branch we were aiming to build on day-to-day and wider organising to promote as widely and effectively as possible to members the importance of voting in ballots. Given the day-to-day circumstances of our members (see above), we needed to make the most of our resources to maximise turnout. The following resources were noted pre-campaign, which HWUCU could draw upon to help maximise turnout in a ballot:

- Membership lists (mostly up-to-date) - e.g. individual work/private emails and building/campus location
- Closed all members' emailing system
- Internal telephone/voicemail numbers (gathered during last campaign)
- Details of where main staff mailrooms were located (gathered during last campaign)
- An experienced branch activist who designed and ran the USS GTVO campaign
- A small number of dedicated branch activists, including a closed all branch committee mailing system
- Branch social media feeds, e.g. Twitter and Facebook.

The resources were mapped on to our knowledge and campaign as follows. First, we had three universal communication methods available to assist in the overcoming of barriers identified above. Second, although less of a priority in terms of engaging the majority of members, social media represented a key means by which we could draw on wider UCU activist ideas and creativity to vary GTVO messages, key to keeping the pay/equality message fresh during a seven-week campaign. Three, we could draw upon an earlier successful GTVO campaign, as well as, if need be, a range of activists who could bolster GTVO campaigning, should voter turnout start to level out at sub-Act thresholds.

Our GTVO campaign had three stages. First, 'pre-GTVO' consisted of a range of strategies, including all-member emails and official posters, to make members aware of the upcoming ballot. Second, the campaign took the form of a wide range of communications with members, involving individual and general email messages, many with attachments and messages aimed at refreshing and revitalising the message of needing to vote, bespoke business cards (week 3) and postcards (week 6) distributed through staff mailrooms, and short reminder voicemails in week 5 of the campaign,

strategically timed on the Sunday to capture the attention of members working at weekends and/or a message at the top of the list of things to do first thing Monday morning. Third, 'post-GTVO' involved follow-up email communications thanking members for participating, conveying the ballot result and the implications, and surveying why members did not vote.

The campaign was also informed by four key tenets, all feeding into raising awareness and acting as multiple ways and means by which members could be motivated / reminded to vote:

**Humour** - most communications contained a small sprinkling of humour (eg use of emoticons and mild satire), principally to sustain the counterculture of trade union identity and convey serious messages in a palatable manner, over a lengthy balloting window.

**Density** of communications - by using several ways to communicate, it increased chances of appealing to as many members as possible, finding a means most suited to member preferences, and adding variety in terms of how members received important information. A danger is of over-communication, yet anecdotally at least members reported very positively on being reminded and encouraged to vote.

**Vote counting** - from week 3 of the campaign members were encouraged to reply to individual emails simply stating 'yes' or 'y' when they had voted. Voting members received no more individual emails on voting. More importantly, live information on voting rates was gathered and fed into a planned, yet evolving, campaign.

**Localising / revitalising the framing of grievances** - throughout the campaign communications in one sense remained true to the official UCU line, but in another, where possible, attempts were made to localise and revitalise the framing of the official grievance, e.g. referring to current news articles on pay and inflation, and how the university was running a campaign to inform students of how comparatively well they can expect to be paid after graduating.

The journey to a 64 per cent turnout was far from easy. Turnout, for example, appeared to plateau at just over 30 per cent about three weeks into the campaign. At this point, the variation and intensity of communications was ramped up. From week 3, a total of eight emails, a postcard, a business card and a voicemail were sent to each member. The 50 per cent turnout required by the Act was achieved midway through week 5 of a 7-week campaign. The

campaign was wound down with nearly a week to go as a turnout of 60 per cent was expected. A higher turnout was achievable, as it would have been possible at that point to mobilise all available activists to deploy 'phone banking' or 'door knocking' techniques. Overall, it is important to note how the campaign was done almost entirely on a remote basis, suggesting that the sprawling and multi-location nature of educational institutions, as well as the busy working and non-working lives of our members, need not be a barrier when it comes to beating the Act.

### Summary

This article was set up to take readers through our example of successful GTVO campaigning and effectively try and dispel any sense that such success is not possible for some branches. Our aim was not to set down a precise blueprint for other branches to follow. Instead, the article was more about demonstrating that successful GTVO campaigning is not beyond the capacity of any branch and with a little guidance and inspiration every branch can come up with its own winning formula.

While the wider ballot result was very disappointing to our branch committee and wider membership, the exercise, primarily built on a successful campaign earlier in the year, led to a range of key lessons being learnt. These are summarised as follows:

**Branch local bargaining capacity was increased**, i.e. in the event of local issues arising, such as compulsory redundancies, management are probably more likely to engage in early negotiations on such matters, rather than see if the local branch can organise industrial action before entering more meaningful negotiations. Members very much appreciated the time and trouble taken to remind / motivate them to vote - **fostering further and deeper member engagement in key issues.**

**The branch developed a bespoke GTVO model** that could be used, as well as further developed, when required. Aside from the four tenets outlined above, as well as ongoing day-to-day organising, our GTVO model recognises how balloting success rests upon mobilising 30-40 per cent of our members, who are angry and frustrated, yet, for a range of complex reasons, struggle to vote without ongoing and timely reminders.

### Acknowledgements

The author would acknowledge how [Matt Waddup's GTVO guide](#) was key to our success at HWUCU. Thanks also go to contributors to the UCU activists email list, in particular Carlo Morelli, who suggested counting votes as a way to run an effective GTVO campaign.

## Where we stand:

*Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in 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.*