

# FIGHTING ON PAY WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?



**U**CU members have put up a brilliant fight on pay. This was in the face of the ineptitude of the current majority of the Higher Education Committee (HEC) in not following through on the decisions of our annual conference and the hostile and aggressive tactics of employers.

The 2 per cent offer for next year would not have been achieved without industrial action this year - and it does break through the 1 per cent public sector pay freeze. This is a significant achievement. However, the 1 per cent imposed this year represents another 2 per cent cut in real incomes, and the 2 per cent for next year is also below the current RPI at 2.5 per cent. We are still a long way from achieving the catch-up we fought for. Therefore we must learn the lessons of this year's campaign and develop a strategy to fight on pay for next year.

## The ballot result

Members voted by 83.7 percent to 16.3 percent to accept the 2 percent pay offer. Some activists may be disappointed by such a large vote for acceptance, but this outcome is not surprising under the circumstances:

- \* The decision by the majority on the Higher Education Committee (HEC) to postpone the marking boycott in January

when it could have been a sharp and effective tool;

- \* The complete absence of an industrial action strategy, and a reliance on the courts, to counteract the intimidatory threats made by many employers to deduct 100 per cent of pay for partial performance;
- \* The failure of the HEC to recommend rejection, despite all recognising the offer fell far short of our demands.

All combined to undermine the confidence of members to reject the offer. Members were left in an invidious position in deciding whether to vote for continuing with a poorly led dispute or accepting a poor deal. However, in spite of this, it was right that branch activists argued for rejection and 4,902 members were prepared to face down the employers' draconian threats even in the absence of a national lead.

## The price for backing off in January

The ballot outcome is the price paid for the disastrous decision by the same majority group on the HEC to postpone the marking boycott in January and the escalation from single day strikes to a programme of regional multi-day strikes. Many members and activists were confused, angry and frustrated that the momentum of the Autumn strikes was lost

and our carefully considered strategy of escalation to our most powerful weapon was dumped in favour of three two-hour strikes.

These had a very mixed and uneven success. In some places, they mobilised some members who had previously not been involved in picketing, but as a whole they represented a significant retreat for UCU. This hesitation and retreat gave the employers confidence that the dispute could be seen off. It enabled them to regroup and prepare their counter moves. It allowed a number of employers to test their strategy of 100 per cent pay deductions for 'partial performance' and to note the failure of the union nationally to adequately respond to this.

## A lack of leadership

After six sets of strike action, with some institutions deducting a full day's pay for each of the two-hour stoppages, members expected some leadership from the people that they elected to the HEC. However, in April, the majority of the HEC voted against recommending rejection of the pay offer and agreed that the argument should be put in a 'neutral' way. When trade union leaderships and national committees have, in the past, given a clear lead to members they have received overwhelming support. In addition, the failure of the UCU to give a national

response to the employers' threat of 100 percent pay dockings for partial performance left many members hesitant and fearful of entering the marking boycott - significantly at a time when many had completed teaching for the academic year.

A robust response and a strategy for countering the employers' offensive would have given members much more confidence that we could face down that threat. Such a robust response would have included national industrial action and solidarity actions between institutions.

## **Where do we go from here?**

Wage cuts and falling living standards remain a real issue for our members – some lower paid members are facing real hardship. The dispute has strengthened many local branches, in terms of numbers and activity. New and younger activists have got involved. Many of our members are angry and smarting from the threats from employers, which have exposed the iron fist in the velvet glove.

This is a starting point for organising to win real catch-up. Branch meetings need to be held to discuss how we build a campaign for fair pay and the sort of action that will be effective. We need to argue that future campaigns are kept under the democratic control of members and not derailed by the HEC. We need to ensure that all aspects of our claim - such as an end to casualisation, zero-hour contracts, and the gender pay-gap, are adequately highlighted

and vigorously pursued (note the UCU Anti-Casualisation Day of Action on 7th May). Ballots and recommendations in national campaigns must be decided by special Higher Education Sector conferences.

## **The wider fight against pay cuts and austerity**

It is unfortunate that our dispute has ended just as other groups of workers are preparing to fight over pay. We know that these fights can be won. Crown Post Office staff in the CWU have been offered 7.9 per cent over three years, 3.9 per cent for this year (after 14 days of strike). Unison local government have announced a strike ballot after members voted 70 percent to reject their pay offer in a consultation and the NUT conference voted to strike in the week of 23rd May and plan more action in the autumn.

The TUC are organising a demonstration demanding fair pay in October. This is the context in which we should begin a new campaign for catch-up for 2015/2016. We must make sure that our branches link up with and offer solidarity to unions taking action. Where possible, we must argue for linking up and joint activity with other groups of workers in education and across the public sector. We can start by mobilising our members for the People's Assembly protests on 21st June.

## **Building networks of UCU activists**

It is doubtful that there would even have been a pay campaign without UCU Left activists elected as negotiators or to the

HEC. UCU Left activists threw themselves into delivering the strike action in the branches and work-to-contract. Liz Lawrence, current President Elect played a key role in arguing that conference policy was carried through. This demonstrates the importance of electing national officers committed to the democratic processes of the union. We currently have an opportunity to elect Lesley Kane in the Vice-President election. She is standing on a platform of accountability and carrying out the actions and strategies determined by the members. The election is open until the 21 May and her blog can be found at [lesleykane4vp.wordpress.com](http://lesleykane4vp.wordpress.com).

However, electing candidates sympathetic to the policies that the UCU Left argues for, is not enough in itself. To prevent a repeat of the debacle this time around we must build strong and vibrant branches linked to networks of activists in branches, cities and regions.

**The current pay dispute may be over, but it is clear that employers are on the offensive – the need to be organised and fight back has never been greater. The current dispute by further education lecturers at Lambeth College who voted for indefinite strike action shows that there is a willingness to fight.**

**The UCU has called a national solidarity demonstration in support of Lambeth on 17th May and we should ensure that we build support for it in our own branches.**

# **When we fight we can win!**

**Join online at [www.uculeft.org](http://www.uculeft.org) / Twitter: [@uculeft](https://twitter.com/uculeft)**