

Vote for action on HE Pay

By Liz Lawrence, UCU Vice President

The importance of the consultative ballot on the pay offer

UCU members in the HE Sector are currently being balloted on whether to accept the employers' final offer of 1% or reject and move to a statutory ballot for industrial action. The ballot closes at noon on 4th September. It is important to encourage all members to vote in this ballot. HE negotiators are meeting after the ballot closes and need to know what action members want the union to take. A strong vote to reject and to be balloted for industrial action will send a signal that UCU members have had enough of pay rises well below inflation and falls in living standards. I appreciate all the work that union activists are doing to get the vote out.

The wider context

The ballot is taking place in a social context in which the society we live in is rapidly becoming more unequal. The Government effectively has an incomes policy for public sector workers and for people on benefits. This policy states that pay and benefits (except for pensions *at present*) will only rise by 1% even though the rate of inflation is much higher. A recent report by Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty reported that half a million people are now depending on food banks. Many people are living in poverty because of low wages, under-employment (because not enough full-time jobs are available) or cuts in benefits. How much more social injustice will people tolerate?

Defence of national bargaining

As a national negotiator one point I would like to emphasise is how little real collective bargaining has taken place in New JNCHES in recent years. What happened in this year's pay round was that the employers took four meetings to get to a pay offer of 1%. Such is the level of unresponsiveness to the content of the joint trade union claim, one feels they could have made this offer at the first meeting, even before we submitted the claim. We have subsequently had two meetings of the New JNCHES Disputes Procedure, which have made no further progress. In terms of the pay equality claim all the employers can offer is working parties and research, not even in many cases any firm recommendations to their subscribers.

When JNCHES was originally formed in 2001 it inherited a wide range of agreements from predecessor negotiating bodies and was designed to provide comprehensive collective bargaining machinery for the HE Sector. In recent years all the employers have been willing to negotiate over is an annual percentage pay increase. Your negotiators regularly face the employer mantra 'We have no mandate from our subscribers to negotiate with you over that matter'.

I believe the majority of UCU members in HE want national bargaining and they want national bargaining that delivers meaningful and worthwhile settlements. If, year after year we get pay rises well below inflation, there are a number of adverse consequences likely for the HE sector. These include:

- More geographically mobile staff regularly changing jobs as their only means of getting a pay rise;
- Emergence of more market supplements, performance-related pay and honoraria as means for employers to retain staff whose skills are in scarce supply;
- Increase in the number and proportion of posts created above nationally negotiated salary scales and so outside collective bargaining;
- Increasing decline in staff morale;
- Younger staff especially wondering whether to move out of Higher Education to another sector of employment.

Why we should reject the employers' final offer of 1%

A pay award of 1% is in real terms a pay cut when inflation is much higher. Even according to CPI inflation was 2.9% in June 2013. Why should UCU members and other trade unionists in HE take a pay cut when many of us are working harder than ever to meet managerially-imposed targets around REF and NSS? If we keep on accepting pay awards below inflation it will become a persistent pattern, in which the employers substantially reduce the share of universities' incomes which goes on staff pay.

We should be mindful too of the impact of low pay awards on pensions. A series of low annual awards impacts negatively on pension for those in final salary schemes, who retire at the 'wrong' time. For those on CARE schemes, the damage to the pension from low awards is permanent, since the salary on which some years of final pension are calculated is low. Moreover many of our members are feeling the financial pressure of increased pension contributions for no extra benefits.

I recognise that UCU members think carefully about the decision to reject a pay offer and take industrial action. We should be clear that it is not only our members who are affected by the pay pressures. Many other groups of low-paid workers in the sector are also affected. The employers have refused to move on the Living Wage part of the claim and address low pay by removing the lowest two points of the pay spine. This lays the basis for the prospect of joint union action over pay. UNISON members have already voted in their consultative ballot to reject the 1% award.

We need to take industrial action to win a better pay offer

If a better deal could have been achieved by negotiation alone, this would have already happened. It is clear that reasoned argument and negotiating eloquence will not deliver an acceptable pay award. It is only through industrial action that there is a prospect of getting the employers back to the negotiating table with a decent offer. All UCU negotiators, elected and full-time, are competent negotiators, who do not put an offer to members until we are sure it is the final offer. We would not ask you to contemplate industrial action, if there were another way of achieving a decent pay award. It really is time for action on pay.

September meetings

UCU is holding meetings on the pay campaign for branch representatives in September. These meetings are:

Tuesday 10 th September	Birmingham
Wednesday 11 th September	Manchester
Thursday 12 th September	London
Friday 13 th September	Edinburgh

It is important that all branches and local associations are represented at these meetings. These will be an important opportunity to discuss the way forward in the pay campaign and will contribute to shaping the direction of the campaign.