

Making the Work to Contract as Strong and Collective as Possible

Working to Contract can be an effective sanction

For UCU members in Higher Education ASOS (action short of a strike) in the form of working to contract starts on Friday 1st November. There is information on the national UCU website about what working to contract means. This contains useful information on legal and contractual aspects. <http://www.ucu.org.uk/workingtocontract>

Working to contract can be a strong sanction if well organised. Universities often depend on staff working unpaid overtime and going the extra marathon to deliver on targets for the REF and NSS. It's time to withdraw goodwill. What goodwill are our employers showing us by expecting us to take pay rises below inflation for five years in a row? None whatsoever.

We should dismiss any suggestion that working to contract is 'tokenistic' or impossible to operate because our contracts are professional and sometimes 'open-ended'. If all UCU members seriously worked to contract universities would come to a halt and the employers would see the need to come back to the bargaining table with a decent pay offer. Working to contract is also important in helping members regain work/life balance. It can empower members to regain control over workloads.

The link between Strikes and Working to Contract

Some members think one-day strikes are ineffective because staff make up the work in the next few days. This is why it is important to think about how strike action and working to contract interact. The point about working to contract is that members do not put in extra hours to make up work lost on strike days. The strike is stronger if supported by strict working to contract. If we need to take further strike action after 31st October this action will be more effective if we have been working to contract between strike days. It's like running down supplies in a factory with an overtime ban before going on strike.

It's easier to say no collectively

Often university staff face unreasonable work pressures and demands to work beyond the contract. All experiences of union organising around workload protection show that it is easier to say no collectively than individually. This is why the work to contract needs to be organised by regions, branches and departmental union reps. We must not let individual members become isolated or come under bullying from managers. Union members in work groups (teams, subject groups, departments etc.) should meet and discuss what work they are not going to do as a result of working to contract. This involves sharing knowledge of the contract and identifying which duties are outside the contract or beyond contractual limits.

What Branches can do

Branches should hold regular meetings for members during the dispute. The work to contract should be a standing item on the agenda. Branch committees should meet weekly to see how the work to contract is progressing. Branches can also organise the following:

- Send a leaflet or message out to members in your branch reminding them of the terms of their contract;
- Encourage members to check with a branch officer or rep if they are unsure whether a particular activity falls within their contract, before agreeing to do it;
- Encourage members to book their holidays and take them (including a decent break at the end of term);
- Encourage members not to take work home at evenings and weekends;
- Where members have defined working hours in their contract, encourage them to log their hours and then ask their manager which work should be prioritised if they cannot do it all;

- Encourage members to use the UCU workload calculator <http://www.ucu.org.uk/workload>
- Where members have marking duties this term, the marking should be done within normal working hours, not additionally at evenings or weekends;
- Hold workplace briefing meetings on the contract (these can be done on a site or department basis as well as whole branch meetings);
- Identify an officer to respond to members' queries about working to contract.
- Maintain a dialogue with the Students' Union and other unions about the effects of the work to contract.

Hourly paid and fractional staff

Hourly paid and fractional staff are only paid for working part of the week. Too often these colleagues come under pressure to work all week, in terms of expectations to answer emails from students and managers, plus the time demands of teaching preparation and marking. This is exploitation and there is no reason they should put up with it. Full-time staff should support colleagues who are HPLs or on fractional contracts by not expecting them to work beyond the hours they are paid for. HPLs and staff on fractional contracts can support the work to contract by making it clear to managers, colleagues and students that they are only working on the days they are paid for working.

Membership education

Working to contract should be used to educate members about their contracts and employment rights. Members should meet and check their work plans to see if they comply with the contract and are reasonable. Briefing meetings on the contract by branch reps can have a useful empowering role. It also helps members to understand that if they cannot do everything they are being asked to do the problem is simply excessive demands, not individual capability as some managers will try to portray it.

The role of Regions

Regions have an important role in building and consolidating the work to contract. Regional email networks can be used to publicise how the work to contract is having an impact. They can also be a useful source of advice and solidarity.

Regional HE Sector Committees should organise discussion and educational meetings on contracts and workload protection. Invite an NEC member to speak on the issue.

Union recruitment

The work to contract is an important opportunity for union recruitment. Non-union members should ask themselves why they are working all hours when union members are working their contractual hours. They may find managers try to pass on to them work which union members have declined to do. The demonstration of better work/life balance and reduced stress levels as a result of working to contract is a good advertisement for joining the union. Union members should talk to non-members about the dispute and workload issues and why they should join the union and work to contract.

Making the work to contract visible

If some work tasks are not being done because of the work to contract, it is important to make this visible, so that university employers feel the pressure. We want employers to tell UCEA (Universities and Colleges Employers Association) to make a better pay offer.

Messages can be added to email signatures, such as:

'I am a UCU member and am working to contract as a result of a trade dispute over the 2013 pay award. Therefore replies to email messages may take longer than usual'.