

Fighting two disputes together unites our sector

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At UCU Congress in 2019 we proposed running the ballots for our two disputes together and combining our strike action for both disputes as a means to maximise the unity of our union.

However, there is still disquiet in some parts of our union about the strategy of running the USS dispute and the pay and equality dispute concurrently.

As the proposers of the motion to the HEC which committed the union to this strategy, we feel this strategy has been spectacularly successful. Here's why.

Fighting over pay

In the first place, if we had not proposed this strategy there would have been no fight over the pay claim this year.

The USS dispute would have taken precedence, and once that had run its course there would have been no time, resources or fighting spirit left for a pay fight. Nothing on pay equality, or casualisation or workloads.

That would also have meant another year of the post-92 membership watching a major fight from the sidelines and those in pre-92s with little or no benefits in USS, tending to confirm the view of many that only a section of the membership in the 'old' universities are the union's priority.

It would also have allowed pre-92 employers to claw back concessions over pensions with stagnant pay, casualisation and excessive workloads.

Criticism of the 'two disputes in one' strategy is not prevalent among post-92 activists or on pre-92 picket lines.

Staff everywhere are demanding pay equality, securing casualised members' rights, and curbing high workloads.



Picketing outside the Institute of Education in central London

Maximising the ballot results

We were told that balloting over two legally distinct disputes would cause confusion among pre-92 members, to the detriment of both. In fact, the reverse was the case. Our view that having the two ballot papers arrive in one envelope would enhance the votes in each was spectacularly confirmed.

In pre-92, branches faced two problems in crossing the Tory 50% threshold compared to the original USS dispute:

- 1) The union had grown by 50% during the strike.
- 2) The USS dispute is more complicated this time around – we are not facing the imposition of 100% Defined Contribution.

But these factors were more than compensated for by the union's highest results over pay in its history.

The strategy has brought the best organised post-92 branches into serious

national action for the first time, uniting the sector at precisely the moment that marketisation threatens to pull it apart.

One set of bosses

Some doubters have continued to argue that it is impossible to resolve two disputes simultaneously when they involve two different groups of employers.

What incentive is there, they ask, for one group of employers to offer concessions if industrial action over the other dispute will continue?

But we should not get sidetracked by the acronyms UUK or UCEA. Behind each of them lie the university managements, our bosses. They are separate in name only. UUK simply represents a subset of the total represented by UCEA.

There was no clearer demonstration of that when UUK and UCEA issued a joint open letter on both disputes last week.

This piece of propaganda was concrete proof that behind the legal framing that stipulates that there are two distinct groups of employers, in reality we are fighting our bosses as a whole.

They are determined to impose the logic of marketisation on us, and we are fighting to resist its effects on our pensions, pay, job security, equality, and workloads.

Indeed the quickest route to resolving both disputes would be if the USS employers (UUK) were to concede the principle that USS should not be valued as if it were necessary to 'de-risk' the scheme. That would immediately release 3.1% of salary costs in those institutions that could be spent towards a settlement on the other issues.

The simple fact is that if our action is strong enough, we can bring our employers to their knees over all these issues.

But that will require maximum unity on our side, a commitment to bring more branches into the action by rebalancing them promptly, and a determination to launch a second wave of hard-hitting action next term.

UCU Left candidates in the NEC elections. Ballot opens 31 January 2020

Early next year there are elections for trustees, national officer and the national executive committee

We recommend a vote for Margot Hill for vice president from the further education sector (all UCU members can vote for this position).

Find the full list of UCU Left candidates for NEC and trustees at uculeft.org