

#UCUstrikesback - reflections from the picket line

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Introduction

These reflections do not claim any great insight into the extraordinary strikes that have taken place in the English higher education sector over more than two years, but rather they are offered as the personal observations and insights of someone who, like many others, has been involved in the industrial action from the outset and who has worked to deliver the most effective action possible. I do not claim to write as a 'union activist' in any narrow sense but rather as someone 'active in the union' - a branch officer who has tried hard over the last two years, working with many others, to build the movement in my institution that can contribute to the sector wide collective action that is required to bring about the changes in working conditions that those who work in the sector desperately need. My views reflect my own perceptions of my own experience working on the ground in my own branch. I am obviously writing about UCU's higher education (HE) strikes, and I write as a member of an HE branch. I hope however that the issues I raise have wider relevance in UCU, and that the longer term issues I highlight have significance beyond my own immediate experience.

I offer these reflections as a contribution to encouraging open and honest debate among union members about what has been achieved in the last two years, what might have been done differently, and most importantly, what are the longer term implications for the union's future activity. The approach is intentionally 'broad brush' and seeks to avoid getting too embroiled in the minutiae of the negotiations with employers or the small detail of union decisions. I am intentionally 'thinking aloud'. Some of my approach is critical - but I am not

criticising. I take it as self-evident that decisions about industrial action are always fine judgements. That there often isn't consensus is because the issues are necessarily complex and there is obviously no certainty about outcomes. Such situations can only be approached by a willingness to be self-critical and to take collective responsibility for setbacks as well as successes.

2018 and USS - the transformation of UCU?

I have heard it said that the 2018 USS strikes have assumed some sort of mythologised status in the history of UCU, with the implication that somehow things weren't ever quite as they are now presented. I do not agree with that assessment. The events of Winter/Spring 2018, when UCU members in many pre-1992 universities (1) undertook 14 days of strike action sequenced over 4 weeks, were nothing short of extraordinary. Having been involved in past strike action in both the school sector and HE I am not sure I can recall a situation where action started so strongly and got appreciably stronger as the action progressed. The energy and creativity on picket lines, amplified and connected across campuses by social media, was a revelation. Part of that energy was fuelled by strong student support, while picket lines attracted many who had not previously seen the union as the vehicle for their grievances. As that first wave of strike action came to an end I wrote at the time:

Whatever the outcomes, there can be no return to 'before the strike' - that time has gone and things have changed. Above all,

large numbers of university workers have (re-) learned the importance of democracy in our lives and the power of collective action. When unions provide this democratic space to members and use their collective voice to articulate members' aspirations then union renewal follows - and it is through vibrant, inclusive and collective union organisation that we can both defend our working conditions and reclaim the idea of the university (2).

I still think the strikes of early 2018 were a turning point in UK higher education and a moment when fundamental questions about the nature, purpose and future direction of the university were all starkly posed. However, it is important to remember that the 2018 'moment' was created by an extraordinary situation in which the employer representatives completely mis-judged their ability to attack and dismantle the pension scheme in the pre-1992 universities. In summary, the dramatic changes to the USS pension scheme would cut deep and impact widely. They provided the union with a (largely unanticipated) opportunity to unite virtually all the union's pre-1992 membership by mobilising around the anger that the pension changes generated. It is to the union's credit that it was able to capitalise on that moment and organise the most extraordinary collective action that had been seen in the education sector since the teachers' industrial action of the mid-1980s.

Of course it was always clear that the outcome of the 2018 USS action was a compromise (nothing intrinsically wrong with that tactically), and that the issues would need to be revisited at a point in the future. What was less clear was the likely longer term impact of the 2018 experience on union organisation. In my own branch we clearly benefitted from the substantial increase in membership that had accompanied the dispute, and we continue to benefit from the influx of new activists, some of whom now populate key positions on the branch committee and in branch campaigns. However, what was equally apparent was the ease with which we returned to our previous working lives and the individualised work cultures that higher education encourages. On the picket lines we were convinced that our new found collective identity would somehow continue in our post-picket lives. This optimism was misplaced and very quickly the pressures of performativity drove us back to our keyboards and our closed office doors. It should remind us that collective cultures in our workplaces don't just happen, but must be consciously created and constantly re-created. That requires genuine

workplace organisation in the locations where employees do their work - in their Schools and Departments.

2019 - USS revisited plus 'four fights'

Perhaps predictably the hoped-for outcome from the 2018 compromise did not materialise and therefore in 2019 the union found itself needing to mobilise members once more in a campaign of further industrial action in order to achieve its objectives. However for this 'second wave' of industrial action the decision was taken to broaden the issues on which the union was seeking to challenge the employers. Participants in the original pensions dispute (the pre-1992 universities) were to be balloted on this issue, but the whole of the higher education sector was also to be balloted on a range of other issues - pay, casualisation, workload and pay inequalities. This sector-wide campaign (ie pre and post 1992 universities) was referred to as the 'four fights' dispute. As with the first wave of strike action the ballots (3) were conducted on an institution by institution basis.

There was clearly some merit in rolling the 'four fights' dispute in with the USS dispute. This expanded the dispute across the whole of the HE sector, while it also highlighted many issues that had proven to be significant mobilisers in the 2018 disputes (even though the focus in 2018 was solely on pensions). Anyone involved in those disputes saw first-hand how issues such as workload and casualisation often emerged as the core grievances of those taking action. In this sense the 'four fights' dispute spoke to the much more fundamental questions about what it means to work in a modern university that had been raised by the USS strike, but which could not be addressed by that dispute alone. Taken together, the issues raised through both disputes posed stark questions about the exploitative nature of the neoliberal university and the ways in which that exploitation reinforces all the fundamental hierarchies and cleavages of the wider labour market.

However what was also clear was that the much more ambitious bargaining agenda represented by the two disputes opened up the possibility of destabilising the unity that had been a feature of the 2018 pensions strike. By definition not all institutions were engaged in the same campaigns, as post-1992s were not part of the on-going pensions dispute. Later outcomes from the strike ballots served to highlight some of these tensions with significant differences in the ballot results

between branches in the pre- and post-1992 universities (broadly 2/3 of the pre-1992 branches met the thresholds, while only 1/3 of the more numerous post-1992s achieved the same target). The, understandable, decision to then re-ballot several branches who had not met the 50 per cent threshold initially further added to the complexity, resulting in branches involved in different campaigns (either two, one or none - depending on sector and ballot outcomes) but also working to different timetables (depending on whether branches achieved the threshold in the first or second wave of ballots). While (anti) trade union legislation can make the decision to ballot on an institution by institution basis a logical one it is not without its consequences and costs.

The 'four fights' dispute also introduced additional complexities as there had been little preparation for this campaign among members. While the headline issues, such as casualisation and workload, clearly resonated with members it was simultaneously less clear what the union's demands were. Put very simply, what was the union asking for and what would winning 'look like'? Moreover, how did one dispute relate to the other and what might the consequences be of securing a significant breakthrough in one dispute, but not the other? Typically, industrial dispute resolution involves the trading-off of some demands against others but how might this work when the bargaining agenda ranges over two separate disputes (and the membership taking action in the separate disputes may overlap but is different)? In raising these points I'm not taking a position on the approaches adopted, but rather making the case that the questions raised here needed to be discussed and debated collectively much more than they were.

Lack of clarity on these issues emerged very early when our branch committee met to plan our 'Get the Vote Out' (GTVO) campaign and had to spend some considerable time working out what the union's demands were, and a simple way of framing them for the purposes of communicating to members. Much later, at a well-attended branch meeting just before the February/March strikes, some members were still asking what the union's demands were and what might a settlement look like. Although communications improved considerably during the strikes, and were helped enormously by the General Secretary's accessibility at picket lines and through email, it always felt like the disputes' objectives were ones members were being asked to uncritically support, rather than ones they felt they understood and owned. This inevitably impacted on member commitment.

In my branch we devoted enormous effort to our GTVO campaign. For some time we have put considerable work into developing our network of 'workplace representatives' (the choice of language is deliberate - we do not call our reps 'departmental contacts' because we hope they will act as more than 'contacts') and we put these people at the centre of our GTVO campaign. In Summer 2019 we had organised a half day training and planning event which had been attended by 17 workplace representatives and the WhatsApp group we formed from that provided an easy and efficient way for all of us to keep in touch. It was this network of UCU members who were able to do the vital 'on the ground' face to face work that was pivotal to University of Nottingham branch exceeding the 50+ per cent threshold on both ballots (ie pensions and 'four fights').

Shortly after the ballot results were announced the union's Higher Education Committee called for eight days of continuous strike action during the end of November/beginning of December. I have already maintained that making such decisions is difficult as the arguments setting one option against another are inevitably complex and finely balanced. My concern is less with the actual decision and more with the way it was made. At the time the call for eight days of action took pretty much everyone, activists as well as members, by surprise. The commitment being asked for from members was substantial (which many could see would impact directly on their January pay packet - the most eagerly awaited pay day of the year) and I am not sure the groundwork had been done to prepare members for that. As it was, organising for the November/December strikes always felt somewhat reactive and, although we felt we 'delivered', our strikes in 2019 did not capture the same level of energy and momentum that we had experienced in 2018. That may not have been the experience of other branches, but it is my own assessment of my own branch's experience. The real problem was that having not been able to adequately prepare members for the November/December action we used up a considerable amount of member goodwill in delivering what we did. We did deliver - but many were not convinced of the efficacy of the action and/or were deeply concerned about the financial impact of the strikes. This failure to adequately engage with members prior to the November/December action in turn impacted the further development of the campaign.

Meeting immediately after the November/December strikes the union held a special Higher Education

Sector Conference to determine the next stages of the USS dispute (because constitutionally the conference had originally only been called to discuss the pensions dispute) and that conference requested the union to commit to 14 more days of strikes, across four weeks, in February and March - a recommendation that was validated by the HEC on 31 January. HEC also decided that these strike days would be for both disputes, that is, pensions and 'four fights'. The conference also determined that if there had been no breakthrough at the end of the strike period then the union would immediately commence a re-ballot for further action (as required by legislation).

In my branch we knew we would have to work extremely hard to deliver the next wave of strike action and we committed to put the maximum effort into securing member support. This was because, first, we knew that members would require more convincing to support the action, and second, because delivering the action would maximise our chances of securing a breakthrough and thereby, crucially, avoiding the need for a re-ballot. Once again we put our network of workplace representatives at the heart of our GTVO campaign. At a meeting for workplace reps called to mobilise for the strike action over 30 people attended. At the meeting we were able to make clear to reps their key role in winning the support of members 'on the ground' for the next wave of action, while the meeting also fizzed with ideas about how we could make union membership more visible prior to the strike as we built a sense of collective solidarity among our colleagues (my personal favourite was an A4 poster announcing 'I'm striking' which workplace reps distributed and which members could post on their office door).

Having this contact with workplace reps, and a much expanded WhatsApp group, allowed us to generate much better intelligence about member reactions to the next wave of strikes. The group made it very easy for people to quickly and easily share successes, but also problems. Reps were able to share what they were doing and we were also able to support and advise reps who were encountering some push back on the action. I knew the strategy was working when one rep ended an email '*I will continue to have as many conversations with colleagues as possible.*' This was always going to be what was necessary to deliver any ballot result (and re-ballot), but also to deliver the action itself.

As in November/December, so too in February/March we delivered the action. As with all previous action there were extraordinarily inspirational

moments. Many of these were extraordinary precisely because they were ordinary and everyday - fantastic colleagues putting inordinate amounts of work in to get picket lines set up and organised, every single day. But particular highlights were the strike social (with General Secretary Jo Grady speaking plus speakers from the Nottingham College FE strike and the National Education Union Sixth Form College strike), the many teach-outs and the mass picket on International Women's Day (4).

I would also highlight the branch meeting we held on the Monday of the final full week of action when the branch debated a motion that raised questions about the next phase of the dispute should there be no breakthrough. The issues behind the motion had already been debated within the branch committee and in the workplace reps WhatsApp group. The debate centred on the efficacy of proceeding immediately to a re-ballot at the end of the action without a wider debate among members about what the next stages of the action should be. The motion also anticipated the potential impact of the emerging coronavirus pandemic on the higher education sector and therefore our disputes. The wider concern was that without that debate, and a greater sense of ownership of the dispute by the members, it would not prove possible to win the necessary support to exceed 50 per cent in the re-ballot. What the debate surfaced was that in the 2019 and 2020 strikes several members felt that a disconnect had opened up between the Higher Education Committee and members in branches and that grassroots members needed to be placed back at the centre of the dispute, as they felt had happened as the strikes developed in 2018. Debating such a motion at a meeting with over 100 members in the outdoors in a public park was never going to be straightforward but members seemed keen to address the issues while recognising they were difficult. The motion, which was forwarded to Higher Education Committee, was passed 88 votes for and 7 against. As we put our hands in the air it reminded me of two years previously when, in the exact same spot, the branch held a mass meeting and rejected a possible compromise in the USS dispute. In much the same way, I felt it was an important moment when members' voices genuinely emerged at a crucial moment in the dispute.

Even at that moment, as the potential impact of the coronavirus was becoming clearer, we had little idea quite how quickly developments would unfold. The branch met on Monday and within a week it was announced that teaching would be online with immediate effect. Just one week after the final strike day (13th March) the University was closed and

buildings could only be accessed in exceptional circumstances.

These events have been extraordinary and are obviously unprecedented. They have unfolded with incredible rapidity. I have absolutely no idea how they will impact the two disputes that currently remain far from resolution. One obvious impact, already clear, is that HEC suspended the planned re-ballots that should have commenced on 17th March (ie two working days after the end of the strikes). By the time this article appears in print who knows what will have happened and how the sector will be impacted by the covid-19 pandemic. I am certainly not going to make predictions or suggest what I think ought to happen. Rather I will finish by highlighting two key issues that have emerged from the strike action I have been describing, and which I think are long term issues for the union to consider whatever the developments in the current disputes. The two issues are inextricably linked to each other.

Looking forward: issues for consideration

Democracy and governance: bring the members in

Industrial disputes are necessarily difficult moments. There is, by definition, a need for united action and therefore a call for 'discipline' to use an unfashionable, but important, term. Communications have to be carefully worded in order to mobilise members, and maintain confidence. However, there is often a challenge in maintaining strong links between decision-making bodies that determine strategy and those in the union who are active in the dispute but often have little involvement in formal structures. I am aware that HEC is made up of elected members and that some important decisions were made at a sector conference which is obviously made up of branch delegates. What I am suggesting however is that there appeared to be less connection between some of these formal structures and the much less formal participation which is the reality of many members' engagement with the union. Unions can be technically democratic according to their rule books but decisions are still often made by a relatively small group of individuals. During the most recent wave of action it has often appeared that key decisions have been made very quickly, with limited involvement of branch activists, let alone members. The more organic, and perhaps more important, link between the union's formal and informal structures appeared to work much less effectively in the 2019 and 2020

strikes. While it may be easy to understand how this can happen in the specific context of any dispute it is important to recognise that when this is the experience it militates against involving the wider membership in a way that ultimately is more likely to win support for further action. Collective discussion isn't simply about technical decision-making but is an opportunity to shift thinking. It is part of an essential educative process that is the basis of member commitment and unity.

UCU's experience of the 2018 action opened up the possibility of reculturing the union in a way that opened it outwards and focused on wider member engagement and participation. Looking forward, the priority must be to find better ways to discuss and debate key strategic issues in the union in ways that involve many more members. Such debates need to acknowledge complexity and be honest about difficulties - otherwise whatever outcomes are generated lack credibility. The recent Democracy Commission appeared to represent an opportunity to trigger this process of cultural change, but I doubt a large majority of the union's membership were even aware it existed, let alone felt any investment in its decisions. As it was the Commission appeared inward and entirely focused on the concerns of activists: it served to exemplify problems, rather than model the process of democratic renewal that is necessary if the union is to build on its recent successes.

Build at the base: develop workplace organisation

Central to the process of democratic renewal I am calling for is a relentless focus on branch building. Undoubtedly, for me, the most powerful lesson from all the recent experience of action is that the union needs to think much more strategically, and creatively, about how it 'builds at the base' of the organisation and commits seriously to developing workplace organisation. By 'workplace organisation' I am not talking primarily about formal branch organisation, although that is an important element of this. Rather I am talking about building the network of members who operate at a level 'below' the formal branch structures - in the physical workplaces and departments where members work.

UCU has long had departmental representatives, but their role within the organisation has often been ambiguous. Members have often been recruited into these roles on the understanding that they're not committing to anything significant. Traditionally we have often talked the role down, rather than up. What is becoming demonstrably clearer is that **In c**

these people are the key under-utilised resource in the union. In our branch, where we have consciously sought to develop this role, workplace representatives have been central to getting the vote out, winning the argument with members about participating in the action and, in some cases, raising issues in their immediate workplaces that have a significant impact on members' working lives (and which over-stretched branch officers have almost no time to deal with). During the dispute they have been absolute gold dust in communicating upwards the views of members - from across all corners of the university (and not just our 'hotspots' where we know membership is strong). Every time the union or university communicated with our members the intricate and informal networks of workplace reps and local officers meant we immediately had a strong sense of member attitudes on all key issues. Communication was constant and rapid and most importantly, extended far beyond the core group of members who we know we can rely on to attend branch meetings. None of this circumvented normal and formal structures, but rather it helped inform and shape the usual mechanisms for branch decision-making. When the branch committee put its motion at the branch meeting it was in part the outcome of collective discussions with workplace representatives. As it was, a possibly contentious motion was passed overwhelmingly and secured consensus on a complex issue.

Whatever the outcome of the current disputes, a strategic priority for our branch will almost certainly be to think about how we consciously and proactively build on the increased engagement of our workplace representatives that has taken place over the last six months and beyond. What we know from 2018 is that without serious and deliberate action by branch officers to make it happen, the energy and commitment of many who have been active in the strikes will dissipate. What we will seek to avoid however is the traditional practice of hoovering up good workplace reps onto branch committee roles that matter more to us than them, but rather we will find ways to share our collective experiences and expertise in ways that build the self-confidence of reps to take on a more significant role in their Schools and Departments. This is where members 'see and feel' the union. It is in their immediate workplaces where the union needs to become real and meaningful in members' lives. It is where collective identity is formed and forged, and where solidarity develops. It is the most basic building block of the union, on which all else is based. Building this layer of 'activism' is what transforming UCU should look like.

In conclusion:

In using this article to 'think aloud' I hope to make some small contribution to an important debate that I think needs to take place in UCU. I hope the approach I have taken makes clear that I make no claim to having an 'answer'. We all know there is no such answer - but collectively we can develop solutions. This collective endeavour must be based on an open debate that is able to transcend traditional demarcations in the organisation. The union's recent action in higher education has been both extraordinary and exciting, but it has also surfaced longer term issues that need to be addressed. The current disputes highlight the union's considerable strengths, and the opportunities that now exist to open the union up and further build union organisation. However, recent experiences have also exposed limitations that the union must be willing to confront. Everything about my experience, as someone active in their branch over the last two years, makes me optimistic about that future - but it will only happen if the union is willing to think hard about the possibilities that exist, and the actions required to make real change happen. If the debate remains internal and inward facing there will be little prospect of change that will make a real difference.

1. In the UK higher education sector there is a clear demarcation between 'pre' and 'post' 1992 universities. Pre 1992 can be considered the traditional universities whereas post 1992 universities can be considered the 'new universities'. They were previously polytechnics and managed by local government. This explains why the two types of institution have different pension arrangements.

2. https://www.worldsofeducation.org/en/woe_homepage/woe_detail/15773/the-uk-university-strike—union-renewal-in-action-by-howard-stevenson

3. UK employment law requires union members in a dispute to be balloted individually about taking industrial action. To be valid the turnout must exceed 50 per cent regardless of the balance of the 'yes'/'no' vote. The legislation also requires members to be re-balloted if the industrial action is to exceed six months.

4. See 'Striking is a feminist issue' - <https://youtu.be/LpQXxODLLcA>

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