

Answers to Guild UCU Strike Dispute FAQ

1. Why is the proposed industrial action happening?

- The strikes are happening because of two disputes, and UCU provide a handy video explainer here: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/hedisputes>. The first dispute is over low pay, high workloads, staff casualisation, and inequality, referred to more colloquially as the 'Four Fights'. The second dispute is because of substantial cuts to the USS university pension scheme (35% of the guaranteed part of the pension, 20-24% overall, based on figures that are publicly available). The University will claim that there has been positive progress since the last round of strikes nationally, this is simply incorrect, here's why:
 - As students, you may have noticed increased class sizes and university services that are hard to access, delayed or unavailable. This is symptomatic of higher staff workloads, a situation that has worsened after the pandemic due to the introduction of a Resilience Framework, a move conducted without adequate staff consultation.
 - Below inflation pay awards (1.5% which is 3% below the rate of inflation) mean that pay is 16-20% lower than 10 years ago.
 - Pay also remains 18-20% lower for women than for men for the same work.
 - No published figures for pay differences based on ethnicity or disability, meaning we do not know if these are areas that the University is working to address, even though we know there are national pay gaps for these groups.
 - Widespread use of temporary contracts for teaching jobs that should not be temporary and low pay for work carried out by post-graduates. These things have adverse effects on the university learning environment, impacting both staff and student mental health and well-being, while also making it more difficult for staff from lower economic backgrounds to secure permanent work.
 - Continued use of zero-hour contracts and staff outsourcing that allows the University to pay staff below a living wage. As many staff that work for the University are also students, this also has a provable impact on students.

Staff have been willing to resolve these issues and remain willing to work with university managers to tackle them, but the university remains unwilling to join that effort. In 2018 staff agreed to end industrial action to let an independent panel resolve pensions issues. The panel produced a good report, but their work was ignored by universities. When staff again had to act in 2020, the result was that the pension scheme was put through a destructive and dramatically unfair evaluation at a historically unprecedented time of economic disruption (the beginning of lockdown) and then this was used to argue the scheme was in financial trouble. To date, the University has not sought to resolve any of the issues outlined in the 'Four Fights' dispute. The erosion of pay by inflation remains a problem and the university's latest proposal is to explicitly continue the problem (saying 1.5% is a good pay award when inflation is running at more than 3%), progress on equality has not moved since 2018, with the median gender pay gap being 19.6% since then, and the size of the temporary workforce remains large and pay low. These are all issues that you will feel directly or indirectly impact your university experience now and in your future studies or even work. The problems could be addressed tomorrow, and the dispute resolved if the

university had the desire to do so. Instead, it is determined to harm our community and try to set staff and students against each other.

2. What does it mean to cross the picket line?
 - The picket line represents a boundary between the worker and their workplace during industrial action. Before the pandemic, this was usually a concrete line outside of the workplace where workers would collectively raise awareness of the reasons for their strike action. In our current hybrid working environment the picket line can now be more abstract, referring to a symbolic boundary between the worker and their place of work (i.e., if working from home, refusing to undertake that work). Crossing the picket line refers to any employee who consciously chooses to ignore the Union's strike action and either enters the workplace or returns to work as normal, undermining the collective effort of the union's protest. Only staff who undermine strike action can be classed as crossing the picket line, not students, although students who wish to support the strikes can do so by joining one of the physical picket lines or protests on campus, by raising the concerns of staff with other students or working staff, by displaying symbols of support such as placards and signs on pickets or at protests, or social media profile pictures, and writing about the strikes in student publications or on social media.
3. What impact will students see on their education if the strikes go ahead?
 - There will undoubtedly be short-term disruption because of the strike action. This is true for both students and staff. Students will see teaching activities cancelled, and striking staff will not be paid. However, should the dispute be resolved, students will also benefit from the outcomes. High workloads and workplace casualisation have a provably negative impact on the student learning environment and mean that students have more limited contact hours with specialized members of academic staff. Workplace inequalities also impede academic diversity, making students lose out on things like background and subject specific expertise while leading to more limited academic and professional representation. Economic factors—pay, and pensions—also have an impact, dissuading staff from lower economic backgrounds (which often includes minority backgrounds) from pursuing academic careers, which has huge ramifications on the diversity of experience that you stand to benefit from. Finally, the issues of zero-hour contracts and job outsourcing affect everybody who works at the University, including student members of staff.
4. Can postgraduate teaching assistants take part in the industrial action?
 - Yes, and we encourage them to. All staff can take part in and support industrial action as per their legal right. All postgraduate teaching assistants and postgraduates intending to progress into a career providing professional support to education, training, or research, in the higher education, further education or learning and skills sectors are also eligible and encouraged to join UCU and can do so here: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/join>.
5. Can international students support the strike when attendance is crucial for maintaining their visa status?
 - Yes. Students who want to support the strike are not expected to boycott the University. As we note above, there are lots of different ways to support the strike. International students will not at all be expected to put their visa status at risk, and the strikes will not have this impact upon them. UoB, as a UKVI-accredited visa sponsor, is under obligation to make sure students have the relevant opportunities to meet their visa requirements. Physical attendance is

not the only way to prove engagement; online Canvas, Panopto and Zoom activity is also taken into account. Any Reasonable Diligence or visa compliance escalations will be dealt with according to the Code of Practice and students will be informed asap. In real terms, short strikes are unlikely to affect students' ability to comply with their visa requirements.

6. What support will be available for students during the strike period?
 - Student's may have reduced contact hours with staff during strike action. However, the strikes also provide an opportunity for students to engage with their mentors, tutors, lecturers, and professional service staff by supporting them during strike action and joining them on the picket lines. The Birmingham Union branch has also previously provided a teach-out programme to take place alongside the strikes, where lecturers put together more informal learning sessions that also align with the objectives of the strikes. These are also great learning opportunities for students, and if this is something that students would like to see or be involved with during the dispute, then we encourage them to get in touch with the University union branch. Ultimately the aim of our strike is to improve the working conditions of staff at the University, and these are the most important source of support that students have available to them during their time at the University. Our working conditions are your learning conditions.
7. What should a student do if they want to complain about the strikes?
 - UCU has taken every step to avoid strike action, treating it as a last resort for resolving the disputes. If any strikes do take place, they do at the behest of the University, and their continued attacks on staff working conditions, pay, pensions, workloads, equalities and job security. Students can complain to the University and ask them why they aren't resolving the dispute. This can be done by contacting and emailing the Vice-Chancellor, as well as members of the University's senior management, such as pro-vice chancellors and heads of colleges. The University can work through their professional body (UUK) to push for a resolution, and they could demonstrate that they are taking serious steps to address local issues. We also welcome students talking to members of staff on the picket lines, to discuss the strikes and their concerns about the dispute and how to resolve it.
8. What will happen to the pay that teaching staff won't receive whilst on strike?
 - Staff on strike are not paid! Additionally, they are not just teaching staff. We include Administrators, IT Officers and Librarians who are equally affected by the issues of the dispute. We encourage students to demand that the money the University saves through pay deductions be used in a way that is both transparent and of benefit to their learning being used to further things like academic and library services, or assignment support, or is put towards the student hardship fund.
9. Is going to the Sports Centre or sports training crossing the picket line?
 - No, as a student, using University facilities does not constitute crossing the picket line, as this only applies to members of staff.
10. Is going to an online lecture or activity crossing the picket line?
 - No, as we are asking all employees to not cross the picket line, not students. Students can support the strikes by respecting the choice of members of staff to strike over the dispute, and by either attending the pickets or by raising awareness about the strike action on strike days, as outlined above.