

Learning from BUIRA Special Session on ‘Effective industrial action and organising in higher education’, University of Birmingham, 30 June 2022

A special session was organised at the BUIRA 2022 Annual conference to draw on the theoretical and practical experience of industrial relations scholars to discuss what forms of action and organising are needed in the higher education sector to resist cuts to pensions and the long-term erosion of pay and conditions. The past year has seen two national disputes, over USS pension cuts and the Four Fights on pay, casualization, gender and race pay gaps and workload, as well as numerous local disputes, including over redundancies.

The session invited contributions from conference participants to share their experiences of effective action and organising, and to decide on how BUIRA might contribute to future discussions on organising and resisting the erosion of conditions in higher education. The purpose was not to try and apportion blame for the progress of the ongoing national disputes or engage in factional disagreements, but to look at what can be effective strategies for action in higher education at national and local levels, and to outline some local successes. This document sets out the key points emerging from the session, which we hope will contribute to development of UCU industrial action and organising strategy. It has been written by the session panel members:

- Prof Sian Moore, Greenwich University (Chair)
- Prof Tessa Wright, Queen Mary University of London
- Professor David Whyte, formerly Liverpool University (now Queen Mary University of London)
- Dr Chris McLachlan, Queen Mary University of London

Key points

- **Shifting the narrative onto profit and senior management pay is crucial.**
 - The RMT have shown that it is possible to win public support by exposing profit and the pay of senior executives, and the UCU has launched a campaign highlighting university surpluses and senior pay;
 - In the coming months there will be a need to coordinate strike action at national level and to link up with local strike action.
- **Strategy is important.**
 - A ‘super-majority’ is not necessary for effective action if actions are strategically chosen. Liverpool UCU identified choke points in the ‘degree production line’ that would cause maximum disruption.
 - Liverpool’s success was based on a marking boycott carefully planned over around 6 months with huge efforts to build networks at local level.
 - Liverpool was realistic about their strategy and capacity and timed the ballot mandate period to maximise impact. They also had in their back pocket the threat of action during first 2 weeks of term;
 - The branch deliberately set out to exploit intra-class fractions by fermenting disputes in professional organisations (on research ethics and academic standards)

- The national media strategy (ITV, BBC, Guardian and FT) was not aimed at ‘convincing’ managers around the PR risks, but aimed at bolstering morale and the strength of action.
- **It needs to be assumed that universities will declare 100% deductions for a marking boycott, with members prepared and ‘lock-outs’ planned to follow strike action and escalate the dispute.**
 - QMUL strongly encouraged the use of collective and individual grievances, providing model letters, both over the threat of deductions and actual deductions from pay. It also advised members to keep records of all work done while participating in the marking boycott in order to challenge whether it is proportionate to deduct 100% of pay for refusing to do just some work.
- **There is confusion between branches with regard to policies on declaring strike action.**
 - QMUL adopted a strategy of not responding to any management emails asking staff to declare participation in strike action in response to threats to deduct 100% of pay for not rescheduling classes missed due to strike action;
 - The non-declaration strategy was effective at QMUL in avoiding deductions for not rescheduling as management had insufficient information to carry out their threat of deductions;
 - There are fears that not declaring allows management to claim that action look as though it is only supported by a minority undermining effectiveness.
- **Factionalism is paralysing the union’s national strategy and can paralyse local action.**
 - Liverpool actively avoided factionalism by ensuring open discussions with members where issues were aired, debated and resolved;
 - QMUL branch officers created a spirit of open discussion in meetings, enabling expression of varied opinions;
 - Both Liverpool and QMUL held daily members’ meetings to support each other and answer members’ queries throughout the marking boycott – to be effective, online meetings need significant and continual organising to achieve high levels of participation.
- **The value of universal free higher education has to be asserted with teaching integrity and standards part of local campaigns planned and executed with students.**
 - Discussion emphasised the need to link with and support student action including occupations.
- **In marking boycotts solidarity inside and outside the branch is crucial.**
 - QMUL have benefitted from generous financial donations from other branches;
 - Liverpool also received generous financial donations, but at Liverpool the bulk of financial support to sustain the action came from within the branch wage-sharing scheme. Where there are marking boycotts, those who participate must be sustained by those who don’t.
- **There needs to be recognition that there is a danger that where branches reach local deals to settle issues arising from the national dispute, national action and bargaining could be undermined.**

- **The greater vulnerability of some workers was highlighted, leading to reluctance to take action, in particular among UCU members of colour, who may need additional reassurance that the union will support them against victimisation and discrimination.**
- **Participants at the session welcomed the chance to share practice and experiences across branches and to reflect on the dispute and union strategy in a non-factional environment – there may be a role for BUIRA here, including in providing training workshops on union membership, getting the vote out and action.**

A more detailed report of the Special Session is available from Tessa Wright t.wright@qmul.ac.uk

Written by Chris McLachlan, Sian Moore, David Whyte and Tessa Wright, August 2022