

# The UCU strikes: a battle for the future of Higher Education



*What type of university system do we want? One with a casualised workforce and vice-chancellors who can claim they deserve exorbitant pay packages for running commercial organisations? Or one in which education is seen as a public good and its workforce – at all levels – is treated with the appropriate respect? It is this fundamental contradiction that lies behind the 2018 UCU strikes, writes [Stewart Smyth](#).*

The first days of strike action by UCU members at over 60 universities has been a magnificent show of solidarity, excitement and optimism. Reports from picket lines have shown big numbers of both staff and students turning up. Among the rallies and demonstration were over 1,000 in Bristol and hundreds in Glasgow, Cambridge, Southampton to name but a few. In Leeds, a demonstration set off around the city centre led by a group of students holding a banner stating: "[Leeds Students Support the Strike](#)".

As the second week of strikes commenced rallies were organised for big cities including Edinburgh and London; while "teach-outs" were happening across the country from [Bangor](#) to [Newcastle](#). At [Goldsmiths in London](#), those attending on a bitterly cold morning heard Gary Younge discuss the *US Civil Rights Movement* and Paul Mason explain the *Labour Theory of Value*.

Reviewing the photos and videos of these events, the most striking element (besides their size) is the presence of many young people, both students and staff. This dispute is not the last hurrah of an old generation of lefties and trade unionists. As a result of this unified action, the newspaper coverage has found it difficult to play old, untrue stereotypes about lazy, privileged academics or to pit students against university staff. Instead, the papers have focused on the university leaders pay and their developing divisions (see the front page of *The Times* on 23/02/2018).

The rallies and protests also highlight how out of touch senior managers at universities have become. A student protest at the University of Leicester drew the attention of two managers who decided to come out of their building and show their support for the students, assuming that the protest was against the strikes – this was a bad misjudgement. Their first sentence to those assembled, "There is a deficit of £6 billion" was met with a chorus of "Lies" from the students.

## The strike this time

This is not the first time in recent years that UCU members have been asked to vote for industrial action (including strike action) over pay or pensions. But most recent disputes have followed a pattern, where we have voted for strike action, held a one-day or two-day strike, which is then followed by a negotiated settlement often on the employers' terms.

This raises the question of why the strike action is qualitatively different this time round, even at this early stage. Here I think there are three important interrelated elements, some of which arise for apparently contradictory reasons, and are also a result of other changes in the higher education context over recent years.

First, (and obviously) is the size and importance of the issue itself – the loss of pension rights. Pensions are deferred pay and the loss of £10,000 per annum is huge for all staff concerned. Some lecturing staff now face the prospect of an annual income of less than £10,000 after a working life of 30 years or more. However, it is not just the scale of the economic loss but the nature of the reform that the employers are trying to impose. The move to a defined contribution scheme shifts the risk of poor stock market returns from the collective staff across 60+ higher education institutions onto individual academics.

This is a well-worn path for employers in the private sector who have been seeking to extricate themselves from providing for their employees after they are no longer economically productive. A recent example of this process is the restructuring of the British Steel Pension Scheme (BSPS) in 2017 by Tata Steel. With the closing of the BSPS each member was given a share of the scheme's assets, only for the vultures of our financial system to [shamelessly bamboozle](#) the steelworkers, and in the process extract large fees and commission.

Second, the increased anti-trade laws introduced in the [Trade Union Act 2016](#) rather than discouraging or limiting strike action have actually enabled UCU build a deeper engagement with members. The 2016 Act requires that not only should there be a majority in favour of the industrial action among those who vote, but that the turnout must also be over 50%.

To maximise the turnout the UCU ballot period extended for nearly two months, with the ballot papers first being distributed at the end of November 2017. While part of the reason for this was the Christmas vacation, it also allowed local branches to mount effective campaigns to ensure the 50% turnout was exceeded at university after university. The results were [truly impressive](#) – across all institutions balloted the turnout averaged 58 percent, with 88 per cent voting for strike action. Just seven out of 68 branches did not reach the required turnout threshold.

Third, the increased commercialisation of the higher education sector and especially the increased fees of £9,250 per annum was meant to turn students into individual consumers. A degree is portrayed as an investment that will allow individual graduates access higher earnings over the rest of their working lives.

It is this logic that has led to reports of up to [100,000 students signing petitions](#) calling for compensation for missed lectures. Yet, there are also contradictions here, with active support from the NUS both nationally and locally (as noted above). A [YouGov poll](#) on the eve of the strikes found that only 2% of students blamed university staff outright for the strikes.

### **The two futures of the university**

It is this final point that exposes the fundamental contradiction behind the strikes – what type of higher education system do we want? One future continues successive governments' policies and leads to a casualised workforce, while universities compete in a global market through a construction race of new buildings on campus. Such a future will continue to be presided over by vice-chancellors and other senior managers who claim they deserve [exorbitant pay and reward packages](#) for running global commercial organisations.

The other future sees education as a public good and research as essential for the advancement of human knowledge (not the next idea or product that can be commercialised and spun-out through a joint venture incubator). This future entails a secure and respected workforce (at all levels), educating students as critical thinkers not customers investing in their future career. As a principle this future needs to rekindle the idea of a public service ethos.

The current pension dispute is the latest resistance to the ongoing process of turning higher education into a commodity. In 2016, [students at UCL](#) won their dispute over accommodation by organising a rent strike. The ongoing dispute by [cleaning staff at King's College London](#) saw them show solidarity with UCU members by joining protests and pickets during the current strikes.

Students, cleaners, lecturers and other staff in universities organising together can win this dispute and in the process start to move the higher education sector towards the public service our society needs it to be.

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### **About the Author**



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