



2023 WINNING THE DISPUTE STRIKE ACTION STRATEGY



DEAR MEMBERS...

We write to you at the end of what has been a huge year for every single one of us. We have achieved things collectively this year that many thought were not possible. Winning a national ballot, delivering record breaking support for strike action, and the biggest picket lines in UCU history. All of this hard work means nothing unless we convert it into a victory that changes our sector forever. This must be the goal of every single one of us in 2023. The employers are back at the negotiating table. Even this is different from previous disputes when they have sat on the side-lines as we have taken strike action. On both pay and pensions we believe we can shift the employers significantly. We would have hoped that this could have been done via robust negotiations alone, but what has become clearer and clearer in recent weeks is that to achieve the change we all want, we are going to have to call and take further strike action.

In November of this year, our elected Higher Education Committee (HEC) voted for a marking and assessment boycott (MAB) to begin in January, and for an all-out indefinite strike to begin at every university in the UK in February. This combination is a serious and immediate escalation of strike action. It is also so significant that the right thing to do is to ensure that every member and branch is consulted prior to this action taking place.

In an ideal world all-out and indefinite strike action would be the go-to weapon of almost any trade union in the UK. We have indeed seen this tactic used effectively in recent months by some of our sister unions. The difference between those disputes and this one is the sheer scale of numbers and workplaces involved. It is very different to call indefinite strike action in a single workplace versus calling it for 70,000 members across 150 workplaces. Moving to all out action, which would mean striking every single day is a very significant move in a national dispute.

All of the successful local examples of indefinite action have been on the back of our sister unions having the financial capability to pay prolonged periods of strike pay. For example, it is completely understandable for a union with hundreds of thousands of members to afford all-out strike pay at a site with just hundreds.

We believe that we cannot rule out all-out indefinite strike action as a tool we may need to win this dispute. To do that though, we will have to build the UCU fighting fund to a level it has never been before – this will require time.

We also believe moving from 3 single days of action immediately to an all-out indefinite strike is far more than just escalation, and is not in line with the pledge we gave to members to use their vote for industrial action responsibly.

UCU is a democratic organisation, and we want to be crystal clear at this point of the document – if the branch delegate meeting (BDM) and HEC vote to continue with the decision taken by the November HEC and move to all-out strike action, then we will do everything within our capabilities to make that a success.

This document sets out what we believe is a more professional, detailed, and robust plan to win the dispute. It is also a plan which will keep the whole membership together, and that is how you win a dispute. The suggested programme of action is much more in line with the successful management of national disputes, such as we are seeing with the RMT and the CWU. One of the other points we want to touch on is how we bring pressure to bear on our employers during periods of strike action. A key element in that is the media. We have seen in the rail, NHS, and postal strikes that escalating action gives trade union leaders and members multiple opportunities to gain significant media coverage. We believe that this would not be as impactful if we called immediate all-out indefinite action in February.

The UCU fighting fund is going to be a key component to winning this dispute. We have already begun to receive donations, both from the public and sister unions, which will bolster the amount of money we have available to support strike action. Our belief is that if we continue to find the right balance between escalating strike action and raising money for the fighting fund, then we will be in a far better position later in the year, should we need to call all-out action. The anti-trade union laws mean that our fantastic mandate for strike action runs out on Thursday 20 April 2023, this means that realistically we will have to re-ballot early in the new year. It will be much easier for us to deliver victory in the second ballot if we have momentum, all of our members still with us, and the morale is still high. If we go too early with all-out indefinite action then we risk not only playing into the hands of management by splitting our membership, but also by significantly damaging our chances of winning the second ballot.

Sitting alongside the suggested plan for industrial action we are also in active discussions with unions from across our sector and beyond on the possibility of delivering coordinated strike action in 2023. We will update the BDM on this verbally on January 10.

In addition to the need to take key decisions on the next steps for strike action, we should also examine whether January is the prime time for us to commence a marking and assessment boycott. All of our potential options are set out in this document.

The landscape we operate in today is volatile and ever changing. Our response must be agile, dynamic, and as democratic as possible. We want to continue the high levels of democratic engagement that we have had so far, with this in mind we recommend that the BDM and HEC agrees a programme of action that will take us through the full extent of our current industrial action ballot mandate. We propose that when we are near the close of the voting period for the second ballot, we will once again engage in the widest democratic process possible with our members, branches and the HEC to agree an additional programme of action, if needed – this should include serious consideration to escalating the dispute to an all-out indefinite strike at the appropriate time.

We want the widest ever discussion in our union on how we take forward the next steps of this dispute. Every single member, representative, and branch deserves a say. Ultimately of course, our HEC will decide the path we take, but we know that like all of us, they will welcome the highest possible levels of democracy, engagement, and membership input to allow them to make the most informed position possible in early January.



All of this hard work means nothing unless we convert it into a victory that changes our sector forever.

Your branches will also be involved in the process and a Branch Delegate Meeting has been called for 10 January. Branches from across the UK will currently be calling membership meetings to invite input. It is crucial that you attend those meetings, either in person or online. You can also let us know your views by emailing your branch, the HEC, or us at UCU HQ. Thank you for your support in 2022, none of us should take lightly what we have been able to achieve together this year. Our role now is to take the next step and win the dispute – with your support that's exactly what we are going to do.

Solidarity,

Dr Jo Grady
UCU general secretary



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Considering the information that we have on term and teaching dates from February onwards, the table below indicates potential weeks for strike action

(✓ = a clear majority of institutions in term/with teaching; X = too many institutions out of term/without teaching – NB this is not perfect as term times/teaching schedules do not align straightforwardly).

Except where mentioned explicitly, reading weeks are not accounted for as they are so dispersed that it is not possible to cover them all.

The table also includes an approximate indication (our info on this is incomplete) of when main summer term/end of year exam/assessment periods begin.

WEEK COMMENCING MONDAY:	STRIKE POTENTIAL	SUMMER EXAMS START (APPROXIMATE NUMBERS)
6 February	✓	
13 February	✓	
20 February	✓	
27 February	✓	
6 March	✓	
13 March	✓	
20 March	✓	
27 March	X (over 30 HEIs will have finished for Easter break)	
3 April	X	
10 April	X	
17 April	X (over a third of HEIs not yet back from Easter break)	5
24 April	✓	11
1 May	✓	22
8 May	✓ - around 3 HEI's terms will have finished	20
15 May	✓ - around 13 HEI's terms will have finished	16
22 May	X - around 25 HEI's terms will have finished	14
29 May	X - around 50 will have finished	4
5 June	X - around 75 will have finished	
12 June	X - around 95 will have finished	
19 June	X - around 110 will have finished	
26 June	X - around 120 will have finished	
3 July	X - very clear majority will have finished term	

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Observations from the previous information:

- The optimum period for strike action is February to mid/late May, beyond which there will be a growing number of branches where strike action will have little impact; with four weeks (w/c 27 March to w/c 17 April) when strike action will have little impact due to the Easter break.
- A marking and assessment boycott intended to hit end of academic year summative assessment would be best timed to start no earlier than w/c 17 April.

Other factors to be considered are university reading weeks, school half-term breaks, and potential TUC co-ordinated strike days.

While we don't have comprehensive information on the dates of university reading weeks, based on the information we have, the number of HEIs with reading weeks scheduled in February is as follows:

WEEK COMMENCING MONDAY:	READING WEEKS (NOT NECESSARILY INSTITUTION-WIDE)
30 January	5
6 February	2
13 February	8
20 February	5
27 February	1

The week commencing 13 February will be the school half-term break in most areas, with some areas having half-term w/c 6 February, or w/c 20 February.

In addition to planning UCU industrial action to fit HE timelines, we should also seek to align days of UCU action with that of other unions coordinated by the TUC. There is to be a meeting on 10 January of TUC affiliated unions to discuss, and hopefully agree, such co-ordination. Any outcome of that meeting and recommendation for coordinated strike days with other unions will be reported to the BDM later that day.

There is a risk that UCU strike days called around TUC co-ordinated mass action would be overshadowed by such action and would therefore receive little media attention. It is possible that TUC co-ordinated action may be called in the first week of February (w/c 6 February) in which case UCU should call day(s) of strike action, in addition to specific UCU strike days, in order to join the multi-union action.



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Looking to distribute strike days to avoid either too many bunched together (leading to high deductions in one pay period and potentially draining support) or dissipated single days of action, suggests a pattern of two/three days at a time, grouped in fortnights, with breaks in between. (Such a pattern would also reflect the effective strategies of the CWU and RMT in other national disputes.)

Co-ordinating strike days with options for re-ballot timing, to maximise GTVO activities around strike action, gives a pattern of action and re-ballot dates such as follows:

- 2 days (Monday and Tuesday) w/c 13 February + 3 days (Wednesday, Thursday, Friday) w/c 20 February (5 days of strike action likely to fall in the same payroll month).
- Re-ballot opens Monday 20 February, with ballot papers arriving on strike days in the second week 22, 23, 24 February.

followed by

- 2 days (Thursday and Friday) w/c 13 March + 3 days (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday) w/c 20 March (5 consecutive working days, at or near the end of Spring term for many HEIs, falling in a single payroll month but not the same one as the first five days).
- A 5-week re-ballot from 20 February would close on 24 March, at the end of the second week of this phase of strike action, giving opportunity for a final GTVO push through those strike days.

There would need to be a break in strike action over Easter, which could be followed by further strike days in the week commencing 24 April, followed by a marking and assessment boycott to impact end of academic year summative assessments or, alternatively, as teaching ends and assessment begins at a growing number of institutions, a marking and assessment boycott called from 17 April when the main end of year assessment periods begin.

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- The timings above would ensure that the opening of the re-ballot would coincide with strike action.
 - Strike action and therefore strike related pay deductions would be spread across two or three payroll months
 - Strike action would happen through the re-ballot period, escalating towards a marking and assessment boycott at the time of year when it will have most impact.
 - Such a pattern of action would make it difficult for the employers to sit the action out all the way through, would increase pressure for a negotiated settlement while maximising the time for such a settlement before a marking and assessment boycott commenced and the threat of continuous punitive pay deductions for that boycott arose for members.

RE-BALLOT

The current ballot mandate expires on Thursday 20 April 2023.

To ensure continuity of action, the latest date for notice of action under a re-ballot is Wednesday 5 April

On this basis it is proposed that the re-ballot will open Monday 20 February and close Friday 24 March.



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