

Organising for action

A well-supported strike will show your employer how strongly UCU members feel. If well organised, it will also help to boost morale. However, it is vital that members know what they need to do.

SHARE THE LOAD

There are a number of things you need to do to make the day successful. We recommend that you share the load with as many people as possible.

One way of doing this is to appoint an ACTION GROUP. This can draw its members from the branch committee and from the wider membership. It is best if the secretary, president or chair is involved so that the group remains accountable to the branch.

The group can plan what action will be taken, decide who will oversee it, ensure it happens and report back. The ACTION GROUP does not have to be big, but it should be able to meet quickly, and often, to respond to changing situations.

GETTING MEMBERS OUT ON STRIKE – WHAT TO SAY

It's vital not to assume that your members will turn out just because you ask them to.

- Make sure you get email messages out to them reminding them about the action and what you will be doing.
- Organise your reps to visit members personally and talk to them.

The majority of members will be loyal to the union. However, no one likes going on strike. 'I don't want to do anything to damage my students' education', or 'I don't like taking strike action,' are the kind of viewpoints you might hear.

Here are some arguments you can use with members. Remember to listen to them respectfully but be firm about your commitment.

- Job cuts are a critical issue. If we can't make a stand on cuts, we won't be able to win on the other issues affecting staff at this institution.
- Sending a clear message and winning on job cuts now will benefit us all later on by increasing respect for the union and increasing our ability to represent you and get things done.
- No one likes taking strike action and no one likes doing anything that disrupts students' education. Everyone working here feels the same way. But we are asking you to support the strike now so that we can stop this institution undermining the education it provides.
- Everyone who refuses to strike directly

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undermines their colleagues in the union as they make it possible for management to claim that the union doesn't represent staff feeling.

- The best way we can ensure that our students get a good education is to defend lecturers' jobs.
- The law protects union members who do **not** wish to participate in industrial action.

ORGANISE PICKETING FOR THE DAY

It is very important that the union has a visible presence outside all workplaces. As well as encouraging members to support the strike, it gives us the chance to get our message across to the public and students. It's also a really good way of bringing in new activists. When seeking volunteers, stress that it can actually be fun and a way of meeting other colleagues.

- List the workplace sites and entrances that need to be picketed.
- Seek volunteers and organise rotas making sure there is someone designated to be in charge of each picket.
- Ensure that pickets are outside workplaces early, so that they are visible by the time managers and students arrive.
- Make sure that there is a supply of armbands and placards for the pickets and a good stock of leaflets explaining the dispute to students, other staff and members of the public.
- You can request supplies of these materials from the National Campaigns Team at campaigns@ucu.org.uk.

HELP TO GET OUR MESSAGE ACROSS

Public support can have a massive influence on the successful outcome of industrial action. Visible support not only improves the morale of members undertaking action, it also sends a clear message to managers

who don't like bad publicity and fear damage to the reputation of 'their' institutions.

Contact your local press and media who are always looking for stories, and tell them about the action, including possible photo opportunities on the day. You can get help drafting your press release on the UCU website at:

www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=2291

Once drafted, please try to send it as soon as you can to local radio and to your daily and weekly local papers – don't miss free sheets. Ask someone to check it before emailing to news desks or contacts.

Be sure to add mobile phone numbers for contact on the strike day.

GETTING OUR MESSAGE OVER TO THE PUBLIC

Dealing with the press is a skill in itself. But there is plenty of advice about talking to journalists on the UCU website. You can read it via the web link:

www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=2293

If you would like to speak to someone for some tips before approaching the media please contact the UCU press office who will be happy to help:

press@ucu.org.uk

ADVICE

It's our job to sound reasonable. You may be encouraged by journalists to slag people off but DON'T take the bait. Remember that all UCU members are doing is defending their jobs. You are striking because your institution is cutting jobs and threatening the quality of education at your institution, not because you hate management. If you can stay cool and on message, it makes life a lot harder for management. Inappropriate press comments could lead to disciplinary action.

When taking calls from journalists or talking to the local media, here are some points you might want to make:

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- Job cuts will increase workloads and increase class sizes, which will mean a worse educational experience for students.
- Cuts will damage the provision of education in the community or region – think about what parts of your institution's activities have a high profile and if you can emphasise the effect on this, do so.
- For example, at Tower Hamlets, the impact on ESOL provision was emphasised because of the needs of the area. At Reading University, the decision to close both physics and healthcare provision was stressed for the impact on the need for social workers nationally, and the decline of students studying core science subjects.
- Politicians are saying that education is vital during the recession to help people of all ages to get the skills they need, and to ensure that businesses are able to prosper. Yet your institution is cutting jobs.
- Your institution's actions will damage the local or regional economy and reduce access to education in the area.

SOLIDARITY

Get statements of support from other unions. This is a good way of increasing the volume of solidarity for members taking action. Approach other college unions and the local student union for statements of support. If you don't know who your Students Union contact is, email campaigns@ucu.org.uk

KEEP IN TOUCH WITH YOUR MEMBERS AND WITH US

If your institution has several sites, staff can feel isolated and uninvolved. The best way to combat this is to establish a steady flow of information that keeps members informed. They need to know what is planned for the day and who to contact if they have any questions. It is best to use a mixture of

emails, hard copy and personal contact by departmental reps. Remember to make special arrangements for part-time staff who may not have access to email or be on site every day.

Let us know about any particular action you are taking on the day so we can give it a higher profile and counter any employers' propaganda. Photos are always welcome. If you encounter any difficulties on the day, contact your regional office in the first instance.

DEALING WITH QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS

The following may help answer questions members might have.

Q Am I breaking my contract by taking strike action?

A All effective industrial action is likely to be a breach of your contract of employment. But because UCU has carried out a statutory ballot and the action has been formally called, the law now protects workers from dismissal whilst taking part in lawful industrial action or at any time within 12 weeks of the start of the action and, depending on the circumstances, dismissal may also be unfair if it takes place later.

Q Do I have to tell my employer that I am taking strike action?

A In order to fulfil legal requirements, employers have been provided with statistical information about UCU members taking industrial action, but not individual names. You are under no obligation to inform management in advance as to whether you will be taking part in strike action or action short of a strike. However, if your Human Resources or personnel department ask you AFTER the strike whether you took action, you should answer truthfully.

Q How much money will I lose?

A You should expect to have a day's salary deducted for taking part in the strike. Following a recent successful court case taken by UNISON, members should not be

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deducted more than 1/260 of their salary. Part-timers should be deducted on a pro rata basis. If members are deducted in excess of this amount the branch should pursue this with employers and contact your regional office for assistance if necessary.

Q How will it affect my pension?

A The effect on the length of service of a day's strike is actually very small. However, our policy has been to exempt those in their last year of service if they wish.

Q What is the law on picketing?

A Peaceful picketing is entirely legal. Picketing should be carried out at or near an entrance or exit from a site at which the pickets work.

When others who are not in dispute come into work or use these entrances or exits, pickets must not interfere with them. This includes encouraging them to support us.

The legal categories of people permitted to picket are:

- UCU members in dispute
- former employees who have lost their jobs for reasons connected to the dispute
- UCU officials and NEC members supporting members in dispute, providing they are accompanying union members who work at the location.

The police often try to limit the number of people at a picket to six, based on a statutory code of practice. This is only a guideline. However, the police have powers to enforce this by citing numbers in excess of six as a common law nuisance, obstruction in criminal law or breach of the peace.

While UCU members should bear this in mind, sensible and disciplined picketing is unlikely to result in legal intervention, so members should not be put off from undertaking legitimate picketing activity.