

Threats to sick pay

The context

In December 2012 the Association of Colleges (AoC) unilaterally pulled out of The Joint Agreement on Guidelines on Sickness Leave in Further Education Colleges between the AoC and the relevant trade unions.

The AoC position does not automatically change anything in your college. There is no call from the AoC for colleges to cut their sick pay provisions or procedures. The AoC reminds colleges that:

'... where a college has adopted the April 2000 joint agreement as a local collective agreement, the arrangements for paid sick leave will have become incorporated into individual employee's contracts of employment, and thus cannot be unilaterally changed without collective consultation and agreement to any proposed variation'.

UCU survey

UCU has been hearing from branches that colleges are increasingly pushing for cuts to sick pay and the introduction of severe absence management measures. UCU and UNISON surveyed FE branch secretaries to get a more detailed picture of the extent of the threats and to investigate providing bespoke training to members to help and support them in defending their entitlement to sick pay and freedom from punitive sickness absence measures. The details of the initial training event in London are below. There will be further training in London and other regions as needed.

The headline results from the survey are:

- over 40% of colleges have changed their sick pay policies since the AoC Unilaterally pulled out of the joint agreement in December 2012
- the good news is that 80% of colleges have consult with UCU regarding those changes
- at least a quarter of colleges include disability or pregnancy related absence as normal sickness absence (one third of respondents were unsure)
- 68% of colleges do have some wellbeing policies in place. One respondent commented that they have '*Bike scheme. Free Fruit for Staff on Wednesdays. But no stress policy.*'
- in some colleges there is no occupation sick pay at all in the first six months of service

- in some colleges the full entitlement to sick pay after five years has been cut and examples include a cut to 5 months full pay and 2 months half pay (the joint agreement was 6 months full and 6 months half).

The concern caused by the introduction of severe sickness absence measures is highlighted in the survey and comments included:

- *'Any 4 absences in 12mths or any 3 in 6mths to be referred to OH And where necessary disciplinary procedure to be use'*
- *'Attendance Review after a small number of absences. This causes MUCH stress and anger and demotivates staff. 3 absences in 12 months but the 12 months is on a rolling basis...not fair. Depending on your line manager it is then decided whether you have a disciplinary or not. Awful.'*
- *'Verbal warning (without union rep being present) for someone with a high Bradford Factor.'*
- *'Increasing use of Bradford Factor to start capability proceedings. Changes made before branch consulted'*

But there are success stories out there:

- *'The plan was to half the sickness allowance to 3 months from 6 months. We organised with [other unions] and fought the proposal. In the end we won, with only a minor change for new members of staff, that is only slightly worse than the previous agreement.'*

Such success stories in the face of the threats to sick pay and procedures show the need for well organised and informed branches.

Training

UCU and UNISON are holding a joint initial training session at UCU, Carlow Street London, on Friday 4 July.

There will be further training in London and other regions as needed.

Sick of it? This one day course is aimed at anyone who is either currently or likely to be involved in negotiating sickness absence policy within a further education institution. You should be active within your branch and ideally, but not exclusively part of your branch negotiating committee.

To register go to: <http://www.ucu.org.uk/7107>