

The story so far . . . what have we learned?

The reality is that UCU has very limited industrial or political power. Industrial action does disrupt services and causes inconvenience, but it does not impact the employer's revenue. Nor does action by university staff generate the type of political pressure that places the employers under pressure to settle (contrast the media coverage of our disputes relative to that by nurses, rail workers, paramedics).

The reality that we have to face is that the type of action UCU has taken up to now has typically had a high cost for members (salary loss/increased workload pressures), while simultaneously having a low cost on employers (no loss of income, manageable levels of inconvenience). As long as this situation prevails we are making it very difficult to win our disputes.

We have to flip the system – to maximise the impact of action on our employers, while seeking to minimise the costs to members.

Maximising the impact on employers (where impact = service disruption + unpredictability)

Our experience at Nottingham is that *the action that works, is action that hurts*. For us, this was demonstrated during the MAB in Summer 2022 when our local employers immediately asked for negotiations, having made no such overtures previously. The prospect of serious disruption to 'the service', in particular the failure of students to graduate or to successfully complete professionally accredited programmes was clearly a serious threat – and so discussions were opened immediately. Many members were not required to take any action, and probably only a relatively small number needed to formally commence the boycott – but the potential impact, combined with its unpredictability (which courses would be impacted? which wouldn't?) made this highly effective.

The lesson we have learned is that we must make every effort to amplify the action that we take. It also suggests that there is no point taking industrial action on a day that has no impact on the employer.

Minimising the cost for members.

Because of the need to have a real impact on our employers it is clear that members will have to engage in industrial action for a sustained period of time. We know how costly this will be for members, and how concerned they are about taking 'open ended' indefinite strike action. Our proposal is that the union mitigates against these costs (of loss of pay) by organising the dispute in such a way that members only take industrial action on those days that directly impact the employer (for example, on days when the member is teaching).

Practical actions:

1. As agreed, the union commences a MAB in January. This is unlikely to have the same level of impact as a summer boycott, but it has the potential to make a significant impact to the dispute. It will bring a combination of impact and unpredictability that will be seriously destabilising and is an important 'next stage' in the campaign.
2. The union commences on-going strike action from the first day of the second semester, organised in such a way that members only take strike action on those days when withdrawing labour impacts the operation of the business (such as teaching etc). On days when a member may have no work that disrupts university business, such as a research day, they will continue to work. The member has no duty to inform their employer in advance of taking action and so a high level of uncertainty is immediately created. This is action that is both highly impactful *and* unpredictable – and will contribute significantly to causing organisational instability. The relatively low cost to members (who are unlikely to be taking strike action every day) means that the action can be sustained longer.
3. The union continues its campaign of ASOS.
4. The union helps local branches to develop 'solidarity schemes' whereby those members needing to take less action can easily contribute to those members required to take more action. Such schemes will obviously require administration but should not be difficult to organise. They will provide a very tangible connection between those most directly involved in the action, and those less so.