

## Lancaster UCU newsletter December 16th 2022

Dear Lancaster UCU member,

We have had enough ... on a historic level. Yesterday was the largest nursing strike in the history of the [NHS](#). On the same day 115,000 Royal Mail workers were again on [strike](#) and 40,000 rail workers shut down 80% of national services the day before and are doing so again [today](#). In UCU we have the legal, democratic mandate to shut down the entire university sector. *We have lost the equivalent of a month's pay via a 9% pay cut and had an average 35% of our pension wiped out.* Below we spell out what the cost of living crisis looks like for our poorest branch members and draw on Lancaster University's latest financial statement to ask: **The money is there, but where is our share?** We then outline the next steps in national industrial action.

### Local Cost of Living Crisis - Poorest Staff Excluded From Subsidised Bus Pass

For the past five years, Lancaster UCU has been asking for PGR students, who teach, to have the right to access a staff bus pass. Currently, although staff on permanent contracts can access a subsidised bus pass through the flexible benefits scheme, PGR students on precarious contracts are not offered this. Staff at grades 1 to 3 can receive a free Staff UniRider bus pass, grades 4 to 6 pay £112 per year, and grades 7+ pay £126. PGR students, however, are left having to pay a regressive £430 for a student UniRider (or £765 for the Gold UniRider) despite often being amongst the staff members who can least afford this kind of expenditure just to get to work.

This means that PGR students working as Associate Lecturers, Graduate Teaching Assistants, or Practical Demonstrators often have to work for almost 30 hours before they have paid off their bus pass just to get into work, roughly equivalent to a full term's worth of teaching on some modules. *This issue has been raised by, amongst others, a student who has done some teaching in FST, paid £13.83 per hour, who would have to work over 30 hours in order to be paid enough to afford the bus pass after Stagecoach increased their prices, which meant they effectively had to work for free for a whole term in order to pay off their bus pass. The cheaper termly bus pass is also not an option, as this expires in March and the teaching year in the student's department runs beyond this. With the cost of living crisis and rents and bills going up, this just wasn't workable, and so they are relying on buying a £3.40 return ticket when they can afford this and walking for around an hour and a half each way to get to campus when money is tighter, meaning that they have less working time to spend on their own research and teaching. As the colder winter months approach at the start of next term, it is particularly concerning that some student teaching staff members are left with no option but to walk to campus because public transport is so unaffordable.*

*Another PGR student (in FASS) explained that they had to turn down teaching for a module despite wanting to teach, because it just wasn't viable without an affordable means of transport in place. The student, who wants to work in teaching and academia in the future, told us that they were worried this is going to affect their prospects of finding an academic job after finishing the PhD, because it has limited their teaching experience. We shouldn't be in a situation where students can't afford to teach because the combination of low pay, precarious conditions, and no support on essential requirements like transport mean that they'd be making themselves worse off by working in the field that they're passionate about.*

The issue of bus passes for PGR teaching staff was raised again directly on the picket line with Nicola Owen, the University Deputy Chief Executive, and in a meeting with Phill Dixon, director of 'People and Organisational Effectiveness'. They have promised to look at costings. The can has been kicked down the road for five years, the cost of living crisis is now, we need to end the exclusion now.

## **Lancaster University Finances – The Money Is There But Where Is Our Share?**

The University describes its performance in the latest financial statement as 'solid' and 'robust'. For example, the total income of the University is up by 10% to £358M, and cash up by 4% to £61M. Other metrics such as student accommodation income, reserves, and current assets (cash & cash equivalents) have all gone up significantly.

Senior management is reaping the benefits of this. The Vice-Chancellor's salary has gone up by 4.5% (excluding pensions contributions made by the University, which alone are in the region of £50k, more than most of our annual salaries). Also, 71 key management staff earned more than £100k, up from £66k in the previous year, and up from £46k in 2018, which roughly equates to £2.5M increase in senior staff salaries alone; while the University Executive Board (UEB), which comprises 13 senior managers in the VC's team, took home a cool £2.3M, equivalent to an approx. average salary of £180k.

*Staff salaries and costs, on the other hand, have decreased to 50% as a proportion of University's income, down 3.5% from last year, and down 5% since 2019 when the University used to spend 55% of its income on staff. The money is there, but where is our share? Is a few hundred thousand pounds for bus passes for Associate Lecturers, Graduate Teaching Assistants, or Practical Demonstrators really too much to ask?*

## **National USS Pensions Surplus – Return Our Money**

USS is now reporting a surplus of between £4bn-£5.4bn in its latest monitoring report. This has vindicated our position that the deficit is an actuarial and accounting construct, and that our benefits were cut by opportunistic employers based on spurious grounds. However, the USS market ideologues and UUK hawks are trying to throw up as many issues as possible to prevent a restoration of our benefits.

*A recap of what we have lost earlier*

1. The income threshold for a DB pension: £40k instead of £60k
2. The pension accrual rate: 1/85<sup>th</sup> instead of 1/75<sup>th</sup>
3. The inflation protection cut (capped at 2.5% when inflation is running @11%+. Every day inflation is above this cap your pension is being eroded).

While benefit restoration could be implemented from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023, we also need to keep the pressure up for a restoration of earlier losses of what we have lost. UUK and USS are making spurious arguments to why this is not possible. We have a crucial and shrinking time window, before March 23, when the threat of hard-hitting industrial action can move the employers to join hands with us and force the USS to restore our benefits. Restoring our benefits as of April 2023 will not incur any significant costs to the employers, and it will enable them to earn the trust and goodwill of members. We hope our VC will use his role alongside other VCs to enact this. UUK narratives of 'powerlessness' are not only deeply unconvincing but insulting and impoverishing.

## **Next Steps In National Industrial Action**

Senior managers will read this email. It is therefore a basic tenet of trade unionism not to discuss sensitive information on strategy and tactics in front of the employer, and that is why we have regular members meetings where participants have their names on zoom and we can feel safe in

relative confidence. At our last (quorate) emergency general meeting on 7 December 2022, we passed the following with 79% voting in favour, 18% against, 3% abstaining:

*This branch believes that it is crucial to keep the pressure on employers, especially during talks. This branch resolves to call on the HE officers to notify the marking and assessment boycott (MAB) in time for it to begin in early January and to prepare members for the MAB by circulating guidance drawn from the experience of branches; to confirm the terms under which strike action would take place in cases of 100% deductions; and to announce the intention to take sustained strike action from February.*

UCU's democratic decision-making body, the Higher Education Committee (HEC) had met nearly five weeks earlier on 3 November 2022 and voted on these next steps. Our branch Equality Officer, Julie Hearn, who is one of the 41 elected HEC members – any member can stand in annual elections for a two year term – explained that HEC members could not break confidentiality and that the national union had to announce the strategy now so that members could discuss its merits and challenges and make practical arrangements. The decision, including an indefinite strike, was finally revealed on 13 December 2022. This means we have effectively lost six weeks of discussion and preparation time for our largest, most ambitious action to date, a national marking and assessment boycott with indefinite strike. This gives us very little time to talk through what that might actually look like. However, we have been here before, we are used to working in far from ideal conditions. We can win *if* we stay focused and united.

#### *Indefinite Strike – What Is It and Why Now?*

At its essence, an indefinite strike means that you strike until your demands are met, which may only take days or weeks because the direct impact is so intense. Arguably, it is the original understanding of a strike and has been widely and successfully used in the labour movement. In more recent years, we have come to understand and practise striking as time-limited where we give an end-date, as we did in November with the three days. The advantage of this is that we lose less pay, however, it has lost its impact for numerous reasons. The general secretary has consistently promised that this strike would be on a different scale and she was right, we have delivered a strike across the *whole* sector. However, as a union we have to reflect on how we strike, drawing on our experience to date. Some members have said that they don't want more of the same, that they want to strike until they win because the stakes are so high for them now. The HEC took its responsibility extremely seriously when it discussed indefinite strike and after careful deliberation, voted in favour. Due to the newness, scale and lack of discussion and preparation time within the union and the general secretary's particular take on it, this has come as a shock to some. It is a massive deal. Finances and hardship funds are crucial, we know this. However, it has the potential for success. Instead of a twitter frenzy and politically motivated fear-mongering, we need to systematically break down what an indefinite strike would look like and we need to do that together, not here in front of the employer. Operating on a tight timeline, we would like to organise the following with that in mind with details to be confirmed on Monday.

#### *Timeline – January 2023*

Thursday 12 January national HEC meets

Tuesday 10 January national Branch Delegates Meeting (BDM) to inform HEC decisions

Monday 9 January zoom Emergency General Meeting – to be confirmed

Friday 6 January zoom Teach-In, 'Reconceptualising how we strike' – to be confirmed

## **Local Strike Solidarity**

As we have seen, we are part of a much larger trade union movement. On *Friday 13th of January, at 7.30 pm, at the Gregson Centre*, there will be a fundraising event, “Which side are you on?” in support of local union strikes, organised by the Lancaster & Morecambe Trade Union Council. There will be bands and an open mic session. Let’s make it well-attended!

Our branch has donated £100, in addition to £100 previously to the posties’ CWU branch, who have been out on strike many days already. With low pay to start with, the lost pay is starting to bite. We need them to stand strong; they’ll need more support before this is over. You can also contribute by putting up posters at home, to show your support for striking workers.

## **Thank You**

We receive just 0.6 FTE buy-out (‘facility time’) to run the branch. This means a lot of voluntary work, particularly during industrial action. We would like to thank our officers and committee members, especially those who bear the burden of responsibility, going consistently over and above; thank you to our wonderful, inspiring department reps, getting the vote out again this year as well supporting colleagues; thank you to our voluntary caseworkers, who help others in often complex and distressing cases, and members who have volunteered their time, representing UCU on University probation and promotion committees. Most of all thank you to each one of you who has sacrificed yet again this year for fair pay and pensions and a just higher education system for all. We wish everyone a restful and restorative break.

In solidarity and unity,

LUCU committee