

Things you should know about the strike...¹

1. Universities UK is promoting hardline, life-changing cuts to staff pensions.

Analysis by independent consultants suggests that a lecturer starting work now may end up losing around £10 000 per year in retirement, or £208 000 in total.² Change on this scale will drive the best qualified people away from academic jobs.

2. UUK's "six-billion-pound hole in finances" is a myth.

The valuation process used by UUK to justify the cuts imagines that every university in the scheme might suddenly go bankrupt at once.³ In the real world, the existing pension scheme's incomings and outgoings are projected to be pretty well balanced for the next 40 years.⁴

3. The decision-making that led to the hardline plan was confused.

Many major universities do not support these hardline changes. They result from a consultation last September in which, according to UUK, 42% of employers wanted changes to reduce their own risks. It's now clear that this figure counts individual Oxford and Cambridge colleges, with tiny numbers of staff, as separate employers.⁵ Also, some of the responses included were not authorised by the relevant universities.⁶

4. Union members feel they have no choice but to strike.

The University and College Union (UCU) uses strike action as a last resort. The decision follows the failure of repeated efforts at negotiation, and a strike ballot that was supported by an overwhelming 88% of voting members nationally.⁷

5. The union wants to negotiate and end the strike.

UCU is ready to begin negotiations at any time, either directly or through the conciliation service Acas (as recommended by the National Union of Students), provided UUK doesn't impose preconditions that mean particular outcomes are not up for negotiation.⁸

6. Employers want to negotiate and end the strike.

The leaders of 19 of the 64 universities involved in the strike have now broken ranks with Universities UK to call for a resolution.⁹

7. UUK offers talks on "other issues", but is not negotiating on the main issue.

On Friday of last week, under growing pressure, UUK called publicly for discussions – but privately told university leaders that it would not negotiate on the loss of defined benefits, the issue that caused the strike in the first place.¹⁰ We're still waiting for a positive commitment.

8. Most students support the strike.

According to YouGov polling, only 2% of students think university staff are most to blame for the dispute.¹¹

9. The strike is not aimed at students.

Lecture cancellations are most visible, but many researchers, technicians, librarians, managers and non-teaching support staff have USS pensions and are on strike. The UCU represents postgraduate students as well as staff in research and other roles.¹² The aim of the strike is to put pressure on employers to persuade UUK back into genuine negotiations, leading to a fairer outcome for everyone involved.

1...with footnotes!

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² Derek Benstead for First Actuarial, "Report for UCU: a comparison of TPS with USS with and without a salary threshold", 29 November 2017, https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8916/TPS--USS-no-DB-comparison-First-Actuarial-29-Nov-17/pdf/firstactuarial_ussvstps_nodb_29nov17.pdf, p6 (case of Member M10).

³ Sean Wallis, "Made in Westminster: the source of the USS 'crisis' – and the solution", 8 February 2018, <https://heconvention2.wordpress.com/2018/02/08/made-in-westminster/>. For a further challenge to the deficit, see David Spiegelhalter et al., "Examining the numbers on pension valuations" (letter), *Financial Times*, 19 September 2017, copy at <http://www.dannydorling.org/p=6109>

⁴ Hilary Salt and Derek Benstead for First Actuarial, "Report for UCU: progressing the valuation of USS", 15 September 2017, https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8705/Progressing-the-valuation-of-the-USS-First-Actuarial-Sep-17/pdf/firstactuarial_progressing-valuation-uss_sep17.pdf

⁵ See Michael Otsuka's blog posts at <https://medium.com/@mikeotsuka> from February, particularly "Oxford's and Cambridge's role in the demise of USS", "Cambridge Colleges coordinated a rejection of USS's proposed level of risk", and "The rotten boroughs of the Isis and the Fens".

⁶ See responses summarised at <https://twitter.com/etymologic/status/966703675543613441>

⁷ University and College Union (hereafter UCU), "UCU announces 14 strike dates at 61 universities in pensions row", 29 January 2018, <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/9242/UCU-announces-14-strike-dates-at-61-universities-in-pensions-row>

⁸ UCU, "UCU says it remains ready for talks in university pensions row", 22 February 2018, <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/9349/UCU-says-it-remains-ready-for-talks-in-university-pensions-row>

⁹ According to UCU, Aberdeen, Strathclyde, Kent, Birkbeck, Goldsmiths, Bangor, Warwick, Loughborough, Newcastle, Glasgow, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Sheffield, Essex, Lancaster, Durham, Keele, and Surrey had all made statements by the end of Thursday 22 February: <https://twitter.com/ucu/status/96698055539011584>. Statements from Cambridge and Bristol followed on Friday 23rd: https://twitter.com/Cambridge_Uni/status/96703057458939042; <https://twitter.com/BristolUni/status/967108759381250049>. For the full list of universities involved in the action, see University and College Union, "Over 1 million students will be affected by university pensions strikes", 20 February 2018, <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/9338/Over-1-million-students-will-be-affected-by-university-pensions-strikes>

¹⁰ Universities UK, "Universities seek meaningful talks with UCU about USS", 23 February 2018, <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Pages/Universities-seek-meaningful-talks-with-UCU-about-USS.aspx>. Cf. email from Alastair Jarvis to vice-chancellors, accidentally shared to St Andrews university staff, 23 February 2018, reproduced at <https://www.facebook.com/amygilligan/posts/10102415714201539>: "Talks without preconditions cannot achieve a sustainable resolution to the dispute... it would hardly be responsible to re-open negotiations without the prospect of an alternative proposal [without keeping defined benefit contributions]... In the meantime, Universities UK has offered talks on a range of other issues, including agreeing a framework for a return to a defined benefit model *should economic and funding conditions improve*" [emphasis added].

¹¹ YouGov polling conducted 13 to 20 February 2018. University and College Union, "Poll shows students support pension strikes and blame universities for the disruption?", 22 February 2018, <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/9345/Poll-shows-students-support-pension-strikes-and-blame-universities-for-the-disruption?list=1676>

¹² Universities and Colleges Employers' Association, "Universities Superannuation Scheme", 2018, <http://www.ucea.ac.uk/en/empres/pensions/uss/>; University and College Union, "Who can join UCU?", 2018, <https://www.ucu.org.uk/whyjoin?detailid=2282>.

Ways to support the strike

1. Join UCU if you can

Membership is open to anyone who works as an academic, lecturer, trainer, instructor, researcher, administrator, manager, computer staff or librarian, and to postgraduate students. Full details at www.ucu.org.uk/join

Postgraduate students who are contracted to do some teaching can join for free.

If you're joining to be able to take part in strike action over USS, your membership will be dated from the day of application.

2. Don't cross the picket lines

The official picket lines are an important symbol of strike action and a way to communicate the scale of the shutdown to University management.

If you are a student or visitor, please demonstrate your support by staying outside of buildings or areas where you see UCU members picketing, or an "OFFICIAL PICKET" sign at the entrance.

We know that many staff in non-UCU roles support the strike but would be at risk of serious disciplinary action if they stayed out. Thanks for your support, and please make your decisions based on what's safe and reasonable for you.

Current remaining scheduled strike days (assuming no return to full negotiations) are:

Monday 5 • Tuesday 6 • Wednesday 7 • Thursday 8 March

Monday 12 • Tuesday 13 • Wednesday 14 • Thursday 15 • Friday 16 March

3. Show your support at pickets and demos

Please come along to the picket lines and any organised demonstrations that you hear about, chat to the pickets, and make sure your support is visible – this is particularly useful if you're a student.

Picketing is often a cold and miserable business: pickets welcome gifts of hot drinks and fatty/sugary food.

4. Write to your university leader

There's a list of contact details for vice-chancellors and other university leaders at tinyurl.com/contact-VCs. Contact them and ask them to use their influence to get Universities UK back to the negotiating table **without preconditions**. (Please be polite!)

5. Donate to the fighting fund

If you have cash to spare, please consider a donation to the official UCU strike fund. Members aren't paid for the time they're on strike, and the fund prioritises making payments to strikers who are precariously employed or suffering hardship (including postgraduate student members who lose teaching hours they were relying on for support). Details at www.ucu.org.uk/fightingfund

For more suggestions, links, contacts, sample wordings for protest messages, and background info on the pensions mess and the strike, see this blog (not our blog, but we think it's great):
UCUstrike.wordpress.com