

Members strike over zero pay award

UNISON members at the University of Brighton have taken strike action over the 2020 0% pay award, whilst five other universities are beginning a ballot over the 2021, 1.5% pay offer.

Alongside Brighton, members in Oxford, Solent, Southampton, Sussex and Winchester will all be taking part in the vote over action.

Under the approach that UNISON has adopted this time, each ballot will be separate, so that a vote for action in one university can go ahead even if a vote in another is lost.

Under the anti-trade union laws, turnout will still need 50% of those eligible to take part to cast a vote, and the majority of those, voting YES for a ballot to succeed.

In real terms, many of UNISON's members are effectively being offered 1.5% over two years – less than the current rate of inflation (using the Consumer Price Index), which in November stood at 4.2%.

Many members have also seen the inadequate pay offer as little reward for the huge efforts that were made during the start of the Covid pandemic and the way in which the workforce has faced redundancies, increasing workloads and additional pressure to support students.

Commenting on Brighton's day of action, UNISON's branch secretary Ivan Bonsell said: "Alongside UCU, dozens of our members were on the picket lines at all four campuses in Brighton and Eastbourne demanding decent pay, with students from both Brighton and Sussex universities showing their support."

"If the university doesn't start talking to us about a bonus payment then we will be out again in the New Year until we have a settlement."



Early morning picket at University of Brighton © UNISON

Speakers at a midday rally attended by around 300 staff and students made the case for decent pay for all higher education staff, an end to tuition fees and for a fully publicly funded education system.

The current 2021 pay offer means that for many on the lowest pay point working more than a 35-hour week, they fall below the foundation living wage rate of £9.90 an hour.

In truth, the latest offer falls far short of UNISON's claim for a £2,500 increase and a move towards introducing a 35-hour working week for all HE staff.

UNISON's HE national officer, Ruth Levin said: "Whilst this pay offer finally brings the pay freeze to an end, it simply doesn't go far enough to address the loss in value of the wages of higher education staff working so hard to keep their universities going over the last two years."

"The six branches taking part in the ballot will now be working hard to ensure a 50% turnout and a massive YES vote for action."

Keeping in touch - Moved house? Changed job?

If your details have changed, please amend your membership record at unison.org.uk/my-unison or contact your branch. If you would like to find out what is going on in HE across the region you can join our online, informal HE meetings which are held every few weeks. Please send your email address to n.duncan-jordan@unison.co.uk if you'd like an invitation.

HE pensions must tackle climate change

Many universities offer occupational pensions to staff that are part of the LGPS (Local Government Pension Scheme), but few members realise the importance of how their pensions are invested.

In Hampshire, UNISON campaigners representing universities such as Solent, Portsmouth and Winchester have joined forces with local government branches and environmental groups to call on the LGPS fund to divest from fossil fuels.

The Hampshire fund currently invests an estimated £136,056,249 in environmentally destructive industries - putting it in the country's top quartile of fossil fuel investments.

UNISON will be approaching employers that contribute to the fund – including universities – to call for changes such as:

- Stopping investments in environmentally destructive industries
- Committing to managing investments in line with the Paris target of limiting global temperature rises to 1.5c



Protest outside Hampshire LGPS meeting © UNISON

- Publishing a strategy and a timetable outlining how this can be achieved

The region's LGPS secretary, Neil Duncan-Jordan said: "It is vital that branches in our universities start to raise these concerns with their Vice Chancellors and put pressure on them to bring these concerns to their pension fund boards."

"So many of our members pay into this scheme and they have been appalled to find out how their money is being invested."

"There can be no retirement on a dying planet," he added.

HE conference set to debate strategy and policy

Activists from around the country will gather in Newcastle on 3 February 2022 for UNISON's one-day HE conference.

Delegates will debate 23 motions that have been submitted on a range of topics from hybrid working and pensions to structural racism in universities and the impact of Covid on support staff.

One of the main areas of debate will focus on the union's pay strategy and whether or not future industrial action ballots should be conducted on an aggregated or national basis, rather than a disaggregated or local basis.

There are also calls to formulate a plan that will help HE members engage with the issues around pay so that they will be more confident to vote in any future industrial action ballots.

Homeworking will also be covered along with the call for members to have the right to disconnect from work and to have a genuine balance between work and personal/private lives.

The impact of Covid has raised a number of concerns and there are also motions calling for staff to be compensated for the added costs of working from home, along with recognition for the amount of hidden hours that are being worked outside of the office by staff not taking lunch breaks answering emails into the evening.

There are also concerns around increased instances of sickness absence, especially in relation to mental health, anxiety and stress, alongside a rise in bullying.

The conference will set the strategy and policy for the coming year and UNISON will organise a report back in due course.

TAKE ACTION: The South East Region HE Committee AGM will take place at UNISON headquarters in London on 6 April. Branches are encouraged to send delegates and take part. Details to follow.