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change was the only way to deal with the deficit in the pension scheme, with the only alternative being to increase the contributions paid in by both employers and staff – and that making higher contributions would result in member universities making ‘serious cuts to teaching, research and jobs’.

The University and College Union (UCU) is a trade union representing casualised researchers, teaching staff, and permanent lecturers (postgraduates intending to follow a career in any of these sectors are also eligible to join). UCU were strongly critical of UUK’s proposed changes to the pension scheme. They argued that the proposal would leave a typical lecturer £10,000 a year worse off in retirement, and that younger staff (those who would spend the longest amount of their working life under the new scheme) could lose up to half of their anticipated pension. This

The proposal would leave a typical lecturer £10,000 a year worse off in retirement, and younger staff would lose up to half of their anticipated pension.

was a major concern for many academics. Paul told Cultured Scene “Salaries are relatively low compared to other professional groups, hours are long and demands are high. I am 55 so the evaluation of my pension would be detrimental but nowhere near as significant as for those starting

out twenty or even ten years after me.” Kirsty said “I chose to take part because as someone who is just starting my academic career, I didn’t want to wait and say “I’ll strike when I have a permanent job.” I thought that if I didn’t go on strike, this might not be a system in which I want to get a permanent job.”

UCU also argued that the original valuation of the scheme, which appeared to demonstrate a deficit, was flawed, and that UUK’s negotiating position had been unduly influenced by the views of Oxford and Cambridge Universities, whose

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UK Higher Education Strikes

member colleges had been allowed to make individual submissions in response to consultations. UCU balloted their members, a majority of whom voted for both strike action and action short of a strike. This meant that UCU members at institutions whose local UCU branches had received the required turn-out of 50% and voted for strike action did not attend work on the days in February and March specified by the UCU. They also took part in action short of a strike – this meant that on days on which no full strike action was occurring, members worked to contract (sticking strictly to the work duties and hours outlined in their contracts), and did not take on any additional work, such as covering for absent colleagues, rescheduling lectures cancelled due to the strike, or undertaking any additional voluntary activities. Some members also resigned from their roles as external examiners.

During this strike action, members formed picket lines outside their workplaces, holding up placards to put forward their view and handing out leaflets to inform passers-by about the strike. Many members also organised ‘teach-outs’ during the strike, public events where striking staff shared their knowledge on everything from trade unionism to hypnosis to juggling. Kirsty had a very positive experience of the strike itself, telling *Cultured Scene* “It was like this rallying force had pulled everyone together from across departments that otherwise never communicated with one another. The snow days were the best days. People brought hot drinks, snacks, music; the snow could have kept people in but instead more people came out!”. Paul’s experience was more mixed, and he told us “My experience of industrial action is a little different to some others as I used to be a coal miner and was on strike for a year 1984/85. This isn’t meant as a badge of honour but my emotional interpretation is different. The camaraderie in any strike is special and the recent action created many great bonds with colleagues - to be fair, the people I was closest

to before are the same people who were on strike The most negative aspects were two-fold - (a) the position of my own and other Universities (and UUK) senior management treating this like it was a bun-fight and we are just kids in the park throwing our toys out of the pram, and (b) the incredibly negative affect on the mental health of some of my colleagues; they were bitter, spiteful, and hurt by the disingenuousness on both sides of the strike.”

As might be expected in 2018, social media played a strong role during the strike. Those on the picket lines shared photos and stories of their strike

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experience, and in depth analyses of the proposed changes to the USS scheme were posted on Twitter. Kirsty found that “Twitter was one of the best ways to keep informed. UCU branches around the country were sharing updates from their picket lines and meetings. And the threads unpacking the proposed USS

scheme were fantastic. From what I saw, striking academics were able to mobilise online much more effectively than UUK and I think that also helped with getting students on board.” Paul found that “Twitter was a fantastic source of information and support but it did get to a point where there was too much going on and too many people expressing their despair and I had to stop following them. I am pragmatic, it is an economic issue and there is no point in turning it into any personal heart-breaking attack on one’s self or worth.”

Despite the potential disruption to their education, students tended to support the strike action. The National Union of Students officially supported the strike, and a YouGov poll conducted just before the strike began found that 61% of student respondents supported the strike.

How did it all end?

After 14 days of strikes, UUK and UCU talks resulted in a new proposal from UUK, offering a

joint expert panel to review the valuation of the pension scheme, to make recommendations if, in light of a new valuation, either contributions or benefits need to be adjusted, and to discuss the USS's comparability with the Teacher's Pension Scheme (the pension scheme used by most post-1992 higher education institutions) and alternative scheme designs. On the 13th of April UCU members voted by 64% to accept the UUK offer, and the industrial action ended. However, the issue is not yet resolved, although Paul thinks "the strike succeeded in precisely what it set out to do - there was never going to be a triple-lock agreement on protected pensions. I think it will be resolved as the affordability of pensions has improved so much since our salaries have fared so poorly and University incomes are large and protected." At the end of June, UCU announced that it will ballot its members this autumn for support of industrial action in order to achieve pay increases for higher education staff.

What does this all mean for early-career researchers?

While retirement and pensions may seem to be far-off for many of us, pension provision is a key benefit offered by employers, and is something that we should all be taking into consideration when making career decisions. The way that academia works means that early-career researchers and teaching staff may not start making pension contributions until after they've completed their PhD and started their first full-time job – this puts us at a disadvantage in comparison with workers in other sectors who start paying in much earlier. For this reason, whether or not one agrees with either the UCU or UUK's arguments, pensions are a key issue that affects us all.

But these strikes can be seen as being about more than just pensions. The industrial action this year took place in a higher education landscape in the UK in which wages for lecturers have fallen in real terms for the last 8 years (with any pay increases failing to keep up with an increasing cost of living),

in which one-third of all academic staff and two-thirds of research-only staff are employed on fixed-term contracts, many of which only last 12 months, in which students are paying the highest tuition fees in fifty years, and in which the sector is seeing increasing commercialisation, with the current universities minister arguing for a university comparison website which would base the 'value' of a degree upon the salaries of its graduates.

So what should early-career researchers do?

Kirsty suggests they consider joining their union, especially during their PhD studies because "PhD students don't pay UCU membership fees! I did not realise that until the strike. If I'd known when I was a PhD student, it would have been great to join sooner so that I'd have a better grasp of what the union is and what it does. Since the strike, the UCU branches are maintaining more activity than before, and the communities of university employees that met on the picket lines will hopefully last for a long time to come!" Paul points out that effecting change in higher education working conditions isn't just about union membership or industrial action, but about working to improve the culture of your department year in year out - "We are told to collaborate but be independent, to be first author and to compete for funding against colleagues with whom we are friends. Early-career researchers in a department should agree it isn't a competition and only work 40 hours a week, never evenings or weekends, unless that is their preferred 'pattern'. If senior staff say you should be working longer or even if you perceive that to be the case, take a deep breath, consult any major non-totalitarian guide (religious or otherwise) and join the union and tell them to f*** off. Alternatively look at any work on human physiology or psychology that explains the damage that long hours do to your cognitive ability, physical health, and mental health." □

Did you take part in the strike action? Perhaps you have a different view on the issues raised in this article – or a view on issues regarding the work environment in academia outside the UK. We'd love to hear from you - contact Rachel Harrison at journalsec2@eslrsociety.org