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University of Brighton Branch Newsletter

June 2017

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Welcome to our June newsletter, brought to you in full, just before the end of June.

As always, lots to say and a limited amount of time to say it, but thanks to all our members who made an effort to vote in favour of public services—you know what I mean. We'll see what the next few months hold as far as national changes to higher education policy and funding are concerned, but in the meantime, we need to ask most of you to vote (again) over the national pay offer. We also have a bit to say about Voluntary Severance.

This is the longer version of the newsletter. Happy reading!

Ivan Bonsell, Branch Secretary

2017-18 Pay Consultation

University employees

As we reported last month, at the last meeting between the employers' organisation (UCEA) and the five trade unions across higher education, UCEA made their "full and final offer". This is **1.7%** for all spinal points except for those at grades 1, 2 and 3 where the offer is equal to roughly **£365**, making the percentage increase at this university range from 2.3% at the start of grade 1 to 1.7% at the top of grade 3.

To put this another way, it's **1.7%**, or a bit more if you're grades 1 to 3, meaning that everyone would approximately get **at least £1 extra a day** from **August 2017**.

The offer also includes some limited work on pay gender reporting and action towards equality and to look again at casual employment, which we would welcome. (Full details of the offer can be found on our blog.)

UNISON's Higher Education Service Group Executive (HESGE) met in May and decided that this is the best that can be achieved through negotiation alone and that industrial action would be required to improve the offer.

This Branch believes that whilst the offer is numerically better than we've had before, with all measures of inflation around 3.0% and expected to go higher, this offer falls well short of what's required to keep our members on top of rent, bills and other costs. It addresses the issue of low pay in such a limited way that our demand of £10/hour for all higher education workers is overlooked, forcing many of our members to survive on poverty wages and benefits.

So, **we recommend that you reject the offer**, which if done on a national basis, will result in a formal strike ballot with the intention of pushing UCEA to offer more.

However you vote, **the important thing is that all our eligible members do**. If you're not sure how to vote, then talk to your workmates, UNISON contacts or stewards. **We want to make sure that this union is led by its members, so your participation is crucial for the branch and the union.**

There are two ways to vote—please make sure you only do one (!)

Either,

1. email UNISONHelp@brighton.ac.uk with **2017-18 Pay Ballot** in the title, and indicate whether you want to **ACCEPT** or **REJECT** the offer.

Or,

2. put a cross on the ballot form and return it to **Sarah Pickett, UNISON Office, Steam House, Moulsecoomb**. (You can fold the ballot into three, staple it and return it in the internal post.)

The **deadline** for emails or ballots returned is **5pm on Friday 30th June**, so please make sure you vote by then.

We're always interested in any questions, observations or comments that you have, so feel free to get in touch or talk to our reps. Thanks in advance for your participation. We'll let you know the local and national results as soon as we can.

Voluntary Severance

For the first time ever, the University has introduced a Voluntary Severance Scheme (VSS). This is posed as a way of reducing the number of staff and therefore staff costs, and flows from the suggestion that the cost of staff at the University being "too high". By asking for volunteers, the University will, apparently, avoid the "need for compulsory redundancies" later on, provided enough of the right people apply.

As we've said before, having high staff costs is only a problem if you decide it is. Comparisons with other universities are fraught with problems of matching like with like against other multi-layered, complex institutions. (The university with the lowest staff costs is highly unlikely to be handing out bonuses or recruiting more people to bring them nearer to the "correct" ratio.)

Focussing only on staff costs leads to bizarre decisions (as we have seen) where income-generating groups are put at risk at the same time as income streams which generate surpluses for the University.

It is obvious, but worth stating again, that a reasonable salary limit of say £75,000 would save significant sums in University staff costs and send out a message to current and future students about Brighton being different and daring to challenge the perceived wisdom about paying to get "the right people." All our employees could be in the 95%.

If you accept the concept of higher education being a business, then reducing costs while maintaining productivity is something you'd always try to aim for. (You'd also probably scrap all non-profitable areas – postgraduate courses, research, and arts/science courses and turn the University into a School of Business, Humanities and Social Science only.) So with this logic, it makes sense to dangle a carrot in front of people you can do without, if that will tempt them to go away quickly.

This scheme is not so much a scheme involving careful regulation and a consistent process, but a framework for what will potentially become individual settlement agreements i.e. personalised confidential arrangements where the University gives the applicant some money in exchange for them agreeing to quietly disappear off to the job centre.

Unless you're particularly well paid and/or have many years' service since your 41st birthday, it's unlikely that you'll be tempted to go unless you're reasonably confident of getting work elsewhere pretty quickly. For many, the loss in value of their pension will make this seem like less of a good deal.

However, our concern is that for some people, the chance of being given more cash than you've ever had in one go, combined with not really wanting to work at an institution where stress is endemic and staff are being encouraged to leave, may tempt some to make poorly advised decisions.

UNISON's position is that we're disappointed that the University is seeking to solve its problem of funding shiny new buildings by paying off its own members of staff. No attempt to spin this will turn it into something that we should see as an opportunity for the University.



We totally understand if people are tempted by the scheme, but we'd suggest that all potential applicants think very carefully about giving up their job and what implications that might have.

UNISON has been shown what the scheme involves and have verbally commented on it, but we have certainly not negotiated or agreed anything in relation to it.

Our role as a trade union, is to defend and advance the terms and conditions of support staff at the University and in times such as this, our main concern has to be those still here after their workmates have gone. **Under no circumstances should work be spread out across remaining members of staff or should individuals be asked to pick up extra work as a result of this.**

We will not accept a situation where the VSS leads to the same amount of work being done by fewer members of staff. Just like individuals thinking of leaving, the University needs to think very carefully about the implications of losing chunks out of its best asset, when student experience is supposed to be what we're all striving to improve.

VSS—some practical advice

A trade union never wants to ease a situation where its members leave their jobs, but we recognise that members will be interested for a variety of reasons.

If you've been chosen as member of a group which can apply for voluntary severance then UNISON can help you with some of the practicalities, but on the bigger questions—effect on pensions, benefits, mortgages, we are untrained, unqualified and not insured to give advice, so you will need to seek professional help. We're happy to point you in the right direction.

It's worth pointing out that the initial calculator was incorrect, so if you're basing your application on the figure it calculated on the first couple of days, then it's worth checking again. We're currently arguing with HR over whether shift allowances or regular overtime should be included. We think it should.

If you are invited to apply, then there's no reason for not doing, if you think that there's a chance you would be interested. We're not suggesting that people should apply for the sake of it, but the 30th June deadline means that you wouldn't want to regret not having done so, and nothing commits you to going until the final point of signing the agreement, at which you could potentially leave or decide to stay. At that point, you should have got all the professional advice you need. If you haven't then potentially you can ask for a delay to the process. The lack of fixed rules, given that the scheme involves an individual agreement, we would say, allows some flexibility over timing.

We have been told that there is no flexibility over the amount or the possibility of enhancing pensions, but again, potentially there's always scope for flexibility. You just need to ask. It may be that they have a hard line on this, but if you don't ask, you won't get. Applicants who take this further than an initial inquiry won't be able to compare notes, because there will be a secrecy clause that goes with the agreement.

The most important thing to say is that this should not be seen as an easy option. It's potentially a life changing decision that you will have to make.

What's worth remembering though is that the University is only going to be willing to spend public money on "releasing" people they can manage without. The promotions process for academics means that it's possible to replace a principal lecturer or researcher with a lower graded recruit provided the work is reorganised or areas of teaching or research reduce. For support that, this is just not possible, and most of us would need to be replaced at the same grade to do the same job.

You need to ask yourself, "what's in it for the University?". If they think you might retire or leave anyway, would they give you money to go?

There is a limited amount of funding set aside for this. Our guess is that the number of support staff who will ultimately go will be minimal, in some very targeted areas.

That said, nobody, least of all UMB have a clue how this this going to pan out, and to some extent, this is a fishing exercise to see what happens. Managers will see who applies and then determine what, if anything, they can do to re-jig the services. Cue yet more reorganisations and changes. It's going to be an interesting Summer.

LSE Cleaners win a massive victory!

Our branch heard about the strikes at the LSE last month and gave them financial support. This is taken from the United Voices of the World Website:

UVW is proud to announce that the LSE cleaners will be BROUGHT IN-HOUSE and become employees of the LSE from Spring 2018! This will ensure they get, among other things, 41 days annual leave, 6 months full pay sick pay and 6 months half pay sick pay, plus proper employer pension contributions of up to 13% of their salary.

This is the most significant victory for any group of workers in UK higher education today, and will hopefully set a precedent to follow for other degraded outsourced workers across the country.

This announcement comes on the back of an awe-inspiring 10 month battle for dignity and equality waged by the cleaners, through their union UVW which represents the near entirety of the unionised cleaners on the LSE campus.

This dispute saw the largest number of cleaners – all of whom are migrant and BAME workers and most of whom had never been unionised before – in UK history strike from a single workplace, and saw the cleaners take 7 days of strike action in total, with 3 more pledged for the LSE's student graduation days in July. There were also several protests and two occupations through the course of this dispute.

The cleaners were heavily supported by the student led Justice for LSE Cleaners Campaign and the wider trade union movement.



We'll be going to London next Saturday for this. Please let us know if you want to come with us.