



Our newsletter is free to all members.

If you're not a member then you're inadvertently weakening our ability to defend each other, so please join!

## University of Brighton Branch Newsletter

*October 2017*

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Welcome to our October newsletter.

For many, a new academic year will mean a new start, but for lots of University employees, the feeling that the University has changed, and not in a good way, will be what we're all thinking. Now more than ever, it's important for us to be organised and stick together.

A trade union exists because hundreds of individuals have recognised that their interests are best served as a united collective, rather than remaining as isolated individuals.

Quite often, and perhaps more often than not these days, people decide to join a trade union because they need help, after years of thinking they'd be OK on their own. We always welcome more members, but the challenge is to get people to join before they need our assistance, because in becoming a member, you're supporting all those who do need our help now, and crucially, making our ability to campaign for all of our interests, much stronger.

This edition of our newsletter is dedicated to the concept of the collective.

*Ivan Bonsell, Branch Secretary*



## ***What is a trade union?***

A trade union is an organised group of workers who have come together to achieve common goals. These might be better pay, holidays, working conditions, safety and welfare etc.

Where a trade union is recognised by the employer, its elected representatives negotiate on behalf of all employees covered by the union, so here, this is all non-teaching staff of the University or Students' Union.

Where issues are negotiated nationally, like the annual pay award for University staff, a group of elected representatives from all trade unions in higher education negotiate with UCEA, the employers' group.

The point of a trade union is not just to make negotiations easier. Since the beginnings of present society, the most sensible sections of working people have always recognised that sticking together makes sense. This is because we're the ones who do the work! The managers can make the decisions, but ultimately they'd be powerless to even begin to run a university without us.

This essential fact gives us power, because if we decide, democratically of course, to withdraw our cooperation, then their best hope would be to negotiate a resolution. They could try to discipline or even dismiss us, but any management consultant would tell them that this would be a disaster.

The power that we have as organised workers means that we can usually push things in a direction that benefits us all.

As well as dealing with the big issues, we also take up individual cases where members have problems requiring help. These can be important cases where members are threatened with dismissal or smaller cases requiring some advice. Either way, we approach each case on the basis that the member receives support on behalf of the whole branch as an act of solidarity. **An injury to one is an injury to all**, remains the principle on which we operate.



It's worth considering what the situation would be like if trade unions didn't exist. In recent years, unions have campaigned and won:

- *A national minimum wage*
- *Improved parental leave*
- *Equality legislation*
- *Laws on reasonable working hours*

Without a trade union, we're open to management promoting their favourites, ignoring health, safety welfare and equalities and pretty much putting "the needs of the business" ahead of our collective interests.

Some people may think that they can use their skill and judgement to navigate the world of work without the need to be organised. These people are happy to accept all the benefits that unions have campaigned for them over the years, but could soon recognise their shortcomings if left to negotiate with management as individuals.

For the most farsighted of working people, joining a trade union makes perfect sense.

## Five Common Reasons why people don't join a trade union:

### ***I was never asked.***

It is true that many members of staff have never been asked or encouraged to join. We're aiming to make sure all new starters are asked to join within a few weeks of them starting work.

### ***You have to pay and I can't afford it.***

Joining a trade union isn't free, and if it were up to us, UNISON would be a lot cheaper, but members recognise that their money is going to support us all to gain better working conditions, including better pay.

### ***It's not relevant to me.***

Since when has pay, holidays, leave, safety, equalities etc. not been relevant?



### ***I don't want to be labelled as a trouble-causer.***

Being prepared to stick up for yourself and other, potentially vulnerable people does not equate to causing trouble. We're just people who want to stick together to get the best deal for us all.

### ***I don't want to have to accept the will of the majority if I don't agree with the decisions.***

You probably do in every other aspect of life. All members have the right to put their point of view, but trade unions have to be democratic to function properly. Faced with a decision, we debate and discuss, we vote, and then we carry out that decision collectively.



The University of Brighton Christmas spirit is alive and well:

*The university will not make any contribution to Christmas parties.*

*Staff will not be given any time off for any Christmas event.*

*Departments / Schools are not expected to close as a result of staff attending a Christmas event.*

i.e. don't even think about it.

Putting students at the heart of everything we do requires us to forget about making the slightest concession to keeping the staff happy at Christmas. We're not expecting any more than many of us were used to, but the concept of working somewhere where your contribution felt valued seems to be slipping away.



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## ***What's this branch doing?***

Over the last year or so, in no particular order, here are some of the things we've done....

- \* Secured a 2.5% pay award for Students' Union staff.
- \* Written and successfully passed motions at Higher Education Conference and UNISON's National Delegate Conference, reaffirming UNISON's commitment to a £10/hour minimum wage (amongst other issues.)
- \* Argued for a proper system to be put in place for Student Services' casual staff, to give job security and access to other employee benefits.
- \* Argued that the University leave allowance is discriminatory to distinguish between different grades and begun to negotiate on a new flat rate allowance.
- \* Supported members who have faced dismissal over sickness absence.
- \* Campaigned over the closure of Hastings campus.
- \* Challenged the narrative of the pay costs being "too high" and the consequent need for redundancies.
- \* Organised a UNISON LGBT group to attend UNISON's national LBGT Conference and campaign alongside the University equalities group.
- \* Exposed unequal treatment of Students' Union term-time-only staff in relation to annual leave and Bank Holiday leave.
- \* Organised consultative ballots on pay for both University and Students' Union members.
- \* Achieved a good turnout at our Annual General Meeting, despite the difficulties of being a split site branch.
- \* Represented the branch at UNISON's Regional Committee and Regional Council.
- \* Attended every induction event for new starters.
- \* Conducted a walk-around of (almost) the entire University, to meet members and ask people to consider joining.
- \* Held monthly branch committee meetings and local members' meetings to hear about members' concerns and offer help and support.
- \* Argued for a proper system to be put in place for changes to job descriptions and potential re-grades.
- \* Produced a regular, monthly newsletter for all members to keep people up to date with what we're doing.
- \* Attended Safety and Welfare Committees to campaign for the University to conduct a stress survey soon, or we'll do our own!
- \* Maintained a network of volunteer branch officers, stewards and health and safety reps, who have given their time and dedication to supporting the branch.
- \* Given support to members making complaints or taking out grievances.
- \* Defended members threatened with disciplinary action.
- \* Engaged with consultation over the (seemingly endless) list of reorganisations.
- \* Attended meetings with senior managers to argue for policies and procedures that recognise the contribution support staff make to the success of this university.

## Don't just join—get involved!

Stewards are the backbone of a union branch. They're the union reps elected by each site to promote the union and deal with joint and individual cases which members raise. Any member can become a steward and with appropriate training, can be the voice of the union and make a difference.

If you're not yet ready to become a steward, we have a network of reps who are the first point of contact for any questions people have.



Health, Safety and Welfare is very important for trade-unions. Any member can become a Safety Rep, which gives the authority to conduct inspections and draw attention to problems which the University needs to deal with. With so many people ill through stress and the pressures of work, a Safety Rep also campaigns for better working conditions for us all. We currently have no dedicated Health and Safety Officer, so please let us know if you'd like to fill that vacancy.

Equality Reps are important, not just to promote equality across the University, but also to campaign for a workplace and society with no prejudice and injustice. There's still a long way to go, but trade unions are the leading campaigners for equal rights and justice for all. Our LGBT group is attending UNISON's national conference in Brighton in mid-November, with the largest ever delegation. Let us know if you'd like to go along.



The only limits on what we can do as a trade union branch is the number of activists willing to get involved. If you have something you'd like to organise that would promote our branch and union, then let us know.

If you want to find out more about being a steward, safety or equalities rep, or even a branch officer, just ask a local activist.

# *Scrap the cap and give workers a proper pay rise, says UNISON*

UNISON is campaigning for an end to the government's pay cap i.e. limit on the pay rises allowed for public sector workers. You could debate for a long time whether higher education is public sector, but we are, of course in favour of all workers getting annual increases to pay that are at least in line with genuine inflation— that is, the real increase in costs of the things working people buy—food, housing, travel etc.

UNISON's focus here is public sector workers in the NHS or local authorities, whose pay should go up in April. Our timescale is slightly different, but for a pay rise which makes up for everything we've lost since 2010, we'd be looking at about 15%!

UNISON's national material suggests that "we deserve a proper pay rise", but is unclear about what proper means. Getting the current or future government to remove a formal limit for pay "restraint" would be a start, but we need to recognise that the pay rise we finally get is entirely dependent on working people fighting for it, and not just on parliamentary debates.



The higher education conference in January will debate UNISON's position as part of the joint union approach to talks. The current motion suggests a flat rate £1,500 or 7.5% (whichever is greater) as a starting point, which seems reasonable, but we'll need to mobilise our members and other union members across the entire sector to achieve anything close to that.

As we've pointed out elsewhere, if non-members would like a pay rise that keeps up with inflation, then they need to join us and play a part in campaigning for it. There is no realistic alternative to being organised collectively.

