

UNISON 2021-22 Pay Campaign

1st and 2nd March 2022 Strike FAQs

Why are we striking?

This is a national dispute over pay. UCEA (the employers' organisation of which the University of Brighton is a member) have imposed a 1.5% increase from August 2021, with slightly higher increases for lower grades. The year before, in August 2020, we had a pay freeze i.e. no increase at all.

For most of us, our wages have only increased by 1.5% since September 2019!

Meanwhile, the cost of living has gone up dramatically and will continue to do so, as inflation is around 7% and predicted to reach 8% soon. National insurance, council tax, gas and electricity prices will all go up in April. What we're paid can't keep up with the cost of just buying the basics and many of our members are struggling.

If we could secure a better pay deal by asking for it politely we'd do that, but experience shows that you need to threaten and then be prepared to take action before the employers will listen.

Some universities have lots of money, some have less. We're not just demanding that universities bankrupt themselves by paying us properly. We're demanding proper funding of universities by central government.

Is it against the law to strike?

Although there is no positive legal right to strike in the UK, strike action organised by a trade union is legal provided some tough conditions are met. We've had a ballot and secured a legal mandate to strike over pay with a positive vote in favour of striking and a turnout in excess of 50%.

Provided members strike on the days we've notified the University i.e. 1st and 2nd March, then there's no need to worry about being disciplined. Members should not face any unfair treatment for exercising their right to strike. You shouldn't be singled out for sticking up for yourself and other union members.

What does striking involve?

Not going to work, or doing any work at home on that day. We know that many people do jobs that are flexible, but the principle should be that any work due to be done on a strike day should not be. Members will need to exercise their judgement about what to do when returning to work on Thursday 3rd March, but working harder to catch up defeats the point of the strike.

The reason for striking is to make the employers tell UCEA that they need to make us a better offer.

Ultimately, we need to show that the University can't function properly without the workforce i.e. those of us who do all the work, but the University will try to show that

it can by relying on people who will work that day. The more members we have and the more people we have taking strike action, the more likely we are to be successful.

What's the picket line for?

Picket lines are made up of striking workers who are there to ask others to join the strike. For our strike to be successful, we need as many people as possible to take strike action, and there's an expectation that members would join the strike because we've had a democratic vote over it.

Depending on the nature of the strike and the type of workplace, many picket lines are to show that we're serious. We want to be able to ask all University workers to not cross the picket line, that is, join the union and join the strike.

Obviously we have to accept that some people will want to work, either because they don't understand what's going on or they don't agree with us, but every one that does is undermining the strike and making our job harder. We have to respect their right to work, if that's what they choose to do, but there's no reason we can't patiently and peacefully explain to them why we want them to join us.

If we do get better pay as a result of this, we'll all benefit, members and non-members.

Should I expect to have my wages deducted?

Yes, you won't be paid for being on strike, at least not by the University. All those striking should declare, afterwards, that they took strike action on the relevant day. The University will deduct 1/365th of the annual salary for each strike day.

For example, a grade 2 caretaker with a 10% shift allowance should expect to lose £60.55 for each strike day. A grade 4 administrator, working part time 18.5 hours a week would lose £30.08.

The University will assume that people work the same hours every day, so part time staff working disproportionately fewer hours than average on a strike day would potentially be deducted more than they should have been. In this case, it's worth contacting HR and asking them to adjust this. They can't deduct more than they would have paid you!

Obviously, if you're not due to work on a strike day then there's no need to declare it because you're not on strike, but you can still come and join us on the day.

The good news is that UNISON will pay strike pay to all those taking action of up to £50 per day. What we can't do is pay you more than you've lost, after tax and NI, so the part time administrator, losing £30.08 in gross terms would probably lose something like £25 after tax, and all claims for strike pay will have to be based on this calculation.

How do we claim strike pay?

After the strikes, we'll make sure all members know how to claim. We'll probably want to see some evidence that you took action i.e. wage slips with deductions.

The idea of strike pay is that we can alleviate some of the difficulties people have in not being able to take action because of the worry of not affording to. We understand the irony of not being able to strike over pay, because you don't have enough pay.

The reality is that if we don't take strike action, we're never going to be able to get our pay anywhere near to where it should be.

Are all UNISON members expected to strike?

Not quite. Only those working directly for the University should take strike action, so not those working for the Students' Union or other organisations.

If you are within a year of retiring, you are exempt, because striking will have a small effect on your final pension. Also, **if you're pregnant and have notified the University of the expected date of the birth**, striking could affect your maternity pay, so you are also exempt.

For that reason, we don't expect you to take part, but you could try to take annual leave instead.

As a democratic union, we would expect all members to respect the decision made by the ballot and join the strike. We appreciate that not everyone will agree with this and equally, we have to respect that point of view.

In trying to patiently explain how we see this, our union is based on members collectively sticking together to make working life better for all of us. Taking big decisions by having a democratic ballot of all members is the best way of involving members in what our union does.

If we vote to accept a pay offer, then we all have to accept that, and not try to strike over it (!), but if we decide to do something about it by striking then we would hope that all members follow that decision, even if they voted against it.

Obviously we can't force members to strike, but we want to be able to persuade most that in this case, they should do.

Do I need to tell my manager that I'm striking?

No, but you might want to. Some managers will be expected to try to minimise the disruption caused by the strike. Please don't help them any more than you feel you should do. The point is to cause disruption. We want the strike to be as successful as possible.

What about non-members?

This is a great time to ask people to join the union. If people join on the day, they can join the strike and claim strike pay, so please encourage everyone to consider joining.

On 1st and 2nd March, we'll be striking alongside UCU members so we should encourage academic staff to join UCU if they're not already members.

What about the students?

The NUS is officially supporting the strike, but Brighton NUS sadly isn't. Many students will recognise that it's in all our interests to have a university run by happy, well paid employees, whether that's lecturers, technicians, librarians or cleaners.

We should ask students to support us and encourage them to get involved in what we're doing. We want them to join a union as well if they're working.

Is it all going to be worth it?

We genuinely don't know, but we know that if we do nothing, our wages will fall and fall because the employers will know that we won't do anything about it other than grumble. There's no guarantee that strike action will win, but from the employers' point of view, they will be thinking what it would take for us to not strike and the more determined we are, the more they will want to reach a settlement. They don't want staff on strike any more than we want to have to do it.

Any more questions?

If we've not answered your questions, please feel free to get in touch.

Hopefully we'll see you on a picket line, at our demonstration or on-line rally.