



# **RISE TOGETHER FOR BETTER PAY**

**HIGHER EDUCATION PAY 2023/24**

## **University of Brighton UNISON branch, October 2023 Strike FAQs**

We've put this together to answer some of the more common questions, especially if you're new to all this.

### **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 an increase of 5%, 6% or 7%, paid partially in February 2023 and then in August 2023. This is still well below inflation and does not take into account the many years of below-inflation real-terms pay cuts we've suffered. Compared to before the pandemic, we're all very much worse off.

Our pay is well below where it should be, and many of our members are struggling to pay for basics, such as food, rent, travel and childcare.

We recognise that the University of Brighton is not a rich university, but this is a national dispute, and pay is negotiated nationally for most universities. We're demanding decent pay for our members and proper funding through taxation for higher education as a public service. This government, or a future government need to solve this, but they won't do it without pressure from the people who make universities work.

On 2nd and 3<sup>rd</sup> October, we'll be striking alongside other UNISON branches with a strike action mandate over pay, including Sussex. (This means they've also had a ballot and achieved a YES vote with a turnout in excess of 50%.) A total of 16 branches across England will be striking. It's likely that Brighton UCU will also be on strike due to their long-running campaign to oppose compulsory redundancies.

### **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, 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 Wednesday 4th 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! 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. 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, which they will do. 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.

Being on strike also means you lose a day's contribution to the pension scheme. This is not a big deal! It used to be the case that if you went on strike for a long time in the year you retired, it would affect your pension quite a bit when it was wholly calculated on final salary. For that reason, people due to retire were (and still are, under the fairly out of date guidelines) officially exempt. If you're not sure, please get in touch, but also see below.

### Can we claim strike pay?

UNISON will pay strike pay to all those taking action of **up to £70 per day** (and increase from last time, which brings our strike pay up to that of Unite), which means that for many, the losses will be small. For some, the strike pay will cover what's been lost.

After the strikes, we'll make sure all members know how to claim. We'll 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.

From Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup>, members taking action will be expected by the University to declare their participation in the strike using MyView. Please make sure you do by the deadline, because not doing this could mean that you're disciplined, but also, we can't pay strike pay unless your wages have been deducted!

### How do we claim strike pay?

Once wage slips are available, towards the end of October, we'll have a link to a Form to fill in. If you get this done on time, we should be able to make payments to members' bank accounts by the end of the month, to coincide with pay day. If not, then soon afterwards.

If you have any problems with this, please contact a rep. (Our Form does not really work on mobile phones, and you'll need to log into the University network to access it, but we can print out paper forms if necessary and you can send us a screenshot of your wage slip.)

### 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.

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 if you feel bad about not doing. They may well be striking themselves of course. We represent a full range of support staff, including many managers.

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, rather than a managed day out where cover is arranged everywhere!

### Should I leave an out of office?

If you want to. How about **"thanks for your email. I'll not be at work until Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> October, because I'm taking strike action alongside thousands of other UNISON members over pay. This is a national dispute where we're saying that we need a better pay offer to stop our wages falling further and further behind inflation. If you're a UNISON member, please join the strike. If you're not yet a member of UNISON or UCU, please join today and help us fight for the pay rise we all deserve."**

Whatever you want to do, please be firm, to the point, and don't be abusive. We may think those working during a strike are letting us down, but it's often because it's never been carefully explained to them, or maybe they're just clueless.

### **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 2nd and 3<sup>rd</sup> October, we'll probably be striking alongside UCU members so we should encourage academic staff to join UCU if they're not already members.

### **What about the students?**

Brighton Students' Union, in recent years, has never brought itself to support our strikes, but the most far-sighted 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 moan. 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.

UCEA are very keen to claim that the 2023-24 pay round is completed, but all five unions have rejected this and only strike action across universities will make them change their mind.

They don't want staff on strike any more than we want to have to do it and strike action over time will make them question whether they could or should make us a better offer.

UCU are balloting members now and could have a new national mandate for action relating to pay by early November, so we could be striking alongside UCU and more UNISON branches later this year if we decide to.

### **I've not done this before and I'm a bit nervous about it.**

There's no need to be. If you want some reassurance, come to our meetings, or talk to colleagues. Depending on where you work, there may well be many other union members who will be striking. There will also be people who may well join us if we ask them.

Union members are not always good at talking to each other, but we need to make sure everyone knows about our strike and is involved in it if they can be.

Feel free to come along to our picket lines, but if you don't know any other UNISON members, get in touch and we'll find you some.

### **Any more questions?**

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

If you've not read this before, then we'd love you to be involved. We want as many members as possible to join the strike, but don't leave it there.

Enjoy your days off work but come along to the picket lines if you can, if only for half an hour. Children, dogs, and other dependents all welcome!