



University of Brighton UNISON branch Annual General Meetings 2024

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1. Welcome

Our AGM this year takes place across all four university sites as follows:

Falmer	12 noon/12.30pm, Monday 11th March	Checkland B502
City Campus	12 noon/12.30pm, Tuesday 12th March	Edward Street 304
Moulsecoomb	12 noon/12.30pm, Wednesday 13th March	Watts Building 504
Eastbourne	12 noon/12.30pm, Thursday 14th March	Hillbrow 117

Each meeting starts at 12.30pm, with a free buffet lunch from 12 noon.

Each meeting will be hybrid, with members also able to join remotely via Teams through the usual UNISON Meeting Team. Members attending the meeting this way can join from 12.15pm.

Please remember that those on-line need one person talking at a time. Those on-line, please bear in mind that we won't be able to monitor the chat very easily and also that we won't tolerate any rude or abusive messages!

Our aim is to make sure we maximise attendance across all four sites, so please come along to the one that works best for you, either in person or on-line.

2. Minutes of the AGMs held March 2023

The agenda and papers for last year's meeting can still be found our blog.

1. The chair welcomed everyone to the meetings.
2. The minutes of the 2022 Annual General Meeting were agreed as a correct record.
3. The financial return and branch budget was agreed.
4. The branch action plan was agreed.
5. Branch officers as proposed were agreed for the coming year.
6. Stewards and health and safety reps were agreed.
7. Changes to branch rules were proposed and agreed.*
8. One motion was proposed by Alex Lee and this was agreed. The motion commits the branch to:
 - a) To actively work with People & Planet to publicly support the student-led Fossil Free Careers campaign, calling on university careers services to align their operations with sustainability considerations, particularly by declining to promote oil, gas and mining companies.
 - b) To produce a website statement about this motion and support for this campaign, and amplify the calls to action of it.

Since the motion was passed, the branch committee has discussed this with the Careers Advice Service. There is still some way to go, but with Alex leaving the University and other priorities, the branch will return to this project when time allows.

9. The Branch Secretary addressed the meeting.

Ivan talked about how this was one of four hybrid meetings taking place, the first physical AGMs we'd been able to have, due to the Covid pandemic. Having the meetings hybrid and across four sites was to try to make sure as many members as possible could attend.

The strike action over pay, taken at various points during the last three years was discussed, as was the reality of the specific financial situation facing the University. The meeting recognised that the pay offer for 2023-24, of 5-8% and paid in-part earlier in February 2023, was a direct result of pressure from the unions, but that it still fell short of the rate of inflation at that point, which was 13.4% RPI or 10.1% CPI.

The meeting also discussed the result of the mini stress survey that the branch had conducted, which showed how work-related stress is still a major issue at the University for many people working here.

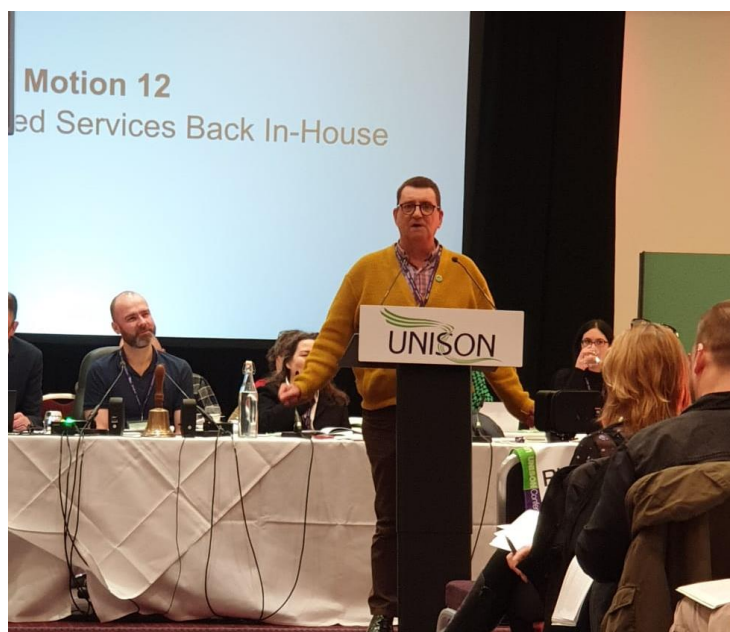
Ivan paid tribute to activists who had left – specifically those who'd played a major role in developing the branch, some for many years and some briefly. Cathy Peters, Mandy and Sian Williams, and Dawn Whitaker will all be missed.

The meeting closed and the chair thanked all for attending.

* Since the AGM, the regional Education, Training and Development Committee has identified a further change that could be made to the branch rules. This will be discussed as item 7.



Lee Christien at 2023's Higher Education Conference



Stephen Brooks at 2024's Higher Education Conference

3. Financial Reports

Income and Expenditure at 31 December 2023

	2023	2023	
	Total	Budget	Variance
	£	£	£
Income			
Subscription income	17,032.20	18,000.00	967.80
Owed from previous year	120.38	0.00	(120.38)
Retired member subscriptions	30.00	0.00	(30.00)
Bank interest	363.28	0.00	(363.28)
Total Income	17,545.86	18,000.00	454.14
Expenditure			
Affiliations	561.50	500.00	(61.50)
Conferences and Group Meetings			
National Delegate Conference	2,553.34		
Higher Education Conference	1,910.34		
LGBT+ Conference	690.00		
Black Members' Conference	0.00		
Women's Conference	0.00		
Disabled Members' Conference	0.00		
Retired Members' Conference	0.00		
Higher Education Branch Seminar	1,414.95		
South East Region Big Weekend	1,183.14		
South East Region SOGs	61.20		
	7,812.97	3,000.00	(4,812.97)
Donations	1,300.00	1,200.00	(100.00)
Education	415.00	1,500.00	1,085.00
Local activities	686.60	500.00	(186.60)
Other Administration	14,197.13	10,000.00	(4,197.13)
Other Meetings (including AGMs)	808.40	1,000.00	191.60
Publicity	234.60	2,000.00	1,765.40
Total Expenditure	26,016.20	19,700.00	(6,316.20)
Surplus/(Deficit) to date	(8,470.34)	(1,700.00)	6,770.34

The branch received income of £17,546 and spent £26,016 over 2023, resulting in a deficit of £8,470.

This is mainly due to spending more than anticipated on conference attendance and having to catch up with invoices from the University for administrative costs. The branch was up to date with these at December, and so the 2024 accounts are more likely to show a breakeven position.

Industrial Action Hardship Fund	
Balance at 01/01/23	838.89
Income	
Strike pay reimbursements outstanding at 31/12/22	(4,755.86)
Reimbursements relating to 2022	4,755.86
Reimbursements relating to 2023	62,725.21
Strike pay reimbursements outstanding at 31/12/23	2,084.76
	64,809.97
Expenditure	
Payments for October 2022	350.00
Payments for November 2022	26,371.28
Payments for February 2023	16,601.64
Payments for October 2023	21,487.05
Hardship Fund payments made	227.07
	65,037.04
Balance at 31/12/23	611.82

The industrial action hardship fund has a closing balance of £612. During 2023, strike pay of £64,810 was paid to members by the branch, the vast majority of which was reimbursed by UNISON by 31 December 2023. (The remainder has since been received.)

The hardship fund balance is available for additional claims where members experience significant hardship, after strike pay has been paid, for the duration of the pay campaign.

Bank Account Balances at 31 December 2023

Current Account	7,710.71
Deposit Account	8,815.09
	16,525.80
Less branch funding liability	(0.03)
Net Current Assets	16,525.77
Accumulated General Fund	17,998.71
Accumulated Industrial Action Fund	(1,472.94)
Total Fund at 31/12/23	16,525.77

It has long been the policy of the branch committee to spend money appropriately to reduce the branch's reserves, which are still relatively high for a small branch.

Agreed plans to spend the branch's reserves are as follows:

- A data collection exercise with high-street vouchers available for all members participating.
- Purchase of a good quality branch banner

Proposed 2024 Budget

		2024
		Budget
		£
Income		
	Subscription income	17,000
	Bank interest	400
Total Income		17,400
Expenditure		
	Affiliations	600
	Conferences and Group Meetings	
	National Delegate Conference	200
	Higher Education Conference	2,500
	LGBT+ Conference	1,000
	Black Members' Conference	200
	Women's Conference	0
	Disabled Members' Conference	0
	Retired Members' Conference	300
	Higher Education Branch Seminar	1,500
	South East Region Big Weekend	1,200
	South East Region SOGs	100
		7,000
	Donations	1,200
	Education	500
	Local activities	4,700
	Other Administration	9,000
	Other Meetings (including AGMs)	900
	Publicity	500
Total Expenditure		24,400
	Surplus/(Deficit) to date	(7,000)

The proposed budget assumes that around £4,00 could be spent on vouchers for the data collection exercise, but this will need to be weighed up against other plans. A proposed deficit of £7,000 would leave the branch with funds in the region of £9,500 by the end of 2024.

National Delegate Conference being in Brighton this year will save the branch a significant amount on travel and accommodation.

4. Branch Action Plan

The branch is required to agree an action plan for the coming year. For 2024, our priorities will be to develop the reps we have, and seek out those willing and able to take on casework, supporting members. We're also keen to develop the Self-Organised Groups where we can create sustainable groups of members with the ability to meet regularly and campaign.

Organising

Targets, objectives and other information

Talent spot reps

Develop and support reps including through regular meetings

Assigned to

Branch Secretary

To be completed by

31 Dec 2024

Develop SOG groups focus on LGBT+

Targets, objectives and other information

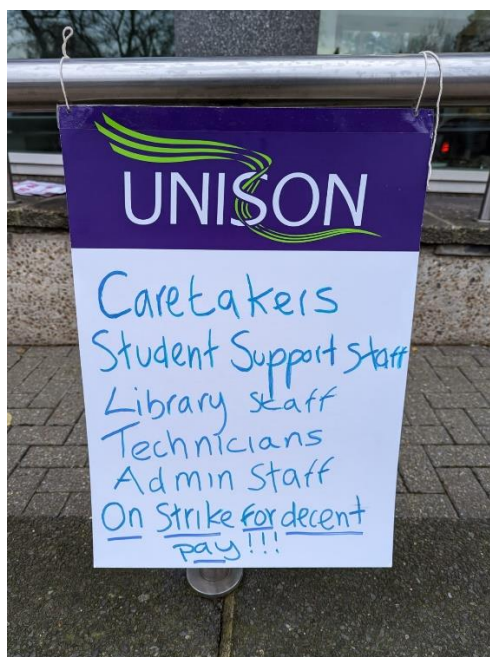
Develop SOGs to build participation

Assigned to

SOG leads

To be completed by

31 Dec 2024



5. Branch Officers

Branch officers have specific areas of responsibility within the branch. Each officer tries to attend the monthly branch committee meetings as well as taking responsibility for their area of work.

	Alan Dilley	Joint Health and Safety Officer
	Bill Acharjee	Equality Co-ordinator, Joint Black Members' Officer
	Carole Chick	Retired Members' Secretary
	Debbie Neale	Joint Women's Officer
	Ivan Bonsell	Secretary, Membership Officer
<i>new</i>	Ivan Landeira Pazos	Labour Link Officer
	Jean Bosco Ndayizeye	Joint Black Members' Officer
	Jodie Jones	Joint Women's Officer
	Lydia Freeman	Welfare Officer, Joint Women's Officer
	Martin Loftus	Treasurer
<i>new</i>	Maurizio Valeri	Joint Health and Safety Officer
<i>new</i>	Rosie Dooner	Young Members' Officer
<i>new</i>	Stephen Brooks	International Officer
	Will Dooley	Education Coordinator
	vacant	Lifelong Learning Co-ordinator
	vacant	Environmental Officer
	vacant	Disabled Members' Officer
	vacant	LGBT+ Members' Officer

We're welcoming Rosie and Stephen onto the branch committee for the first time. Maurizio and Ivan LP are already stewards and health and safety reps, but will also now be officers for the year.

If you're interested in filling any of the vacant roles, please let us know.



6. Stewards and Health and Safety Reps

Stewards are the backbone of the branch and the first point of contact for members. Health and safety reps report and follow up on safety issues and attend the University's Safety and Wellbeing Committee and/or other sub-committees.

All stewards and health and safety reps should be trained within the first year of appointment, to allow them to represent members and carry out safety inspections etc.

Stewards (*ERA accredited)

Moulsecoomb	Bill Acharjee*
Moulsecoomb	Debbie Neale*
Moulsecoomb	Emily Brooks*
Moulsecoomb	Ivan Bonsell*
Moulsecoomb	Ivan Landeira Pazos*
City Campus	Lee Christien*
Students' Union	Luke Frost*
City Campus	Lydia Freeman*
Eastbourne	Marco Troiani
Moulsecoomb	Martin Loftus*
Moulsecoomb	Maurizio Valeri*
Moulsecoomb	Will Dooley*

Health & Safety Reps (*Trained)

	Moulsecoomb	Alan Dilley*
<i>new</i>	Moulsecoomb	Bobbie McVey*
<i>new</i>	Moulsecoomb	Emily Brooks
	Moulsecoomb	Ivan Bonsell
<i>new</i>	Moulsecoomb	Ivan Landeira Pazos*
	City Campus	Lydia Freeman*
	Moulsecoomb	Martin Loftus*
	Moulsecoomb	Maurizio Valeri*
	City Campus	Richard Clayton*

All branch officers, stewards and health and safety reps meet monthly as the branch committee to agree the work of the branch and direct the branch secretary, who is seconded for a year. The branch committee is therefore made up of 20 people, which means that a quorum of seven is required to make significant decisions.

After the AGM, the branch committee elects a smaller negotiating committee, which aims to meet weekly, and its role is to deal with day to day issues that can't wait for the next branch committee meeting.

Where members want to get involved, but can't find the time to complete the stewards or health and safety training, we have workplace reps, who aim to promote the union in their workplace. All workplace reps are invited to branch committee meetings but are not formally branch committee members.

If you would like to become a workplace rep then please let us know.

7. Proposed branch rule changes

The AGM agrees the rules which the branch must follow. We have one very minor tidying amendment to propose this year, highlighted.

University of Brighton UNISON Branch Rules

Version 6 as proposed to Annual General Meetings, 6/7/8/10 March 2023, as amended to version 7 for this meeting.

1. Branch Name

The branch shall be called “The University of Brighton UNISON Branch”, and is referred throughout the rules as “the branch.”

2. Aims of the branch

- a) To support and pursue the aims and objectives contained in the UNISON Rule Book and the Objectives agreed by UNISON’s National Executive Committee annually.
- b) To aim to achieve the agreed targets set annually.
- c) To organise members and build confidence, to be able to collectively achieve the best possible rights at work, in terms of pay, pension rights, working conditions and wellbeing.

3. Membership

Eligibility for membership shall be in accordance with the rules of the union. (Rules C1.1, C5.1 and C5.5)

4. Branch Structure

- a) There will be an Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the branch held between during March, to confirm the election by ballot of branch officers and members of the branch committee.
- b) The AGM will receive the branch accounts and report on branch development and relevant issues from the branch committee.
- c) The AGM may comprise one meeting or a series of aggregate meetings across the University’s campuses, in order to maximise the active participation of members.
- d) The AGM will determine the basis of representation in the branch and the number of stewards and other representatives to be elected in each campus or workplace.
- e) Other general meetings may be called by the branch committee or by 10% of the membership.

- f) The quorum for any general meeting, including the annual meeting is 10% of the branch membership at a single meeting or through aggregate meetings.
- g) The branch committee will comprise all branch officers (see rule 5 below), stewards, health and safety reps and equalities reps.
- h) The branch committee will be responsible for the general organisation and development of the branch and for policy and decision making on matters affecting all members within the branch, between general meetings.
- i) The branch negotiating committee will be responsible for the day to day management of the branch in accordance with the decisions and authority delegated by the branch committee. (See rule 7 below.)

5. Branch Officers

- a) The branch shall elect the following officers annually:
 - 1) Chair
 - 2) Secretary
 - 3) Treasurer
 - 4) Education Co-ordinator
 - 5) Lifelong Learning Co-ordinator
 - 6) Equality Co-ordinator
 - 7) Health and Safety Officer
 - 8) Communications Officer
 - 9) International Officer
 - 10) Membership Officer
 - 11) Young Members Officer
 - 12) Welfare Officer
 - 13) Labour Link Officer (elected by members paying into the political levy only)
 - 14) Retired Members' Secretary (elected by retired members only)
 - 15) Women's Officer
 - 16) Environmental Officer
 - 17) Black Member's Officer
 - 18) LBGT+ Officer
 - 19) Disabled Member's Officer
 - Others to be deemed necessary by the branch committee
- b) Branch officers shall be elected as follows:
 - 1) Any member may be nominated and seconded by the branch committee or any two members, with the exception of nominations for the Labour Link Officer (which shall be nominated by members paying into the Labour Link fund only.)
 - 2) Nomination forms will be available through the usual communication methods and all members will be encouraged to think about volunteering for a role.
 - 3) Nominations will be open twelve weeks before the AGM date and will close three weeks before the AGM.
 - 4) If there is more than one nomination for a role, nominees shall be encouraged to stand on the basis of sharing the role and responsibilities, but if agreement

cannot be reached then a vote will be held, after candidates have been given the opportunity to withdraw.

- 5) Any votes for contested officer seats will be held by ballot of all appropriate members, within the three week period ahead of the AGM, with the results announced at the AGM. Any ballot will be conducted by secret electronic ballot and postal vote for members with no valid email address.
 - 6) Where no valid nomination for a role has been received before the deadline, nominations to fill vacant officer posts may be submitted throughout the year. The branch committee will consider nominations at its next meeting.
 - 7) The AGM will approve all branch officers, who will serve for one year.
 - 8) The branch committee is empowered to fill vacant seats (including those which become vacant during the year due to resignation) by nominations and a show of hands at any quorate branch committee meeting.
- c) Branch officers are accountable to the branch for their conduct and should be expected to give reports to the branch committee on request.
 - d) The Branch Secretary shall give regular reports and updates and is responsible for all practical aspects of the branch operations, convening meetings and managing the administration for the branch.
 - e) Any serious allegations of misconduct of a branch officer should be investigated by the chair or branch secretary, with a report made to the branch committee with recommendations.

6. Branch Committee

- a) Representation on the branch committee will be agreed by the AGM and will include branch officers, stewards, health and safety reps and equalities reps.
- b) The branch committee will conduct branch business in accordance with UNISON rules.
- c) The quorum for the branch committee shall be 33% of the members of the committee.
- d) The branch committee shall ensure that sections within the branch are appropriately and equitably resourced to ensure the effective participation of members, recruitment and organisation, representation, and collective bargaining and campaigning on behalf of members in each section.
- e) The branch committee will establish arrangements for the individual representation of members.
- f) The branch committee shall meet monthly at locations which reflect the spread of branch membership across University sites, or via video conference (e.g. Teams).
- g) All branch committee members will be notified of the meeting arrangements and provided with an agenda and other papers at least ten working days in advance.

- h) If urgent decisions need to be made which cannot wait for the next scheduled branch committee, any member of the branch committee can either:
 - a. Request an additional branch committee meeting to discuss and decide on the issue, providing the meeting is quorate.
 - b. Email all branch committee members asking for a virtual decision to be made, which would require a quorate response i.e. 33% of the branch committee indicating agreement to a proposal, within a one week timescale. The branch secretary will keep an audit trail of responses and the decision will be reported to the next branch committee meeting for ratification.

7. Negotiating Committee

- a) The negotiating committee shall be elected annually by the first quorate branch committee meeting after the AGM, to manage the day to day functions of the branch between branch committee meetings.
- b) Membership of the negotiating committee will constitute no more than eight branch committee members, and shall include the chair, branch secretary and other officers and stewards based on the composition of the branch committee. There is an expectation that negotiating committee members will be able to attend most meetings and commit themselves to building and strengthening the branch.
- c) The negotiating committee shall meet weekly at a suitable location, or via video conferencing, to ensure the effective day to day management of the branch within the parameters of the decisions and guidance issued by the branch.
- d) The negotiating committee will generally include the branch officers and stewards most able to be members of the relevant university committees – Support Staff Common Interest Group, Joint Negotiating Committee, Safety and Wellbeing Committee and Equality and Diversity Committee.
- e) The negotiating committee will be primarily responsible for the planning and execution of agreed branch committee policies with respect to negotiations at the above meetings.
- f) The negotiating committee may commit to no expenditure, policy decision or affiliation that has not been previously agreed by the branch committee.
- g) All negotiating committee meetings are open to all members of the branch committee who are able to attend.

8. Conduct of Meetings

- a) All meetings will be conducted in a fair and democratic manner and with reference to the UNISON South East Working Together Guidelines.
- b) All meetings will be advertised as far in advance as possible. For the AGM, all members will be notified in the most appropriate format at least six weeks before the meeting (or first aggregate meeting).

- c) The procedures to be used at the meeting will be explained clearly.
- d) The Branch Secretary will maintain records of all meetings and other appropriate records to enable the branch to function.

9. Media Communications

- a) Communications to the media on behalf of the branch shall be made only by the following branch officers authorised by the branch committee:
 - Branch Secretary
 - Chair
 - Communications Officer
- b) Publications on social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) on behalf of the branch shall be made by the following officers:
 - Branch Secretary (or Branch Administrator, acting under instructions)
 - Chair
 - Communications Officer
- c) Any other members speaking to the media or publishing on social media platforms on behalf of the branch do so with the approval of the named officers **in 9 a) and b).**

10. Affiliations

- a) Affiliations to relevant constituency Labour Parties will be decided by members contributing to the Labour Link political fund.
- b) Affiliations to trade councils or any other campaigning groups will be within UNISON rules and shall be determined by the branch committee.

11. Finance

- a) The branch shall keep a Unity Trust bank account in the name of the branch and will maintain a financial record of all assets and transactions in accordance with UNISON guidelines.
- b) The branch will manage its finances in accordance with the UNISON Branch Finances Handbook and follow the branch internal control policy (page 29).
- c) The branch Committee will set a budget before the end of each year and this will be regularly reviewed at branch committee meetings.

12. Donations

- a) Donations shall be agreed by the AGM or branch committee in accordance with UNISON's policies and objectives and subject to the national rules.

- b) Any donations made should be to support the trade union movement or workers fighting injustice through strike action or other campaigns.
- c) Each branch committee meeting shall consider requests to make a donation of no more than £100 and decide on one recipient by a show of hands, with the chair having a casting vote in the event of a tie.
- d) If the branch committee meeting makes no donation, the opportunity will be carried over to the next meeting.

13. Expenses

Rates of expenses for members attending meetings or carrying out other activities on behalf of the branch shall be agreed by the AGM in accordance with the Scheme for Branch Expenses as per the UNISON Branch Finances Handbook.

14. Honoraria

No honoraria payments will be made to members of the branch.

15. Branch Staff

- a) The branch shall indirectly employ a part-time administrative assistant to assist the branch secretary and the branch committee in the day to day running of the branch.
- b) The University will employ the post-holder in accordance with its terms and conditions and will invoice the branch periodically for the full costs of employment.
- c) If the post-holder is a member of the branch by virtue of other employment at the University or related organisations, then normal membership rules will apply.
- d) If the post holder is not a member of a trade union, they shall be encouraged to join one, and they shall be eligible for membership of the branch as an employee of the lead employer, but may wish to join a different trade union.
- e) The branch secretary, as the line-manager, will be responsible for the employment, direction and supervision of the post-holder consistent with employment law, current good practice and the University's policies.
- f) In the event of staff disciplinary or grievance matters, the branch chair will liaise with the University to determine the procedures to be followed.
- g) The outcome of any disciplinary or grievance hearing will remain confidential and a summary of the outcome will be reported to the branch committee on its conclusion.

16. Approval/Alteration to Branch Rules

- a) Branch rules must be agreed by two thirds of members present and voting at a quorate annual general meeting.

- b) Branch rules must be approved in accordance with UNISON's procedures.
- c) Any changes to branch rules must be agreed and approved as above.



Ivan Landeira Pazos – on strike for better pay

8. Health and Safety Officer Report, Alan Dilley

Since last year's AGMs I've attended school H & S meetings for SAS and SATE and the termly SAWC meetings where Unison and UCU reps meet with management to discuss policies and reports pertaining to health, safety and wellbeing within the University estate and community.

The next SAWC meeting is on March 13th where Unison will raise the concerning issue with Elm House (glazing and loose tiles), fire evacuations (at Grand Parade and Huxley) and our perennial concern regarding work related stress amongst our staff which we feel management do not take seriously enough.

March 4th marks the start of the 'roll out' of work inspections carried out by our H & S reps beginning with Edward Street (SAM) followed by two separate inspections both in Mithras House for the work areas occupied by SATE and SHSS. This is something we've been meaning to do for some time now and hopefully we will cover a fair chunk of the University's Estate over this year and the next!

We are currently blessed with nine H & S reps - Alan, Maurizio, Bobby, Emily, Ivan B, Martin, Lydia, Richard, Ivan LP, so please do contact them if you have any issues or concerns regarding your work environment. Please remember that the employer has a legal duty to provide a safe place for us to work in but the employee also has a responsibility to take care of themselves as well as others.

9. Branch Secretary's Address

If you're reading this, the chances are you're attending one of this year's Annual General Meetings, in which case, thanks for coming and being involved in what our branch is doing.

Our branch committee has always been of the view that a healthy trade union branch has to campaign, organise and support members, and getting the balance right between all those tasks can often be really difficult. Some UNISON branches rely on member benefits and giving away free (often plastic) stuff to recruit new members, but we've rejected this approach as the only thing we do, because we want a branch that's made up of people who recognise that joining a union is fundamentally about working people sticking together so that we have more power to enact change, and influence what the University management does.

As we've mentioned many times before, the higher education sector faces some major financial challenges and the lack of sufficient funding for universities combined with the effect of decades of marketisation is creating an existential crisis at some institutions.

Brighton is not well placed, because as an ex-polytechnic, or post-92 university, we are not able to offset the lack of inflation on the £9,250 fee by recruiting more and more international students, as some Russell Group universities have tried to do. In fact, the current drop in international students coming to the UK to study is bound to create problems for the most prestigious institutions in the near future, which will have a knock-on effect here.

The reality is that without significant increases to the unit of resource i.e. the amount of funding driven by the average student, universities like ours will be forced into a perpetual cycle of managed decline. We've already seen much of this over the last year, with the closure of Eastbourne due to take place over the summer, and the compulsory redundancies of academic staff forced through last year, despite the valiant efforts of UCU to prevent it.

Our members were affected by the closure of the theatre and gallery and the downsizing of language support for international students (the remnants of what was once the School of Language). Experience shows that mergers of schools is always the precursor to closing courses and realignment of the "educational offer", that is, dropping courses from the portfolio that don't generate sufficient income against costs, and/or don't have good retention figures, and/or don't generate good NSS scores.

At one point, I would have said that the University of Brighton could go bust, if lenders call in their loans and student recruitment bombs. I've revised that prediction, recognising that the University management, for all their faults, are smart enough to see that cuts in expenditure now can put off problems into the future. The issue is going to be, how much are they going to have to cut before we don't have much left to be viable?

The experience of the University of Southampton Solent is worth studying. They went from a medium sized post-92 university to a very small one in a number of years. Without a significant turnaround in funding, we could well be on that path.

That's not to say that we accept all this. The jobs, pay, pension rights and working conditions of our members is the most important aspect of what we're trying to do, but in defending all those, our campaigning has to be not just to stop attacks from the University leadership, but from this and future governments who refuse to fund higher education properly.

As I write, this Tory government would probably be relaxed about a massive shrinkage of the sector with closures and mergers. The bigger question is what will an incoming Labour government do, and so far we've had little indication that the answer is anything positive. Wait until the manifesto is the usual line when the question is asked. If I had to guess, I'd say

that the manifesto will be light on higher education i.e. no answers or promises that contradict the mantra of “fiscal responsibility”. There will be no attempt to redress the balance of crumbling public services, housing shortages, desperate poverty against the further enrichment of the billionaire class.

Whilst I would hope for a Labour government, shifting the balance of wealth and power in favour of working people is what’s desperately needed, and that would involve channelling the wealth of the rich to fund public services, including higher education and those who work in it.

2023 saw some major battles over pay and our branch was involved in every round of strike action to further our demand for a 2023-24 pay settlement that closer matched the rate of inflation at the time. A significant chunk of our members took strike action, many for the first time, and in doing so, we gave a focus for the branch and the membership, raising our branch’s profile and challenging all support staff to pick a side and get involved.

But striking is only one tactic and the point is to win the battle. The reality was that a number of university branches striking, even at the same point in time, was not sufficient to shift UCEA, the employers’ organisation to offer us more. Some university branches have effectively settled their local disputes (local as a result of disaggregate balloting) by agreeing to local concessions, but we have not been able to win significant change at a university like ours, which is struggling financially.

Again, this does not mean we give up, but it’s a lot harder when the employer does not have the resources easily available to shut us up. Other, resource-heavy universities have agreed to more annual leave and radical re-banding of the grades on the pay spine, giving many staff pay rises, in a clever way of getting around national pay bargaining. We’re likely to see more of this where union branches campaign for it and universities have the resources to grant it.

Here, we have been and continue to discuss possibilities with the University, but it seems that our current mandate will have to be used, or at least threatened, if we’re to see significant concessions to our terms and conditions.

Our mandate to strike over pay, which lasts until mid-August, does allow us to exert some pressure on the University, and nationally, as pay talks over 2024-25 start in March and April. We want to see a rise for all university workers which recognises the efforts made and the continually rising cost of living, but this will almost certainly need to be fought for.

We’ve seen many changes which have not always been positive. It’s worth explaining that for every proposed change, we’re consulted as a union before those affected are consulted with as a group. This is fairly normal for a recognised trade union, and allows us to suggest changes or prepare to respond. What we never do, is agree at that stage on any change, because obviously it’s those affected that need to be consulted and we can’t just agree to changes that they’ve not heard about. We always say that ultimately it will be down to those affected that will be best placed to respond and we’ll then be led by them.

With the major changes to security, we knew that this was likely to result in multiple redundancies as the shift patterns were so radically different from the mainly night-time work done previously. In every situation, we have to weigh up the possibilities of resisting the change, based on the people involved and the power we have in the rest of the branch. In the security case, we opposed the changes, but didn’t feel well placed to fight them. With the nursery closure, we balloted for strike action in the end (narrowly failing to get the required 50%+ turnout necessary, for the first time). Before that, we tried to ballot over IS redundancies but the process was so dragged out that we’d failed before we even got started.

In each case, we have to make a collective, democratic judgement on what we can and should do, and then try to act in the best interests of all members involved (and often non-members as well.) For current changes to technicians' job descriptions and consultations over the closure of Eastbourne, we have more alternative suggestions and will support individual members get the best possible outcome, but we know we won't win every case.

Our stewards are involved in casework, supporting members with individual issues – performance improvement cases, investigations, disciplinarys. We support those taking out grievances, in some cases, group grievances and those who've been victims of discrimination or bullying at work. As a rough count, I think we've supported upwards of 30 members over the last year, with either longwinded cases over a period of months, or short bits of advice. We still need to get the stewards taking on more cases, so that I can do other things, apart from the need for them to gain experience and confidence. Supporting a member is often just a case of common sense, bravado and knowing when to seek advice yourself.

We now have, I think, more health and safety reps than we've ever had before and we've started to organise for trade union H&S inspections, with plans in place to look at three workplaces this year already. Members should remember that health and safety, including wellbeing and good mental and physical health is an important aspect of what we do – keeping pressure on the University to not cut corners and have a healthy attitude to the need to manage all risks. The issue of work-related stress is still a major factor in some parts of the University, with staff shortages and unrealistic expectations and workloads causing illness and staff turnover. Our role is to make sure the University takes this seriously and puts appropriate plans in place to prevent the risks of physical and mental harm to all of us who work here.

We're still one of the largest higher education branches in the country, despite the fact that our university has and continues to shrink. Whilst our membership overall has dipped, our density remains roughly the same. We always need new members to replace those who go, so please try to make sure that you're asking people to join. Many don't just because they've never been asked, so we need to make sure that we're asking people to join us all the time, as the more members we have, the stronger we'll be.

Our branch has continued to be involved with UNISON at national and regional level. We've sent delegates and visitors to National Delegate Conference (NDC), LGBT+ Conference, Black Members' Conference, Higher Education Conference and the Regional Council.

This year's NDC will be at the Brighton Centre, Tuesday June 18th to Friday June 21st, so if any members want to attend some or all of it as visitors then please let us know.

As always, I couldn't do this without the efforts of all those who have volunteered their time to be involved, in the branch committee or simply being a loyal member taking strike action and supporting the union branch. A massive thank you to you all for your support and efforts and for once again, giving me the encouragement to carry on as branch secretary for another year.

Ivan Bonsell, March 2024