

UCU members now halfway through ten day strike

Teaching staff at University of Edinburgh who are members of the University and College Union (UCU) joined a ten day strike at 44 universities all over the UK from last Monday.

This week's action by UCU focusses on pension cuts imposed on the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) by university employers. Last week USS, which runs the scheme, [confirmed](#) that UCU's proposals are "viable and implementable". This is a compromise proposal for members of UCU to pay slightly more to protect benefits and resolve the pension dispute.

Instead Universities UK (UUK) put forward proposals, which will result in 35% cut from the guaranteed retirement income of members, and which are set to be formalised on Tuesday 22 February.

Staff-Student Solidarity

Staff, who are striking over pensions, pay and working conditions, are supported by students in a body called Staff-Student Solidarity Edinburgh who point out that in 2020, Vice-Chancellor Peter Mathieson earned 10.6 times more than the university's own median wage with his pay packet of £392,000. The alliance of staff and students also state that there are 304 members of staff (amounting to 1.8%) who are the elite - earning more than £100,000. These salaries are paid in spite

of the debt which the university has accumulated of £586.7 million (with a large part of that borrowed from one US investor, Northwestern Mutual).



Members of UCU at Moray House on the picket line PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter

[Staff-Student Solidarity Edinburgh](#) claim that the borrowing contributes to the university's estate strategy "for vanity projects and extracting more rents from students" and that the result is underpaid staff and higher fees for students. The body says that according to the university's annual report student numbers grew by 29% in the six year period to 2021 while tuition fees increased by 96%.

Strikes will continue

The ten days of strike action will spread to 68 universities from Monday and will highlight the 20% real terms pay cut over the last 12 years, unmanageable workloads, pay inequality and insecure contracts.

Dave Clark, a teaching fellow at Moray House, explained that his own contract was one of those renewed every six months. He said: "I am on a fixed term contract along with about 40 per cent of the staff. My contract is extended every six months and it is difficult to live in that way." He told The Edinburgh Reporter that he joined the picket line to protest over the threat of cuts to pensions and the real terms reduction to pay, as well as the gender and ethnic pay gap.

A member of [@ucu](#) on the picket line at Moray House on the Royal Mile explained why he has joined the ten days of strike action which involves staff at 44 universities all over the UK pic.twitter.com/mmUXEYn5fl

– Edinburgh Reporter (@EdinReporter) [February 18, 2022](#)

UCU is calling for a pay rise of £2,500 for all staff as well as improvements in working conditions, saying the universities can more than afford to meet these demands with reserves of £46.8 billion.

UCU general secretary Jo Grady said: 'The action that begins today and will eventually hit 68 universities is down to vice-chancellors who have failed staff and students. They have pushed through brutal pension cuts and done nothing to address falling pay, pay inequality, the rampant use of insecure contracts and unmanageable workloads.

'It is outrageous that when they should be trying to resolve this dispute, employer representatives have instead been finding new ways to deduct pay from university workers. Rather than punishing their workforce, these so-called leaders need to look in the mirror and ask why students support staff taking strike action and why their own workforce is so demoralised.

'Throughout these disputes, our union has offered simple

solutions that would avert industrial action and benefit the sector in the long-term, but time and again employers have chosen to continue pushing staff to breaking point, while the sector continues to bring in tens of billions of pounds each year. To avoid this period of industrial action all vice-chancellors had to do was accept UCU's viable pension proposals and take action over worsening pay & working conditions. That they didn't is an abject failure of their leadership."

University of Edinburgh response

The University of Edinburgh issued a statement in response to the strike action: "The University of Edinburgh, working alongside Universities UK (UUK) – which represents around 150 universities across the UK – is continuing to engage with UCU on the USS dispute. We hope that the sector and UCU can resolve the dispute without the need for further industrial action.

"We want to minimise the impact on students as much as possible and will work to limit significant disruption to the delivery of learning and teaching, assessment, progression and student experience, whilst maintaining academic standards."

The university has also set up a fund from the money not spent on staff salaries for students who suffer "significant disruption" as a result of the strike. These payments will be capped at around £300 per student. Applications will go live in April 2022.

