**Please note that this document has not been vetted by counsel, is not an 'official' union document and should not be treated as such. Please feel free to adapt it for your branch.**

**--Katy Fox-Hodess**

**FAQ’s for Organising Conversations**

1. **Won’t strike action harm our students?**

None of us wants to see students suffering because of the poor decisions made by university management. But student and staff interests are closely related. We want to ensure decent and fair working conditions for university staff, so that they can carry out their mission of taking care of students’ teaching and overall experience at the university. We all know that we are not able to deliver our best work for students when we are worried about losing our pensions, paying our rent or overwhelmed by excessive workload. For this reason, the Sheffield Student Union has been very supportive of UCU and even backed our pensions strike in 2018.

1. **Isn’t there a better way to get management to change their minds than striking?**

Strikes are a weapon of last resort in bargaining that we will only use if absolutely necessary. However, we do need to give our bargaining teams a strong mandate on the part of members to tell employers that we are *ready and willing to strike if there is insufficient movement at the bargaining table.* From previous experience, we know that it’s only through the threat of industrial action that we see improved offers from management. In fact, simply announcing that we were going to ballot members for industrial action already led to movement by university management in negotiations.

1. **Other workers have it much worse when it comes to pay, so why should we demand higher pay or fight to improve our current working conditions?**

Our inflation-adjusted pay has declined precipitously over the past two decades, leaving us significantly worse off in the same period that tuition (and upper management’s salaries) have skyrocketed and universities have made significant capital investments. Letting our pay and working conditions continue to deteriorate will do nothing to help workers in other sectors. On the contrary, fighting for better pay and conditions sets an example that can inspire and give hope to others.

More concretely, the lowest paid members of our union and other university workers stand to gain the most from an improved pay offer. While top university managers have enjoyed enormous salaries in recent years, there are many working members of our university community who are barely getting by on poverty wages. Those of us in a better financial position owe it to them to fight for fair pay, particularly given the solidarity shown to senior academic and professional staff who faced enormous cuts to our pensions last year. Our pay claim will also help to rectify the serious generational, gender and race and ethnic pay gaps in our workplace.

1. **Why would I strike given that previous strikes have failed, and have not led to any improvement?**

Unfortunately, in the past, our union has relied on very short and ineffective strike action rather than building real leverage on the shop-floor to pressure employers in bargaining. Last year, however, we had a real strike with real consequences. By taking sustained strike action, we managed to take the employers’ proposal to shift our defined benefit pension plan to a defined contribution plan off the table, maintaining a guaranteed income in retirement for our members. Furthermore, we forced a re-valuation of the financial health of our plan, which ultimately demonstrated that the supposed shortfalls the plan faced were more fiction than reality. This was a very important, though partial, win. By building on the momentum formed during last year’s strike, we can take the current proposal for contribution increases off the table.

Last year’s strike has led to a sea change within the union, its governance and its leadership. Rank and file members have been very active and empowered since the strike, and have recently elected Sheffield member Jo Grady as General Secretary. She’s a grassroot union activist with invaluable knowledge on pension issues, and her and her team are much more pro-active in fighting on behalf of, and for the rights of, university staff.  With real allies in leadership at the national level, winning real gains at the bargaining table looks more possible than ever.

Ultimately, though, the union is as strong as its membership and sending a clear signal to the employers that we are united and willing to fight for what we deserve is the only way to win.

1. **How long will we be striking for?**

The tentative plan is for 14 days of strike action commencing on November 18. However, the ballot simply asks us to authorise strike action and action short of  strike without specifying a number of days or starting date. Whether or not we ultimately go on strike -- and for how long -- will depend on what happens at the bargaining table. However, the reason to authorise strike action is to create a threat of serious disruption which is why several-day strikes work better than one-day strikes! On the one hand, we hope that a mandate from the membership for strike action on its own will be enough for our employers to shift their position significantly in bargaining. On the other hand, it’s impossible to know ahead of time how they will respond. In addition, there is the possibility that once we begin strike action, the employers may make meaningful concessions, resulting in a shorter strike than last year, when we were on strike for 14 days.

1. **What if I really need the money, and can't afford to strike?**

Striking has significant financial impacts for all of us, especially those on lower salaries who are already struggling financially. For that reason, our national union has a strike fund that we can apply for, to help cover pay lost due to industrial action. If further financial support is needed, you may also apply to our branch for additional assistance. After our 2018 pensions strike, our branch successfully fought for pay deductions to be taken over several months rather than all in one go, and will fight for that to happen again.

It’s also important to weigh up the short-term hardship of foregoing pay to participate in a strike with the significant long-term benefits of winning on pay and pensions. It is estimated that the employers’ current proposal on pensions, for example, will leave the average pension plan member 200,000 pounds worse off over the course of their career. The outcome of the ballot, strike and overall negotiations will determine our future salaries and  pensions for years to come.

1. **Why are there two separate ballots?**

Our pay and pensions are negotiated by two separate negotiating committees at two separate national bargaining tables. UCU members in more than 60 institutions are covered by the USS pensions plan and only members at these institutions are being asked to authorise strike action in the pensions ballot. UCU members at all of the higher education institutions where UCU has representation are covered by the pay negotiations and are being balloted for industrial action on this basis, along with members of the other trade unions at these institutions.

1. **Will there be repercussions from my line managers if I participate in strike action? Will they make me 'catch up' on the work not done on strike days?**

Union members have a *legal right to strike.* It’s illegal for your employer to prevent you from doing so, pressure you in any way, or threaten you with repercussions. In terms of ‘catching up’ on work, your employer cannot require you to ‘make up’ the teaching or other work that would have taken place on strike days unless we explicitly were to agree to this in bargaining -- a position which members rejected in the USS strike last year. Strikes work because they are disruptive; if employers end up being confident that there won’t be disruptions because workers will ‘make up’ for non-worked days, the strike cannot be effective!

From what we’ve seen in our branch at Sheffield, retaliation for union activities is quite rare. But should you encounter any problems whatsoever from line managers or other management representatives, UCU is here to defend your rights, and has a strong record of doing so.

1. **Why should I vote on, or strike for, something which I don't fully understand?**

It’s very important that we all take the time to understand what the ballots and disputes are about and we are happy to answer any questions and direct you to further resources for information.

However, whether or not you support strike action, it’s still crucial that you use your vote! Voting and unionising are key democratic rights that people have fought hard for over the centuries. Recently, anti-union laws have it more difficult for workers to take strike action by invalidating ballots in which fewer than 50% of union members participate -- a requirement not found in any other democratic elections in this country. So your vote is necessary not only for your own voice to be heard, but also *for everybody’s voice to be taken into account*. Not reaching the threshold means that all of the people who’ve voted and engaged with the issue cannot be heard at all — whether they’ve voted to strike or not.

1. **My job primarily involves research. Will striking have any impact in my position?**

We recommend that you set an away message explaining that you are striking and not do work emails or any other work-related communications when you are on strike. The same goes for any administrative work related to your position or attendance in any work-related activities, such as meetings. And of course, we hope to see you on the picket line! If you would like to talk through other creative ways of making the withdrawal of your labor count in your specific job role, UCU reps will be happy to discuss with you.

1. **If I become a member, how much will I have to pay? Where will the money go?**

There are different monthly fees depending on your salary band. Out of solidarity, higher bands subsidise lower bands, as well as free membership for students.

Our membership fees are used to pay the salaries of our national, regional and local union staff, as well as rent for our offices and the costs of running a large organisation. Our membership fees are also used to build up our fighting fund, from which members can request financial support when taking industrial action and foregoing pay.

If you would like further details, financial reports of UCU are accessible online.

To join UCU, please visit: <https://join.ucu.org.uk/index.php/>

1. **I’m thinking about joining the union to vote in the strike ballots but haven’t decided yet. When is the cut-off date?**

Officially, the cut-off date is October 23 but we recommend that you join as early as possible to ensure that you are able to receive and return your ballots in time.