# The devil in the detail of the UCU's "breakthrough" for university workers

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The University and College Union (UCU) last week suspended the remaining seven strike days scheduled for February over pay, working conditions and pensions. The national strike involves 70,000 lecturers and other university workers at all 150 higher education (HE) institutions in Britain.

The union announced in a message sent to all members on the evening of February 17 that it had made a "significant breakthrough" and would "pause action" for two weeks to "create a period of calm."

UCU general secretary Jo Grady has used the "confidential process" of talks at government mediation service Acas to avoid giving details of the "breakthrough" to UCU members. However, the rosy picture painted by the UCU of "real progress" is at odds with what details have been made public by the universities and other unions.

A February 17 joint statement from the five higher education unions representing university staff —UCU, Unison, GMB, Unite and EIS—with the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA), declares that, on pay, "an impasse, rather than an agreement, has been reached, and it is agreed that with regard to pay the Dispute Resolution Procedure has been exhausted."

The joint statement agreed that the UCU, Unison and Unite would call off strikes between February 20 and March 3, while the universities would not impose the UCEA's derisory pay offer during the same period. The UCEA maintained its below-inflation pay offer of between 5 and 8 percent, to be implemented by August 2023. It is now likely that the first instalment, of between 2 and 3.2 percent, will be imposed in March.

After this was pointed out by members on social media, Grady belatedly claimed, "We do not accept the employers' position on pay and will fight to improve it," but the official silence until then suggests otherwise. Moreover, the joint statement confirms that the UCU's original pay demand for HE members of 13.7 percent—as part of its "Four Fights"—has long since been surrendered.

The UCU sent out an online survey on February 20, *after s*uspending the strikes, asking "Do you support the principle of the union pausing action to create a period of calm to allow negotiations to take place in a better environment?". The survey was clearly not an attempt to find out members' opinions, but was designed to push participants to vote "yes" after the fact, which 71.5 percent did. With the "pause" a fait accompli, the survey included a list of claimed "gains" from talks at Acas, including what was made to sound like a total victory on pensions, and a "ban" on the use of zero-hours contracts.

The suggestion of a ban on zero-hour contracts is contradicted by the joint statement, which merely states, "UCEA has agreed to consult its members, with a positive recommendation to take action on zero hours contracts." It then adds a get-out clause, "We accept that there will be specifically defined reasons in any organisation for offering indefinite or fixed term employment arrangements without fixed or minimum hours where it is appropriate." These "appropriate" circumstances are to be "discussed between [universities] and their local trade unions."

Workers on fixed-term contracts (77,475 according to Higher Education Statistics Agency figures for 2021-22) are mentioned in vague terms in the joint statement: "we would expect indefinite contracts with a fixed or minimal hours to be the general form of employment relationship." But all that is proposed concretely is a suggestion that UCEA "consult" universities.

The UCU does not even attempt to claim progress has been made for the one-third of the workforce without secure employment, but claims it has "secured commitments" for "[t]ime limited negotiations on tacking casualisation." The excuse used to keep early-career academics on short contractsthat their jobs are funded by temporary grants from external bodies—is not mentioned in any of the statements, so will continue to be treated as an “appropriate” justification.

Any national agreement on casualisation will likely follow the pattern established by countless local “victories” over the issue—that were anything but. Among these was the “win” announced in May by the UCU at the Royal College of Art, where future “contracts will be on an open-ended basis *except where there is a real business need* [emphasis added]”.

Local UCU branches also regularly say that their agreements supposedly limiting casualisation end up with “implementation problems,” with no means of enforcing their provisions.

By far the most heavily promoted element of the talks is over the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pensions. Calling off the strikes, the UCU claimed they were “at the start of a process that *will* restore USS pensions and potentially lead to a reduction in the percentage of your salary you pay into it every year based on newly published data [referring to quarterly USS statistics from December 2022] which supports our case for restoration.” [emphasis added]

The universities themselves say that the December statistics “show a significant improvement in the scheme’s financial position,” but insist on deferring any changes to the pension scheme until after the next valuation. This would push any changes back until April 2024.

As explained in a Twitter thread by UCU negotiator Mark Taylor-Batty, in April 2022 the salary cap was cut from around £60,000 to £40,000, meaning any income above that level was paid into a defined contribution rather than a defined benefit pension, which depends on investment performance rather than providing a guaranteed income in retirement.

USS insists that raising the salary cap “is likely to require a statutory consultation by employers,” delaying any reversal of cuts yet further beyond April 2024.

Even if pensions were restored to the level they were at before the April 2022, it would be after two years of record-high inflation. Since April 2022, the Retails Prices Index (RPI) measure of inflation has averaged 12.7 percent, meaning the de-facto cut will be enormous.

Any pensions paid in before April 2022 are increased in line with USS’s “inflation protection”, but this is capped at 10 percent and indexed to the Consumer Price Index (CPI) measure of inflation, which is lower than RPI. CPI has averaged 10 percent since April 2022, but USS applies only partial inflation protection if CPI is above 5 percent—so with CPI inflation at 10 percent, pension benefits would increase by only 7.5 percent.

The salary cap was previously also increased by the old inflation protection formula, but a 2.5 percent cap on increases was immediately applied in April 2022. This means that more and more of the pensions of HE workers are being paid into a defined contribution rather than defined benefit part of the scheme.

After April 2025, the inflation protection on pension benefits will also be capped at 2.5 percent, which could cause massive real terms cuts to pensions in only a few years. While the Bank of England and government predict inflation will soon fall back to near to 2 percent, they constantly add the qualification that this will require crushing workers’ resistance to falling real wages.

The onslaught on the working class by the Conservative government includes forcing millions of workers to bear the enormous costs of their continuous escalation of NATO’s war with Russia. The notion that normal economic conditions will be restored within a year is not credible. Even 10 percent inflation would ensure a 35 percent reduction in pension value—equivalent to the April 2022 cut—in only six years.

Higher education workers can have no confidence that pensions, as claimed by the UCU, will be restored by employers realising they acted rashly in 2022 in making unnecessary cuts. The defence of pay, dignified working conditions and the right to a decent standard of life after retirement cannot be waged through the UCU’s “strategy of mixing action, negotiations and balloting,” but through a turn to broader layers of the working class, to stop the relentless attack on living standards.