



USS Dispute phase one: Scale & impact

• Unprecedented industrial action in UK universities. Unprecedented, sustained, picket lines.







What triggered the dispute?

- 2017, USS trustees claimed to have found that the cost of funding future pension promises had jumped by a third. USS said that contributions would need to rise from 26 % of salary (18 per cent of which came from the employer and 8 per cent from the employee) to about 32-33 % to keep retirement benefits in their current shape.
 - USS later revised this figure up to 37.4 %.
- UUK announced in October **2017** that DB pensions had become unaffordable and warned budgets would suffer if they were to continue. DC pensions were proposed as replacement. A JNC meeting in **January 2018** confirmed this.
- UCU argued this would leave a typical lecturer about £10,000 a year worse off in retirement; £200,000 over a 20 year period. They opposed the change, triggering an industrial dispute on UK campuses.
- Strikes began in February and March 2018. Strongly manned and vibrant picket lines characterised the pickets. Alongside critical digital picket, where USS were publicly challenged the USS to "show its workings"





USS Strike: Initial Outcomes

- Spike in UCU membership (16,000 new members) and engagement.
- Confidence: High levels of sustained mobilization & collective action.
- Grass root & largely autonomous activists emerged.
 - New and online community/use of technology
- Solidarities solidified.
 - Went beyond pensions. Staff/student solidarity; anti-marketization, anti-precarity, permeant ASOS.
- Disrupted the dominant discourse and narrative about DB pensions.
- Mass engagement in HE: USS & UUK lack of democracy and transparency. 'averse to scrutiny'





Citizen journalism



Sam Dolan @etymologic · Mar 14

NEW: How 18 Bursars from **Cambridge** and Oxford got together at OXCAM on 20th September 2017, and helped "steer" the @UniversitiesUK consultation on #USS pension risk. **THREAD**



16

t]

] 554

 \mathbb{C}

384



Show this thread





USS Dispute and emergent contextualisation of pensions as an employment right

Three key factors:

- 1. Democratized information, educated strikers, and disturbed dominant pensions discourse.
- 2. Extended political space into private space.
- 3. Allowed for co-ordinated and effective mobilization.





Democratizing information and Educating Ourselves/Each other



Nick Hardy @NJSHardy · Mar 31

When I get tagged into a thread full of professional pensions experts















Challenging dominant narratives

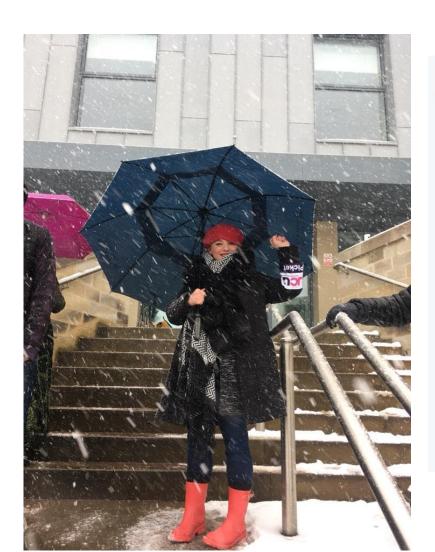
- Both HE sector news, university news, UCU news source are problematic.
- Feeling during USS dispute that no reliable news source that was challenging dominant narratives.
 - HE news is written and edited by journalists. By wonks. By managers. UCU limited by ACAS.
- USSBriefs emerged and is probably the only publication online that is written and edited entirely by university staff.

#AcademicTwitter & related blogs also provided this function during USS strikes.





Education on the picket line: physical picket & digital picket













Findings of the Joint Expert Panel

- **TPR**, were accused of misjudging the ability of the university sector to financially support the scheme.
 - "TPR appears to have taken an approach to the valuation, especially in relation to the employer covenant, that does not fully take account of the specificities of USS".
 - Last Man Standing a strength. Multi employer covenant strong.
- **USS** were criticised for relying too heavily on Test 1. This steered the scheme towards low risk, and low-growth assets, which in turn increased the size of the pension fund deficit to £7.5bn and pushed up projected contributions.
- **UUK** was singled out for poor employer consultation which "produced misleading results" due to the "framing and context of the questions".
 - However, issue of alleged survey rigging and collusion not included.
- **JEP** recommended that **DB pensions could continue to be offered** with contributions rising to 29 per cent significantly lower than the 36.6 per cent from April 2020 proposed by USS, based on the valuation as it stands.
 - A further critique of Test 1 not considered by the panel by Dr Sam Marsh suggests no increases at all are needed.
- **UCU** "The report has given validation to staff who felt compelled to strike over what they saw as a grey area but which was really being painted as a black and white issue," said Dr Sam Marsh "There was a significant push by employers to get out of DB but they forgot there would be a downside in attempting to pull such a move."



USS dispute and pensions as an employment right

- Schrödinger's strike.
- The strike was a strike to protect the employment right that was conceptualised and cemented during the dispute on picket lines as a pension right.
- This conceptualisation mobilised activists on picket lines, and fuelled the solidarities to continue action.
- It continues to shape and contextualise the dispute for UCU members.
- Contextualisation and challenge to dominant narrative about pensions has wider ramifications.

