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The USS dispute, & pensions as an  
employment right

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# 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** 🗨️

16 554 384

[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.





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# Democratizing information and Educating Ourselves/Each other

USS Strike Memes Retweeted



**Nick Hardy** @NJSHardy · Mar 31

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



4

26

180





## 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.





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# Education on the picket line : physical picket & digital picket



**Miriam Miller** @msmimbles · Mar 16

Happy picketers braving the rain, being rewarded with cakes. We're going to miss this next week, aren't we? [#USSstrikes](#)







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# The USS dispute: Phase two





# 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.