

We're finally seeing the end of winter as the days start to get longer and warmer. If you're feeling this isn't happening quickly enough, then take some time to yourself to read this newsletter! In this edition we look at industrial action in colleges, some of our campaigns, what's happening in negotiations and some of the ways we are supporting you.

COLLEGES

Industrial action at Barnsley College

Pay should always be negotiated – never imposed. This is the best way of ensuring that what funds are available to a college are used in the best way possible, and not frittered away on ill-thought-out initiatives or vanity projects. Here, we hear from the branch secretary of UNISON Barnsley on the action that staff are taking to fight for their rights.

Determined support staff at Barnsley College have reached a breaking point. For years, their employer has enforced pay increases without room for negotiation, often disregarding the advice of their representatives from the Association of Colleges.

Consequently, the college's pay scale lags behind the sector norm, and staff morale has plummeted. The meagre 2% pay raise in the 2022/23 cycle failed to address their concerns. This prompted a realization that the strength of unity within a union needed to be demonstrated.



Following a successful ballot in the summer of 2023, support staff overwhelmingly voted in favour of taking industrial action to secure a more favourable pay award and, crucially, to challenge the employer's reluctance to engage in negotiations.

Throughout the Autumn term,

support staff staged strikes on 11 days to assert their position.

Significant victories have been achieved – UNISON membership at the college has surged by nearly 50%, highlighting the concerns of all support staff. Now, the college has awarded a 7% pay increase for 2023/24, surpassing the AoC recommendation. It is essential to recognize that these achievements would not have materialized without the collective effort of staff demanding to be heard. The quest for fair negotiation will persist into 2024, emphasizing the need to pay attention to staff concerns throughout the year, not just when they take to picket lines. One certainty remains – management is now acutely aware that Barnsley staff will fight for their rights.





CHAMPIONS IN OUR COLLEGES

On 9 February 2024, we ran our second national Champions in Our Colleges celebration.

We all know how important support staff are in colleges, but how often do we get the chance to shout this from the rooftops? That's what Champions in Our Colleges is all about, so let's take a look at the exciting events run this year.

Parliamentary event

On 6 February, we went to parliament to host an event where MPs could come along and talk to us about support staff issues and we could encourage them to make a visit to their local college on 9 February. It was great to see so many MPs and to hear from them about the great work that colleges are doing in their local communities. MPs listened carefully to your issues – low pay, high workloads, stress and threats to jobs. If you see your local MP, make sure you talk to them about what needs to be done to make your college a great place to work and a great place to learn.



Nominate a Champion

Throughout January, we ran our 'Nominate a Champion' competition. We received entries from all over the country, from each of our twelve UNISON regions, and heard so many heart-warming comments about your colleagues (see below). We'll pick winners from each region, and both the nominator and the nominee will receive a £25 shopping voucher.

"Her kind and empathetic manner has helped many students find their voice, their strengths and motivation over 20 years of service"

"She is dedicated, always smiling and is one of the most kind and considerate people I know"

"He puts a lot of effort into supporting individual's from different backgrounds to ensure they are understood"

"He is always keen and eager to help in any given situation. Nothing is too big or small"



Celebrating Champions

On the day itself, we saw lots of activity across the UK as we celebrated the important work of support staff across the UK.

Find out more at the campaign webpage – www.unison.org.uk/champions

2023 Keeping in Touch Survey

Every year we ask you what concerns you the most at work. This is one of the many ways we find out what we need to campaign and lobby for. Here's what you told us in our most recent survey.

In October 2023, many of you took time out of your busy schedules to tell us about your experiences and concerns working in colleges. This is what you told us:

- Pay was your top workplace concern; workload/burnout, the

college management and job security also being big issues

- Nearly four-fifths said pay is not enough to give a good standard of living
- Borrowing money from the bank and from family and friends is necessary to cover your expenses
- Just under half feel workload is unreasonable
- With a large majority saying workload is affecting their mental health, they are unable

to switch off at home and it affects their physical health

- Nearly two-thirds said that their job satisfaction has declined in the past year

We continue to press your employers and the government for better pay (see national bargaining in England and industrial action in Scotland) and the need to reduce workload. Keep an eye out for all our campaigns!



UNISON members in FE Scotland renew mandate for industrial action in 2024

UNISON members in Scotland's colleges enduring their second winter in a row without a pay rise voted overwhelmingly for Industrial Action in 2024. The renewed mandate was a massive 81.1% in favour of taking action. The branch will now draw up an industrial action plan if the employers do not get serious about pay negotiations and job security.



Three days of action took place in September and October in colleges throughout Scotland. Despite action and continued pressure moving the employers from 2% to £5k over three years, the current offer still comes with a threat of compulsory redundancies.

The branch has urged the employers to now unhook the year

one offer of £2,000 and get money into members accounts to alleviate hardship and to allow talks to take place on avoiding redundancy approaches and securing government funds to help. The employers now say they will meet

negotiators to discuss these matters after a delay of some two months following the original proposals being made.

Despite real financial hardship amongst college staff and constant propaganda from the employers, members are signalling they are up for the fight against college bosses who have failed to lobby effectively on behalf of

the sector despite being paid big bucks to do so.

This will make it the eighth year in nine where there has been industrial action in the sector and another four colleges are, reportedly, in financial difficulty with Moray College and Shetland College the latest to announce threats of compulsory redundancies. The branch will meet the Minister on 8 February but Industrial Action now appears inevitable.

If your colleagues aren't in a union that fights for pay and job security, spread the word and get them to join us in UNISON.



Meeting the Shadow Minister

In January 2024, Leigh Powell, UNISON national officer, met with the Shadow Skills Minister (England), Seema Malhotra, to discuss what UNISON members want to see in FE.



We discussed the need for better funding and pay in FE, most importantly – that funding in the sector needs to be directed to staff pay. At the moment, individual principals decide how much to pay staff in FE in England. This does not happen in FE in Scotland, in Wales, in Northern Ireland or in 6th Form Colleges in England. This situation has led to pay falling far behind everyone else.

We also discussed other areas of UNISON policy, decided by the FE and 6th Form Colleges Committee, namely:

- That colleges should be the only provider of apprenticeship training;
- That adult education needs investment;
- And that all college services should be provided by directly-employed staff – we must end the practice of colleges contracting out support services so that support staff get worse pensions, terms and conditions than their counterparts.

Seema really showed that she understands the importance of support staff and is keen to ensure they have a stronger voice in parliament under a future Labour government.

National Bargaining in England

What's the difference between pay bargaining in English FE colleges and those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland?

The way pay is negotiated – all four nations have national pay negotiations and yet only in England can these results of these negotiations be ignored, because the result is only a 'recommendation' to principals. It is no coincidence that pay, terms and conditions are worse in English colleges than in any other part of the education system anywhere in the UK.

That's why this year we made a commitment to binding pay negotiations a cornerstone of our pay claim. We knew the employers wouldn't like it – many don't want to 'surrender' their power to hold down pay. But we know there are lots that would prefer to have a functioning national bargaining system – binding pay negotiations with the government fully funding pay awards would save time and resources that colleges can ill afford to waste. We are lobbying MPs tirelessly to ensure they know what they need to do to improve pay and conditions in England.

If you would like to know how you can help, contact us at education@unison.co.uk and we'll tell you how you can get involved.



Pay updates

Pay in England (FE colleges)

In England, many colleges have followed the 6.5% AoC recommendation and their offers have been accepted by members. Other aspects of the claim have, however, fallen short. Talks that were promised on workload, on a Just Transmission and on national bargaining just are not happening. The employers' position on Foundation Living Wage has also weakened as they are no longer 'expecting' colleges to pay it, but leaving colleges to make their own decisions on this. We have a fight on our hands to improve pay and conditions in colleges.

Pay in Scotland

In Scotland, a successful statutory ballot on the 2% pay offer resulted in a 92% vote to reject on a 62% turnout. Since the mandate for industrial action expired in mid-October a rebalot has taken place resulting in thresholds being met and an 81% vote to continue strike action in 2024. Keep an eye out for further info on this.

Pay in Wales

In Wales, an offer of 5% to all staff for 2022/23 has been accepted and paid to members.

Pay in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, NJC pay, terms and conditions apply.

Pay in 6th Form Colleges (England)

In 6th Form colleges, we have re-opened discussions on 2023/24 pay to ensure compliance with the National Living Wage. Additionally, work has commenced on guidance for job evaluation in 6th Form colleges to ensure that support staff are paid in line with the responsibilities.

Getting more active in UNISON

If you've read this far you'll know we have a fight on our hands! By being a member you are making yourself and your colleagues stronger – by becoming an activist you can really make a stand!

There are many ways you can become more active in UNISON. You can become a contact, a workplace rep (steward), a health and safety rep, or a union learning rep. If you're already a rep you can join our national committee and be at the forefront of decision-making about UNISON's policy and direction in colleges.

If you have a skill that you would like to contribute or you feel you just have to speak out when you see an injustice then please do consider putting yourself forward. You'll get full training, loads of support and (if you're a rep) paid time off to perform trade unions duties.



The UNISON Universities and Colleges seminar

On 9 November 2023, the HE and FE sectors joined together for UNISON's first ever joint universities and colleges seminar in the fabulous city of Liverpool.

We've heard wonderful feedback from activists across the board who enjoyed the opportunity to network with like-minded colleagues, to listen to inspiring speakers, to participate in helpful workshops, and of course, we should also mention the fun quiz night and delicious evening meal.

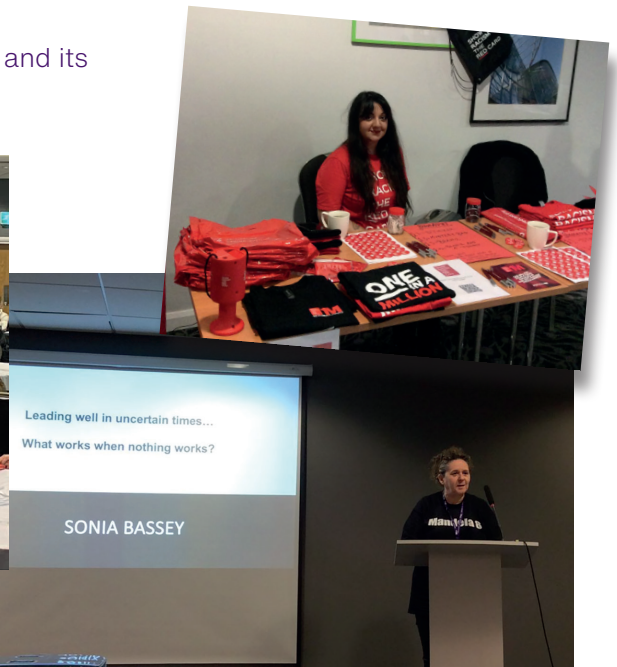
As 2023 was UNISON's Year of the Black worker, the day opened with Sonia Bassey MBE, of [Mandela8](#), who gave a stirring speech about her life

and activism to promote racial equality in Liverpool. UNISON officers, Kevin Russell, Margaret Greer and Jon Richards delivered helpful, information presentations on how UNISON is supporting its members with the issues they care about.

A variety of workshops were available with delegates choosing between:

- The cost of living crisis and its impact on women

- Managing stress as a workplace hazard
- Making sense of job evaluation
- Tackling wholly owned subsidiaries
- Tackling racism in the workplace



If this sounds like something you would like to be a part of in 2024, please come along to our FE and 6th Form Colleges seminar in 2024. The event is completely free for all UNISON reps and this year we'll be in Birmingham on 10 and 11 May. This year all talks and workshops will focus on 'The Future of FE'. Contact your branch for further details.

Not in UNISON yet?

Join the college support staff experts at join.unison.org.uk or call 0800 171 2193.

UNISON Facebook campaigning group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/142274199135739/>
UNISON in FE twitter: https://twitter.com/UNISON_FE