



**Challenging Attacks on Sickness Absence in  
Further Education Colleges 2014  
An Organising Guide**

## 1. Introduction

The challenges facing staff working in Further Education by the attacks on sickness absence entitlement like all other attacks presents an opportunity to recruit and organise. UNISON is only as strong as its membership: recruiting and getting members active within the union should be a priority. It is a vital part of being a democratic and campaigning organisation.

## 2. Recruiting and Engaging Members

Mapping the workplace will give you a good overall picture of the members in your college and where membership can be increased. Once you have carried out your mapping exercise, planning the next steps will be much easier. Keep in mind that there may be several employers on the site, for example where catering and cleaning is run by private contractors. Your branch will be able to help with this but if in doubt contact [education@unison.co.uk](mailto:education@unison.co.uk). In the resources section of this guide we provide a template.

Some staff may be unavailable during college hours, which means talking to them at the beginning or end of a working day. Others might be available during the lunch break. Always make sure that you have relevant and updated materials handy with contact details on these. And take their details, if they would like follow up information. There is no substitute for face- to- face conversations. While messages and emails have their place, active listening and engaging will develop strong working relationships.

UNISON has produced a useful guide for recruiting members in Further Education

<https://www.unison.org.uk/upload/sharepoint/On%20line%20Catalogue/22147.pdf/>

## 3. Building a UNISON Presence in Your College

This involves step by step actions to help you build your campaign and a visible UNISON presence in the college. This can include some or all of following:-

- **Start the conversation about the issues facing staff by leafleting and talking to staff**
- **Hand out briefing sheets/newsletters**
- **Circulate a questionnaire – draft attached**
- **Hold meetings**
- **Text/Email members**
- **Set up a Twitter Account about UNISON at your college**
- **Set up a Face book page about UNISON at your college**

Or follow the UNISONinFE twitter account @UNISON\_FE and the UNISONinFE Facebook page  
<https://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/142274199135739/>

**UNION has templates for posters/leaflets/meeting notices in the resource section at the end of the pack. We also provide advice on face book and twitter.**

#### **4. Organising a Meeting**

There are many ways to effectively communicate with members on issues that affect them in the workplace. A mass workplace meeting is still one of the best ways to establish a proper dialogue with members to find out what they feel about an issue. It enables the union to discuss issues with members and to explore options on tackling the challenges.

UNISON believes that where appropriate joint meetings with other college unions on the issue, with joint speakers from the unions should be considered. Often the problem is encouraging members to attend a meeting. These are some helpful tips for organising meetings for your college members based on best practice examples, but if you need any further help or ideas, or have any local issues to be aware then please contact your branch. They will be able to provide recruitment and promotional materials. If you need further information on this contact [education@unison.co.uk](mailto:education@unison.co.uk)

#### **5. Open or Closed?**

Open meetings should be encouraged at your workplace. Recruitment materials should always be available at meeting and non members actively encouraged to join the union. Members can take recruitment forms and materials back to their workplace to distribute to colleagues. Open meetings are an opportunity to highlight the work of the union and should focus on:

- a) What the employers have said about proposals to change sick leave
- b) What UNISON and other FE trade unions say about this
- c) What UNISON and other unions are doing about this
- d) What members can do to help – in terms of getting involved in the campaign
- e) The importance of more people joining UNISON!

#### **6. Running your meeting:**

- Keep the meeting focussed on the immediate threat to reduce the sick leave entitlement.
- Keep this at the forefront and make this the focus: update your members, give them the union's view and tell them what you need them to do to help.
- But use the opportunity to let them know about wider UNISON issues – circulate copies of the national newsletters.
- If you want to use a PowerPoint we have a presentation with speaker's notes to put across the key issues. Contact [education@unison.co.uk](mailto:education@unison.co.uk)

- Invite guest speakers. Talk to your branch who will be happy to help.
- Provide food and drink as this often helps with the turnout.
  - Keep to the issue and also to your timings and make sure that the key union business about times and dates for any action is not left to the end when people are leaving.
  - Always include closing remarks about what members can do to help strengthen the union. This might be becoming a workplace contact, steward, health and safety rep, signing a petition, writing a model letter recruiting a colleague and shows solidarity and support for the campaign.

## **7. Checklist - How to promote your workplace meeting:**

- Feature the details in an email to your membership including the time, venue and any speakers
- Circulate details of the meeting via leaflets to members and non members.
- Encourage members to sign up to UNISON's twitter account UNISONinFE as well as the UNISON FE Face book pages so that they can be kept up to date with the latest developments and news.

### **1 week before the meeting**

- Email a reminder to all members explaining why their attendance is important
- Email a reminder to members and non members
- Check with speakers that they are still available and that they have the correct time and venue for the meeting.
- Check that any refreshments are organised.

### **One day before the meeting**

- Final reminder to members

## **8. Building Alliances**

Contact your student union representatives at the college. Each college should have a rep but if you have difficulties in finding out who they are contact [education@unison.co.uk](mailto:education@unison.co.uk) and we can help put you in touch with local student activists. Branches and reps will probably need to invest some time in identifying shared goals, since staff and students will each have different but complimentary concerns.

## 9. Building and Sustaining the Campaign

Explain clearly to decision-makers at your college why you feel the need to campaign against their decision, your mandate for the campaign in terms of evidence and support from the students. Communicate regularly with your members and the staff that will be affected. If they are not members, this is an opportunity to speak to potential members and encourage them to join. This will not happen overnight and can take some time as well as sensitivity. Make contact with your local NUS. Students need to understand the issues if you are going to be effective in your campaign, especially if it involves engagement with rallies and meetings.

Engage with the wider community on the issue. Communicate with the local and student press, the board of governors, community groups and local councillors and your local MP. The more publicity your campaign can win the more likely you are to be successful. If you need any support then branch and regional organising staff can offer advice and guidance.

Map out your potential campaign timetable that will influence decision-makers including who is responsible for taking action. Lobbying at the college and with local politicians, policy analysis and press activity can send a strong message.

Here is a not exhaustive list of easy and effective campaign actions you could take:

- Get in touch with student groups and other unions at the college
- Start a petition
- Write to your MP/Councillor
- engage with your employer and the board of governors. You can find out who is on your governing body from your college website. Find out about their interests and background.
- Find out key college dates such as open days and plan a rally to coincide with this
- Get in touch with your local newspaper or radio station
- work with your branch and region promoting the details of the campaign to the local media including newspapers, radio, television and internet news services
- Get a supportive quote from other local trade unions/trades councils, local organisations or other interested parties such as MPs, peers, students, parents to include in a press release
- Set up a Face book group, blog and twitter account use the campaign hashtag to send twitter updates about the campaign or use the UNISON national FE twitter and Face book page



## URGENT Meeting ABOUT CUTS TO SICK LEAVE



**Date:**

**Time:**

**Venue:**

Find out about the threats to your sick leave entitlement. The college is proposing to make significant reductions come and find out more and how we can work together to challenge these. **ALL WELCOME**

**COME ALONG – THE MORE WE ARE THE STRONGER WE WILL BE**

Three simple ways to join UNISON today:



Join online at  
[joinunison.org](http://joinunison.org)



Call us on  
0800 171 2193



Ask your UNISON rep  
for an application form



## **SAY NO TO CUTS TO SICK LEAVE AT COLLEGE !**

YOUR COLLEGE IS PROPOSING TO MAKE THE FOLLOWING CUTS TO YOUR ENTITLEMENT TO SICK LEAVE

THE CUTS WILL IMPACT ON THE HARDEST ON THE LOWEST PAID IN THE COLLEGE

THEY ARE UNFAIR , UNWARRANTED AND IMMORAL

WE WANT YOU TO HELP US WITH OUR CAMPAIGN TO CHALLENGE THIS

TO FIND OUT MORE CONTACT .....

OR [education@unison.co.uk](mailto:education@unison.co.uk) or

Ring UNISON Direct on 0800 171 2193

**Three simple ways to join UNISON today:**



Join online at  
[joinunison.org](http://joinunison.org)



Call us on  
0800 171 2193



Ask your UNISON rep  
for an application form

## Standard Letter to a potential UNISON member

Dear

### Why you should join a union

UNISON, other at ————— college have launched a campaign to challenge the proposals by the college to significantly reduce our entitlement to sickness absence leave. The changes are radical, significant and unwarranted. They will impact the hardest on the lowest paid and the most vulnerable members of our college community.

The College reputation is a valuable asset as is the role it plays with the local community in being one of main employers. It is difficult to see how it can reconcile these changes with this aspiration. Join UNISON and our campaign to defend your pay and conditions; together we are stronger.

**UNISON is one of the UK's largest trade unions, serving more than 1.3 million members. We represent full-time and part-time staff who provide public services, although they may be employed in both the public and private sectors. We are also the largest union representing support staff in Further and Sixth Form Colleges.**

- Representing our members is a key part of UNISON's work. Our reps form the vital links between members and the union as a whole and are volunteers, trained by UNISON to support members at work
- UNISON has secured £95m in damages for members since 2011
- Campaigning is a vital part of our work. It is one method we use to raise awareness of issues, fight for employment rights and gather support for local, national and international issues
- Our fight is defend jobs and quality public services
- This includes challenging the myths about the politically driven austerity agenda
- The UK is the 7th richest nation on earth and the 4th richest when it comes to wealth per person
- This government has reduced taxes for high earners – dropping the 50 pence tax rate to 45 pence

### Three simple ways to join UNISON today:



Join online at  
[joinunison.org](http://joinunison.org)



Call us on  
0800 171 2193



Ask your UNISON rep  
for an application form





## UNISON the UNION for Support Staff in Further Education

Date:

Dear Colleague

UNISON is the fastest growing trade union in the UK with over 1.3 million members. Why join, well UNISON membership offers you protection at work through representation in matters of pay, discipline, grievance or appeals. UNISON members are also entitled to free legal advice for matters inside and outside of their employment, as well as a wide range of discount benefits.

Here in xxxxxxxx UNISON is the lead trade union for college support staff. We are supported by our local UNISON Branch, xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx. The UNISON members at the college working alongside our accredited branch officers, stewards and contacts. We represent UNISON members within the College. We are also supported by a regional team of UNISON Organisers, who are based in ..... Below are a number of issues UNISON is working on behalf of our UNISON members:-

1. **Implementation of Pay 2014**
2. **College Re-organisations**
3. **Health & Safety Issues including sickness absence**

If you would like to be more involved, the workplace rep is UNISON's most important link between the union and its members. You don't need to have much experience or free time to be a rep. UNISON gives training and support and is happy that you do as much or as little as you feel able.

Working in further education is all about delivering the best possible service. And that's what UNISON is about too. Just as the public relies on the service you provide, you need a union you can rely on to protect you in our changing further education sector.

**That union is UNISON – the union that delivers.**

If you have any queries, please don't hesitate to contact me:  
via email:

**Yours sincerely**

**UNISON Steward at xxxxxx College**

## **Model to College Principal and College Chair of Governors**

Dear

We are writing to express our dismay and concern about the level and impact that the cuts to the sickness absence will have on our members. The attack is harsh and unwarranted on the hard working staff at your college.

This is an attack on the most vulnerable and lowest paid members of the college community, with the majority being low-paid women workers.

The College reputation is a valuable asset as is the role it plays with the local community in being one of main employers. It is difficult to see how it can reconcile these changes with this aspiration.

There is no evidence to suggest that there is a problem with sickness absence in the FE sector nationally or locally at xxxxxx college. The proposals are disproportionate. Nationally the number of staff needing time off has fallen. We believe it is important to manage sickness absence so as to not put additional strain on the rest of the workforce. However, the key is in good management, not in this heavy-handed approach that adds insult to injury. We have offered to negotiate around a sickness management policy with the employers, which would be a far more equitable route to go down.

This attack on sickness arrangements runs the risk of alienating staff and removing current good will practices. The vast majority of such absences are currently covered by staff, which means the employers are not liable for any additional expense

Given the severity of the proposals an early response would be much appreciated.

Yours sincerely

## **Model Letters**

### **Indicative ballot in relation to the College proposals to cut Sick Pay Provision**

UNISON, the recognised union at the xxxxx College attempted to engage in discussions with management about the proposals to make significant reductions to the sick pay provision

Insert details

We are now consulting with union members regarding a potential dispute over the employers reluctance to withdraw these proposals. The unions have serious concerns about the manner in which the college is conducting industrial relations with the college unions over an issue of fundamental importance to the future and health of the college. The proposals are unwarranted, harsh and will impact the hardest on the most vulnerable members of staff.

If we move to a dispute, we need to be able to show that we have the support of members, including for industrial action.

Please indicate below whether in principle you are prepared to take industrial action. This is NOT a formal ballot, but an indicative ballot which the unions will use to develop their strategy.

**I would be prepared to take industrial action, up to and including strike action:**

**YES**

**NO**



**UNISON** ESSENTIAL COVER FOR YOU AT WORK

Join UNISON online today at [joinunison.org](http://joinunison.org) or call 0800 171 2193



## Are you worried about the attacks on your conditions of service?

### Time to make your voice heard – take part in this survey.

We would appreciate it if you would take just a few minutes to complete our survey. All responses will be kept confidentially. This will help us identify the major causes of concern by staff so that we can raise them with management.

#### 1. Where is your primary workplace?

Where is your primary workplace?

#### About where you work

#### 2. How concerned are you about the following work-related issues?

	Very concerned	Concerned	Slightly concerned	Not concerned
Changes to sick leave	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Bullying and harassment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Job Losses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Outsourcing/Privatisation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pay	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Management Style	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Very concerned	Concerned	Slightly concerned	Not concerned
Pensions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Restructures	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Training Opportunities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Work Related Stress	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Workload	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other issues of concern/comments

**3. Are there other aspects of the current work environment which worry you, or have affected your working life?**

**4. Who do you approach for support or advice?**

- Your UNISON branch
- Staff Welfare Officer
- HR/Personnel
- Other (please specify)

**5. Are you a member of UNISON if Yes answer 6 if No answer 7**

**6. Would you consider getting involved in branch campaigns and becoming more active in UNISON ?**

<b>Yes</b>		<b>How would you like to get involved?</b>
<b>No</b>		<b>What would prevent you from being involved?</b>
<b>Maybe</b>		<b>Are there small ways in which you could help?</b>

**7. Have you been approached to join UNISON?**

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

I have been approached to join another trade union

**8. Would you like to receive more information about UNISON?**

Yes

No

Please contact me (email address or phone)

**9. Your contact details (optional). Any information provided will remain confidential and will not be shared with anyone else.**

Name: .....

Email address: .....

Mobile number (optional): .....

Work number: .....

Work address: .....

Remember you can join UNISON online <http://www.joinunison.org/>

Or ring 0800 0 857 857 UNISON Direct

If you need UNISON help or information fast and can't contact your union rep or branch - or don't know who they are - call UNISONdirect. This is the union's helpline for members, stewards, potential members and the general public.

Freephone textphone **0800 0 967 968** Lines are open:

6am-midnight  
Monday to Friday

9am-4pm Saturdays

For further information please contact .....

Or [education@unison.co.uk](mailto:education@unison.co.uk)



**'TEMPLATE'**

**RECRUITMENT & ORGANISING PLAN**

1. Map existing employer workplaces – work with your branch and region on this. But head office have information on this as well contact [education@unison.org.uk](mailto:education@unison.org.uk) for information
2. Identify numbers of members
3. Identify workplace contacts and representatives
4. Identify employer density (nos. of staff eligible to be UNISON members)
5. Detail & plan recruitment events, dates/venues/times/no. of new members/contacts/ reps
6. Identify/target workplaces & employers where we have no UNISON members.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Planning & Resources – all of the below with the assistance from your branch and region**

- Communicate & promote with members regarding dates/times for events;
- Consider doing a short workplace survey of **all** support staff to establish current concerns. Could be on sickness absence, stress, pay, restructuring. This will help also identify potential members as well as activists.
- Seek assistance at events from existing members, workplace representatives, service providers, etc;
- Order literature & put together recruitment packs – include the Further Education National Newsletter stock item number 2518
- Provide a UNISON local FE newsletter & front page information sheet;
- Prize draw survey cards – identify workplace issues;
- Talent spot potential workplace contacts & representatives;
- Update member's email/mobile for email network/e-bulletin;
- Circulate recruitment packs to non-members
- Publicity of events/activities
- Organise workplace meetings;
- Consider organizing workplace Membership Services events, pension surgeries, financial advice, insurances, welfare, legal advice, workshops - again advise on this available from your branch and region

