

UK lecturers and academic staff stage one-day national strike

Robert Stevens
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Staff at universities throughout the UK struck for 24 hours Thursday demanding a pay increase.

Members of the University and College Union (UCU), Unison and the Unite trade unions voted to reject a 1 percent rise—a de facto pay cut with inflation close to 3 percent.

University workers have suffered an unprecedented 13 percent pay cut in real terms since 2009. *Guardian* columnist Will Hutton described this as “one of the largest sustained wage cuts any profession has suffered since the Second World War.”

According to Unison, their members have lost between £663-£1,173 each year over the past five years. The UCU said that senior lecturers have been hit with cuts in pay equaling £4,300 a year, with some lower paid members losing £2,400 per annum.

Rallies were held in cities including London, Birmingham, Brighton, Bristol, Cambridge, Exeter, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield. In Scotland, union members rallied in cities including Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Dundee.

Unions stated that the strike resulted in a widespread closure of classes and libraries, but employers said that disruption has been “minimal”.

At the University of Manchester, the largest single-site university in the UK with around 39,000 students and 10,400 staff, the strike fell during “Reading Week” during which no lectures take place.

The unions worked frantically until the last minute in an attempt to call off the strike. A briefing for UCU members pointed out that were any action to be taken this was the “best chance of bringing the employers back to the table.”

An October 29, a UCU article said the unions “were disappointed the employers had refused talks to try and divert Thursday’s walkout,” but “they are still prepared

to meet for eleventh hour talks”. UCU head of higher education Michael MacNeil said, “We are amazed the employers are still refusing to sit down with us to try and resolve this without any need for disruption. There are precious few hours left now, but our offer of talks remains open.”

A spokesman for the Universities and Colleges Employers Association said it had met with the unions “repeatedly over the last six months and as recently as last week”.

The UCU and the other unions have no intention of ending the massive erosion in workers’ pay or opposing any other attack. The UCU has called just one national walkout over pay, in 2006, which was not supported by Unite and Unison.

The massive cut in pay is part of a systematic assault on higher education (See “Massive cuts at universities in the UK”). The £1.1 billion surplus accumulated by the universities cited by the unions as the basis for raising pay levels, mainly through the increase in tuition fees to £9,000 a year, with much higher fees for international students, has not offset the massive cuts carried out by central government to the higher education sector. University spending is already facing a 40 percent cut by 2015. The UK spends less on its university system than every other developed nation but Japan. Earlier this year, a further £400 million was cut from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills that oversees university funding.

University teaching was cut by one-fifth last academic year, losing £1.3 billion in funds. This follows the halving of teaching budgets after the introduction of tuition fees, with ministers arguing that the higher fees would make up the shortfall. The reality has been wholesale course closures and job losses. The UCU, as the main union in higher education, has not

lifted a finger in opposition.

Pseudo-left groups who comprise the “UCU Left” caucus, such as the Socialist Workers Party, play a critical role in facilitating management’s attacks. UCU Left member Liz Lawrence is the union’s vice president. Other SWP members in both further education and higher education are also UCU national executive committee members, working to maintain the stranglehold of the union over every struggle that emerges.

UCU members in higher education will take part in “action short of a strike” from November 1 in the form of a “working to contract”. This is an abandonment of any collective action, as each worker is left to decide what “working to contract” consists of. Most contacts within universities operate on the basis that workers must be “flexible” as a result of deals previously signed off by the unions.

The UCU Left have endorsed the demobilisation of any offensive by university workers through this campaign. Their web site links to a two-page document that attempts to deflect any criticism away from the union in advance. It states, “We should dismiss any suggestion that working to contract is ‘tokenistic’ or impossible to operate because our contracts are professional and sometimes ‘open-ended’.”

It states that a central factor in the campaign is to enable negotiations to continue with the employers: “If all UCU members seriously worked to contract universities would come to a halt and the employers would see the need to come back to the bargaining table with a decent pay offer.”

The document advises that “work to contract is an important opportunity for union recruitment.”

The employers are well aware of the futility of such “action”. A briefing note for universities from the Employment Group at Pinsent Masons, an international law firm, notes, “‘Working to contract’ has not caused appreciable adverse impact in the past—the reality is that there is a degree of ‘soft pedalling’ by UCU when industrial action commences at this time of year.” *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke to some of those attending the rallies around the UK.

Anya Louis, a lecturer at Hallam University in Sheffield, England had been on the picket line earlier in the day and said, “I’m happy about how few went through the picket lines. It’s been a good start. Enough

is enough.

“This is not just about the pay—that’s the tagline. It’s about working conditions, performance related pay, zero contract hours. Teaching is one of the top three professions with the most stress related illness—teaching, social work and nursing.

“There is so much interference in what is being taught from people who don’t know anything about learning. If you talk to people in the National Health Service it’s exactly the same.

“There is a huge tension where everyone is an individual and is unique and learns best in different ways. The drive to standardisation creates the exact opposite.”

Andy, who helps adults with learning difficulties said, “I think the strike is a good thing as I’m in favour of direct action as opposed to sitting around. Talking about things is all well and good but I’m for the class struggle.”

Speaking about the trade unions, Andy said, “The unions don’t have as much power and I’m always suspicious about who they’re defending.”

Matt, a student at Sheffield University, said, “I don’t agree with how education is being marketised. The universities are just launching advertising campaigns all over. This is where they are spending resources.”

Alaric Hall has taught in the English Department of Leeds University for the last six years. He said, “I am concerned that my pay has fallen over the last five years, and that is significant to me. But I am also concerned, very concerned, about the inequality in pay in relation to gender in higher education.”

Speaking about the flexible contracts that many university staff are now employed under Alaric said, “I am really, really worried about all these short term contracts that are getting more and more prominent in higher education. We should be working hard to invest in permanent jobs and nurturing staff and therefore our students.”



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