

# Strike at 200 Further Education colleges in England

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Thousands of lecturers, librarians and cleaners at 200 FE (Further Education) colleges in England took strike action Wednesday to protest a freeze in their pay. Some FE staff have suffered a reduction in pay by as much as 17 percent after years on lower than inflation pay rises.

This is the second joint walkout of Unison and *University and College Union (UCU)* members over pay, following a 24-hour strike in November.

The strength of feeling was evident in the ballots, which recorded 68 percent of Unison members in favour of strikes, while for the UCU it was 74 percent. In both cases, this was more in favour than the previous ballot. The vote took place after most of the more than 200 FE colleges refused a pay increase of £1 per hour for all staff.

FE colleges, as distinct from universities, offer intermediate qualifications necessary for university entrance, as well as a whole range of high-quality technical vocational courses geared toward a specific career path. Courses are open to anyone over 16 and can give working class students, who are more likely to fail first high school qualifications, a second chance.

These colleges also teach students with learning difficulties as well as ESOL students (English for speakers of other languages).

Last year's Tory budget cuts saw a 4 percent reduction in ESOL spending, which has a national waiting list of 3,000, while spending for adult education was slashed by 25 percent. Over the last five years, FE adult education has been cut by close to 50 percent, which according to the UCU could lead to the loss of 400,000 college places.

While some colleges are hiring new employees on inferior contracts, in effect creating a two-tier system, teaching vacancies have increased from 70 percent in 2010 to over 82 percent in 2014.

Not all who work in FE have experienced erosion in their pay, however. There has been a threefold rise in the number of college principals earning an annual income of over £200,000.

As part of the continually revised target of eliminating the budget deficit by 2018, to cut costs in education the Cameron government is planning area reviews with the aim of merging FE and Sixth Form Colleges (which cater for 16- to 18-year-olds). The government admits this will lead to a "rationalised curriculum," and in place of funded ESOL, Access and Adult Education will be courses for only those who can afford to pay. The focus will be more on apprenticeships and the needs of business. Thousands of teaching jobs could go as well as access to a broad curriculum in these new so-called super colleges.

A similar review of colleges in Scotland resulted in the number of colleges reduced from 43 to 26, with thousands of jobs and student places cut.

The FE employees join a growing number of workers, including junior doctors, who are determined to oppose the worsening austerity being imposed by the Conservative government. While workers have shown their willingness to fight, their struggles have been repeatedly sabotaged by the trade unions.

Addressing UCU and Unison members during the strike in London, UCU leader Sally Hunt said, "This is not the end. If we have to do this again, then we do this again". She added, "The UCU [striking] on its own, or Unison on its own, isn't going to make a difference. What is going to make a difference is if we start building an alliance with public sector unions, education unions, and others in our sector that are willing to say that the funding situation in further education is beyond what is reasonable."

The record of the trade unions since the Tories came

to power in 2010 is one of dividing workers and opposing any joint offensive of their members to defeat the governments' offensive.

In 2011, FE staff were among 2 million public sector workers who took strike action against attacks on their pensions. After this enormous turnout, the unions, including Unison and UCU, called only single days of action on a regional basis, eventually making separate deals on a union-by-union basis. Workers in the public sector now have to pay in more and work longer to get a reduced pension. It is these bosses' organisations that pseudo-left groups, including the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party, insist workers should turn to defend their living standards.

The leaders of the FE unions openly admit that the purpose of the day of strike action is to pressure the Association of Colleges (AoC) employers' organisation to include them in talks. Unison Head of Education Jon Richards said the strike was held "to get the Association of Colleges back around the table and in meaningful negotiations."

The role of the unions is to provide a safety valve for dissipating the anger of their members in limited single days of action, to isolate groups of workers and facilitate the government and employers in imposing their attacks.

A strike scheduled for February 2 by staff at the Open University (OU) was recently suspended by the UCU. OU bosses want to close seven regional centres and cut 500 jobs. The Open University, a distance learning institution, is the biggest university in the world in terms of student numbers.

The Labour Party's primary fear, as with the trade unions, is the development of an independent movement of workers and youth, in opposition to the escalating destruction of their working conditions and living standards.

During the November strike rally, FE workers were addressed by Labour Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell. Labour under new leader Jeremy Corbyn remains as committed to defending capitalism and imposing cuts as the Tories and the 1997-2010 Labour government under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Last year McDonnell said regarding Labour's economic policies, "Labour is committed to eliminating the deficit and creating an economy in which we live within our means."

Prior to the latest FE strike, on February 6, Corbyn addressed a UCU conference and pleaded with the employers to settle the dispute in talks with the unions. "It's up to colleges to recognise the insecurity of employment in FE, recognise the very hard work that [their staff] do and recognise the long-term cut in pay compared to other sectors, and to come up with a reasonable offer on this," he said. He warned, "I understand the unions' position on this... *And my message to the government and the colleges is: get around the table now to avoid the strike*" (emphasis added).

Just days later Corbyn said of the junior doctors' dispute, as the government stated it would impose an inferior contract on them, "More strikes now look likely. If that happens, it will be clear that the blame lies with the government, not the doctors. Even at this late stage, I appeal to Jeremy Hunt to go back and negotiate with the BMA."



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