

UK university lecturers strike against pay cuts and casualisation

Our reporters
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Lecturers in the University and College Union (UCU) held a nationwide 48-hour strike on Wednesday and Thursday. The strike was called to protest a proposed pay rise of just 1.1 percent, offered by the Universities and Colleges Employer Association (UCEA), and the ongoing casualisation of labour in Higher Education (HE).

Following the strike UCU members began working to contract, refusing to work overtime, set additional work, or undertake any voluntary duties like covering timetabled classes for absent colleagues.

University staff have seen pay fall in real terms by 14.5 percent since 2009. Employment security in the sector has been progressively undermined by the extension of temporary contracts. According to the UCU, 75,000 university staff are on a casualised contract.

In 2015, the *Guardian* reported, “When it comes to ‘teaching-only’ staff in HE, the UCU’s estimates put the proportion on ‘time limited rather than permanent’ contracts at 60 percent, and its freedom of information request showed more than 21,000 university teaching staff on zero-hours arrangements.”

Another UCU report showing that roughly a third of university academics in casual employment struggled to pay their rent or mortgage, while more than a third had difficulty paying household bills and 17 percent sometimes struggled to afford food.

That such a serious assault could be waged on working conditions is down to the betrayals of the UCU, Unite, Unison and other unions. These organisations have worked to ensure that opposition in the education sector to the government’s policies can find no political expression.

The UCU is opposed to a unified offensive by workers against the government’s austerity agenda.

Unable to stall growing anger from its members, it has sanctioned a few days of limited action to give the impression that it is fighting for them. The strike was timed for the end of the university year, when teaching has stopped for most undergraduate students. Holding it then meant it would cause the least disruption possible. A UCEA spokesperson noted that most institutions estimated “no to low” impact from the strike.

Unite, which has about 12,000 members in higher education, did not call its members out at all. Instead, it is “consulting” on a possible strike, with a ballot closing on June 6.

At University College London, Birkbeck and the School of African and Oriental Studies, turnout for the strike was therefore relatively low, at around 100. Members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) spoke to some of those involved.

Josh, a UCL alumni relations officer, said, “I think it’s really unfair how little academics and university staff are paid. This 1.1 percent offer is pretty pathetic. It has effectively been a pay cut of 15 percent because we’ve had no pay increase for the last 10 years, so it’s been going steadily down. The universities can afford to pay much more.”

Asked how declining pay had affected him, Josh said, “I live locally in Camden, and I’ve had problems finding affordable accommodation, and I’ve had to move around a lot to find a permanent place to live ...

“I am disappointed that Unite and Unison haven’t been balloted on this strike action. I think we might be balloted for strike action in autumn. Hopefully that will be one that all the unions will do together, which would have much more of an impact. I did find it a bit odd that Unison didn’t come out in support of junior doctors. I think we’ve been informally supporting the

British Medical Association and the junior doctors' strikes by speaking at rallies and protests, but it is a bit odd they haven't been doing it more formally and balloting their members on strike action."

Kojo, a Birkbeck PhD student and assistant lecturer, said, "We're striking against the casualization of universities more than anything. So much of the teaching has been taken by casualized staff who don't have the same kind of security, and don't have the adequate compensation that they should to do their job properly. Overall, the university and student experience suffers the most.

"I will be [on a temporary contract] in September. The universities are not a privileged institution, this is something happening across all these different sectors. It's ensuring that the working population is insecure, that it's unable to organise and plan for their lives, and leaving them at the mercy of their bosses and employers. I think it's something that has really gutted the strength of organised labour, and I think the tide needs to be turned back."

On the impact on education, Kojo explained, "I think it's an attempt to transform the university into a place of commodity exchange. It's where students see themselves as customers and pay a certain amount of money and receive a good. Students need to be engaged in the pursuit of knowledge and teachers need to be compensated enough that they can adequately facilitate those processes of learning. They need the time and the space to be able to deal with students, rather than having overcrowded classrooms, and being overworked and underpaid. I think it's having a really detrimental effect."

Byron said, "I'm a UCL employee and as a researcher I think things have been getting very hard recently and I think things really need to change in support of salaries and workers' benefits, as they've been getting pretty bad, and it's very useful to show support in these kind of conditions."

Byron is currently employed on a limited time contract. "For me and my colleagues it means we have no sense of security, and no possibility of buying houses or getting mortgages. It's not unique obviously to our line of work, but in our areas of highly skilled work where we've had to do years of training to get where we are, to now face these levels of insecurity is a pretty horrible situation."

"I think we've grown to accept that this is the way it is and we're taught that austerity is vital in this situation, and we all need to put in our bit to save the economy. But really it's us that are paying the cost."

Asked whether he thought a unified struggle of working people was necessary to defend jobs, education and the National Health Service, Byron responded, "Yes, absolutely. I guess that is where these things can, and historically, have been able to change, when they come from that unified front. But I think obviously the elite, the bourgeoisie, have really been quite empowered. I think the Labour Party and the unions have turned away from their traditional direction."



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