

Scottish college lecturers walk out over pay and conditions

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Lecturers across Scotland's colleges are striking today, following the breakdown in talks over a pay agreement between the teachers union--the Education Institute of Scotland (EIS)--and the employers, Colleges Scotland.

The dispute concerns the implementation of a pay deal agreed back in March 2016, which included a 9 percent pay rise for lecturers over the next two years and a "harmonised" payment structure standardising pay grades across Scotland's recently merged colleges. As a result of the deal, more than 30 days of strikes planned for the same time last year were called off.

The EIS accuses Colleges Scotland of seeking to ram through a raft of changes to class contact time, holidays and other conditions in exchange for the pay rise. Colleges Scotland is proposing a package that would include 56 days holiday and 26 hours class contact time, instead of the 21 hours and 66 days holiday demanded by the union. The employers contend that the EIS signed up to their demands as part of last year's pay agreement.

In a measure of the anger and willingness to fight amongst further education (FE) lecturers, twelve one-day stoppages are planned over the next three months to coincide with the examination period. The EIS said the strike could be escalated to three days per week if lecturers' demands are not met.

Members of the EIS, which represents more than 4,500 staff at 26 colleges, voted overwhelmingly in favour of action by 96.4 percent to 3.6 percent.

Tensions have been building amongst lecturers and college staff for nearly a decade, in which time further education has been the target of some of the most devastating public spending cuts implemented by the devolved Scottish National Party (SNP) government. Hundreds of millions of pounds have been slashed from

college funding according to Audit Scotland, with an 18 percent drop recorded between 2010-11 and 2014-15.

Echoing the austerity drive of the UK Conservative government, the SNP have cynically instructed colleges to do "more for less." The results have been devastating.

Student numbers have fallen by 152,000, an astonishing 41 percent, since the SNP came to power in 2007. This has impacted heavily on part-time positions, which have been halved. As a result, large numbers of adult learners have been cut off from further education entirely, as have other students for whom full-time courses are inappropriate, such as single parents, disabled students and those with caring responsibilities.

In just a few years, between 2011-12 and 2013-14, staff numbers in Scotland's colleges fell by 9.3 percent. According to Audit Scotland, employment in the sector rebounded by 5 percent in 2014-15, but jobs remain under threat as many colleges are in serious financial difficulty.

Edinburgh College is the most indebted and ran up a deficit of £7 million for 2015-16 alone. It is heavily reliant on a "voluntary" severance deal to reduce wage overheads. The financial difficulties of Lews Castle College, in the Western Isles, and Moray College, in the northeast, have been singled out for their severity.

The workload of lecturers and learning support workers, both inside and outside of the classroom, has increased significantly as a result of larger class sizes and fewer staff. A survey of 17 colleges carried out last year by the Unison trade union found that 85 percent of support workers regularly experienced stress at work, while 38 percent said they felt bullied and one in five have taken sick leave due to "stress, bullying, anxiety or depression." Most respondents cited overwork and a

demoralising work environment as the main causes.

The recent dismissal of an Edinburgh lecturer simply for allowing his colleagues' access to his personal supply of paracetamol--a widely used pain relief medication available over the counter at the college shop--sheds some light on the intolerable workplace environment created by years of education cuts. The incident sparked repeated strikes and protests by Edinburgh staff and students this academic year.

The cuts have been carried out as part of a fundamental rationalisation of Scotland's colleges, which has seen 37 colleges merged into just 20 and placed under the control of 13 regional college boards. Seven other colleges remain unincorporated. The SNP announced efficiency saving targets of £50 million per year upon the completion of the merger in 2014-15.

As well as spending cuts, the purpose of this reorganisation has been to tailor college education even more closely to the interests of Scottish business. Shona Struthers, chief executive of Colleges Scotland, applauded the rationalisation, commenting "It is about delivering quality courses that lead to recognised qualifications relevant to industry."

The trade unions have been intimately involved in this process. In its consultation with the Education and Culture Committee of the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Trades Union Congress made a few disposable criticisms before assuring ministers that it "does, however, support much of the [Post-16 Education] Bill and we particularly welcome the requirements to consult with trade unions that have been included throughout."

In contrast, lecturers, support staff and students have repeatedly demonstrated their resolve to fight in defence of education.

There has been a strike--or an overwhelming ballot in favour of strike action across Scotland's colleges--every year for at least the past five years. This is just one indication of a much broader opposition among workers and students to a wholesale assault on every level of education and all vital public services in Scotland and across the UK.

The education unions, the EIS and Unison in this case, have worked assiduously to exhaust and derail opposition by organising token protests, isolated to individual campuses and in separate sectors of education. This has taken place alongside a few futile

rallies outside Holyrood, based on ineffective appeals for the SNP to change course.

The unions only recently changed tack as a means to best control the mounting anger emerging among education workers and students.

Until very recently, the EIS, which represents 60,000 teachers at all levels of education in Scotland, had not called a national strike since college lecturers joined the union in 1988. For its part, Unison engaged in its first-ever national strike in further education last year. This was over pay for workers in administrative positions, catering, cleaning, security, classroom assistants, and technicians. Unison rapidly wound up the struggle in exchange for a miserly £450 flat rate annual pay rise--a figure that does not even cover the inflation of living costs for most pay grades.

Its record demonstrates that the EIS will seek the first opportunity to betray lecturers. According to a BBC report, "Senior figures within the union are hopeful the dispute will be resolved without the need to escalate action. They believe there could be political pressure to solve the dispute quickly because of both the council elections and the general election campaign."

The lecturers strike must be seen in the context of a growing unrest among workers in every sector of the economy after a decade of relentless austerity.

In Scotland alone, Unison are currently balloting 70,000 local government workers in a pay dispute; janitors employed by Glasgow City Council have begun another two-week strike over pay, conditions and jobs; postal workers in Kilmarnock are engaged in unofficial strike action over management "bullying and harassment"; and 20,000 oil workers are threatening strike action in the North Sea after rejecting the latest pay deal from the Offshore Contractors Association.

These follow strikes throughout the UK by junior doctors, rail workers, BMW autoworkers, Fujitsu workers, teachers and teaching assistants. National strike action is also threatened by nurses, teachers and Royal Mail staff.



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