

UK university lecturers and college staff strike against pension cuts and wage cap

Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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Today, 40,000 lecturers across 57 universities are mounting the biggest strike in the UK since the 2016 junior doctors strike.

The two-day stoppage is part of 14 days of action, in opposition to attacks on pensions that mean cuts of around 40 percent, with the average lecturer losing around £10,000 a year. Those beginning their careers stand to lose a staggering £208,000 over the course of their retirement.

Lecturers are being balloted at seven other universities, meaning that strikes in March could involve workers at 68 institutions.

Next week, lecturers will be joined by college staff at 16 colleges, also members of the University and College Union (UCU). They will strike for two days in opposition to a derisory below-inflation pay offer of one percent by the Association of Colleges. Staff at some of the colleges are also walking out over working conditions—including holiday entitlement, workload and observation policies.

While lecturers are striking over pensions, they have also suffered pay cuts, with an almost 15 percent pay decline in real terms since 2009.

As with the junior doctors, lecturers and college staff have been driven to action by the sheer scale of the attack on their living standards. The strikes point to a growing militant sentiment among workers and herald an escalation in the class struggle in Britain, in line with a growing mood of resistance internationally to attacks on jobs, wages, pensions and conditions.

Fully 88 percent of lecturers voted for strike action, while college staff voted by 92 percent to strike, with one college recording a 100 percent vote for action.

The resistance of workers in higher and further education has implications for workers everywhere, who face the same onslaught against jobs, pay and

pensions.

Workers throughout the public sector continue to suffer a pay freeze, in place since 2011. In the National Health Service, workers have seen an average £2,000 cut in real terms pay over the past seven years. The pay of ambulance staff is down £5,286 in real terms.

Pensions of workers throughout the public and private sector are being destroyed or massively reduced in value, while the pensions of more than 20,000 workers at Carillion are threatened following the collapse of the firm.

Universities UK (UUK), representing 350 university employers, proposes to move the entirety of members' earnings from the current defined benefit pension scheme, the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS), to a defined contribution model. It funds pensions for academics mostly based in the pre-1992 universities and has more than 390,000 members. Lecturers will be forced to leave a scheme where they have a guaranteed income, to one where retirement incomes are entirely dependent on returns from investments made in the stock market.

In stark contrast, the amount of money being forked out to those in the higher echelons of management in universities has risen astronomically—with vice chancellors now receiving incomes akin to that of CEOs of large corporations. At Southampton University, vice chancellor Sir Christopher Snowden took home more than £430,000 in 2016/17. The new principal of Edinburgh University, Peter Mathieson, has a £342,000 salary and received relocation costs of £26,000 and £42,000 in lieu of pension contributions. Bath Spa University paid its former vice-chancellor, Christina Slade, a golden handshake of more than £800,000 in the final year of her contract.

A further indication of a desire to fight by lecturers is

the recent estimated ten percent rise in UCU membership. Any belief, however, that a successful struggle can be waged through the UCU, or any other union, is misplaced.

Workers must draw the lesson of the defeat of the junior doctors' struggle, involving around 50,000 members of the British Medical Association (BMA). They struck five times throughout 2016 in opposition to plans by the government to impose a vastly inferior contract. Everything was done by the BMA to limit the doctors' struggle and isolate the dispute, under conditions where it had widespread support among millions opposed to the break-up and privatisation of the NHS. No other health trade union called strike action in their support.

In September 2016, the BMA's Junior Doctors Committee called off 15 days of strikes, before calling off all action against the contract two months later, allowing the Tories to enforce their plans.

The UCU has already demonstrated its opposition to waging a struggle in defence of pensions. This is only the latest major attack on lecturers' pensions since 2011 unopposed by the UCU, with downgrading carried out in 2014 when pension benefits were reduced for new entrants to the USS.

In the current dispute, the UCU has proposed in negotiations that its members pay significantly more to the USS—by increasing their contribution by 2.9 percentage points to 10.9 per cent of salaries. Currently, employers pay 18 percent to the USS.

In November 2011—in the first major struggle against the Cameron Conservative government's austerity agenda—more than two million public sector workers in 20 trade unions, including the UCU, struck and protested against plans to make them pay more, and work longer, for reduced pensions.

This mass movement alarmed and shocked the union bureaucracy, who then worked to demobilise it. Within weeks, the Trades Union Congress announced it was suspending any further action and had accepted a framework deal with the government over the four main pension schemes within the public sector. By the following March, the unions called off a national strike set to involve 500,000 workers. In May 2012, a much-reduced strike was called by just a few unions before they too abandoned all opposition.

The government and right-wing media have sought to

whip up opposition among students to the struggle of the lecturers. The walkouts will hit the classes of around one million students, with undergraduates losing an estimated 575,000 teaching hours under conditions in which students are paying more than £9,000 a year for their courses. Despite this, most students surveyed said they fully back striking lecturers.

What is required is a strategy based on mobilising a unified struggle by university and college staff and students that must turn out to broader sections of workers. This means taking the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the UCU, electing rank-and-file committees at every university and college to discuss a programme of action that appeals to the millions deeply opposed to the destruction of education and other vital services, who would be inspired by the fight now underway.

Lecturers and college staff are not simply fighting the education bodies, but a Conservative government intent on smashing all the gains made by the working class in previous decades and imposing further savage cuts in pay and conditions. This political struggle cannot be waged by relying on the Labour Party. Labour pioneered many of the attacks now being extended, imposes them in local authorities nationwide and remains a party of big business now that it is headed by Jeremy Corbyn.

It means adopting the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party of building a mass political movement of the working class to fight for socialism and the reorganisation of economic life on the basis of human need, not private greed.



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