

“This is a political attack”

Striking UK lecturers speak on struggle against assault on pensions

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to lecturers and students at universities around the UK during yesterday's national strike by lecturers against attacks on their pensions.

On Thursday, 40,000 lecturers across 57 universities are mounting the biggest strike in the UK in two years. 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.

Many strikers outside University College London (UCL) expressed their outrage that the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension fund had not been paid into by universities for a period of 10 years, and that the claimed deficit of billions of pounds was based on a model scenario whereby every university with staff in the scheme closed down tomorrow.

James, a UCL lecturer, pointed to the casualisation and low pay received by higher education employees, describing how some of his younger colleagues were working on four month contracts for £14 an hour. He believed that university bosses would try to “starve the strike out” and attempt to turn students, who in their majority are supportive of the strike, against the lecturers.

In South London, a few hundred lecturers and students were in attendance at a University and College Union (UCU) rally held at Goldsmiths University.

Anna, a lecturer in Social Work at Goldsmiths, said, “I’ve worked all my life and I’ve been on strike before but I’ve never felt so strongly that this is something we really have to come out on strike about. It’s not just our future as lecturers. I can see that, after us, they will go for the teachers, the post-1992 university lecturers [who are in a different pension scheme], and for other parts of the public sector.”

Asked if she saw this as part of a broader attack on workers’ conditions, Anna replied “Yes, this is a test case... the thought of having no idea what your situation might be and given the state pension, which I understand is one of the lowest in Europe, people will have no certainty whatsoever.”

Anna said the attacks are “all built on the same principles that the marketplace is everything... we are completely dependent on what the market tells us it can afford. It changed overnight. Suddenly they apparently couldn’t afford our pensions.

“It’s also part of the idea that universities are marketplaces that have to compete against each other. All the public funding from universities has been taken away and they want to reduce fees at certain places. If they do that here, there will be mass redundancies. The rich institutions will vanquish the poorer ones.”

Students Jess, Lucy and Rosie joined the rally to support their lecturers. “I think this is part of a broader issue,” said Rosie, “which is the marketisation of education that leaves everyone in a worse position. Education shouldn’t be seen as something which is only for the people privileged enough to pay for it. It shouldn’t be something people have to sacrifice pensions to provide.”

Jess added, “I don’t like the way universities can now be pitted against one another. In a way pensions connected institutions so that they weren’t in competition with one another. That being taken away is a big problem. You have to strike and say we don’t want this.”

Asked why they were supporting the strike, Rosie explained, “Lecturers support the fact that a rise in tuition fees is a terrible thing, so students should support the argument that a cut to pensions is a terrible thing. We don’t want our lecturers, who have done so much hard work for us, to retire into poverty.”

John, a humanities department lecturer was on one of the many picket lines on the University of Manchester’s Oxford Road campus. He said, “The pension scheme was downgraded again a couple of years ago. First of all new entrants had their pensions degraded and then it was turned into a hybrid scheme. It was partly defined benefit and partly defined contribution, based on investments. A few people were saying at the time that was the thin end of the wedge

and that they'd be back for more if they thought they could get away with it.

"I think we've realised now we really have to stand up for ourselves this time. Nobody wants to strike and we regret its impact on students but we've been left with no choice.

"This is unacceptable and not minor tinkering from the employers. This is a qualitatively different kind of retirement. The employers are intransigent over this and its part of a pattern we've seen ... and it has to come to an end with this fight were in.

"I see this as a political attack and it's about what they think they can get away with and its part of a broader neo-liberal agenda. It's about driving down wages and conditions. I agree with you, this is interconnected with the struggles of other workers."

Asked what he thought of the role of the unions, Alan said, "It's a big question. You have the anti-trade union laws so sympathetic strikes are very difficult to sustain. But in the last few years, there's been disappointment at what we've perceived as union climb-downs at key moments. I think among the UCU leadership they see that if they do the same this time they really will lose their credibility to a point where it won't be recoverable any more. They'll lose support."

Eva said, "I joined the University of Manchester nearly 11 years ago. I had a secure position in Austria previous to that and I left because I thought this university would offer a better working environment, a better attitude towards colleagues and a more international outlook. But now we suddenly find that our pensions are completely insecure.

"In those 11 years a lot more positions have been created in management. Our workload has increased. We recently had a reminder that we need to do world class research but it's impossible for us to fit it into the day. I regularly have to work at evening and weekends.

"I would like to say to the public and any students who might be angry at us. Very often academics for many years have casual, low-paid jobs, without any social security contributions. So by the time we actually start having contributions to our pension funds it is often later on in life. I started paying contributions here at the age of 39. So I don't feel like even under the old system that I am going to have a cushy retirement."

Eva spoke about the decline in numbers of academics over the years as redundancies were carried out. She said, "In my school of languages, a lot of departments have been cut dramatically or are going to be. People haven't been replaced and have taken voluntary redundancies under severe pressure. This is now the final straw. I see this as part of general movement against work insecurity and worsening conditions everywhere. We have to fight the same fight."

A young University of Manchester researcher on the picket lines said the attack on pensions was "taking the risk from the university management and putting the risk on employees. I'm only just starting out in my university career but I'd like to think that after many years of working I would know what I was retiring to, rather than relying on the stock market.

"As academics we're privileged in many ways but we do have the disadvantage that for years you are training to get the job. All the years you are training to get your PhD, you are not eligible for the pension scheme in that time. So you are actually starting in the pension scheme about five years after your contemporaries. So we need to make sure once we are in the USS that we are building up our deferred wages for our retirement."

She explained, "A real problem is you don't have defined hours... I am working around an extra 12 hours a week, on the basis that the official working week is 37.5 hours. In my situation I might be able to get a short-term 10 month contract but in order to get a longer contract you need to get more publications."

Another Manchester lecturer said that 50 percent of lecturers were on casual contracts, in contrast to well-paid university vice chancellors who were raking in hundreds of thousands of pounds. She expressed a common sentiment among the strikers, stating, "I really think this is the last stand now, absolutely the last stand."

Joaquin, a lecturer at Leeds University, was critical of the UCU saying he stopped attending union meetings as the leadership had "more in common with the management" than the members. He said students who supported lecturers in the 2011 strikes against attacks on pensions had occupied the university for 10 days and felt betrayed by the unions after they reached agreement with the Conservative government.



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