

UK lecturers and students speak out during second week of strikes over pensions

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to lecturers, other university staff and students at picket lines and rallies on Monday and Tuesday. They were the first two days of this week's three-day strike against attacks on the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) by the employers' body, Universities UK (UUK).

Matt, a University of Leeds lecturer, said, "The pension is really important, particularly for younger colleagues coming through. The terms and conditions in Higher Education (HE) in every other respect are pretty tough but the pension is a good compensation. If that goes who'd want to be an HE lecturer? It wouldn't be very good, it wouldn't be very attractive in many ways."

Matt continued, "Higher Education is in turmoil. There are all the accountability pressures that are on us to produce papers, grants, students and you've got the whole fee thing with undergrads paying a lot of money, PhD students paying a lot of money. The workforce will be pretty disaffected if we lose."

Matt saw the struggle as one involving all workers. This "is really big and I do think there's a wider issue, if this pension scheme is destroyed or the benefits, defined benefits are ... who's next? With teachers or health service, you know they'll say, 'Oh, all the defined benefits are going out the window so yours can go as well!' I don't know if that's part of the agenda, but I wouldn't be surprised if it was. It's another attack on workers basically." He concluded, "It's like a business isn't it, everyone at the top earns loads and everyone else gets not very much."

Another striker picketing at Leeds, Fiona, who works in the university library explained, "As a casualised worker I'm in danger already but it's something I feel very strongly about. The pension seems to be disappearing as I stand here, that's what my main

concern is."

Angela works in the library at the University of Leeds. Asked her thoughts on the government's overall attack on education, Angela said, "I'm a parent of a child in primary school who is suffering from what happens in primary schools, all of the ridiculous shenanigans about the curriculum, about SATS [Standard Assessment Tests] and things like that. It just feels very draconian. It doesn't feel like a progressive stance towards education.

"Class sizes are enormous, classes of 32 children. I know people who pay for private education and the class sizes are 15, so why can't we all have that?"

Angela opposed the marketization of higher education, saying, "Education shouldn't be about the money, it shouldn't be driven by how much money you've got in your bank account. Or what you will make in the future."

Angela said that she was employed full-time and had been working at the university for 20 years, though, "I do know people that have struggled to get permanent contracts, in many different institutions, not just at Leeds. They have been several years post-PhD, and they have found that environment very tough. And that's really difficult when you have a mortgage and want to have a family. [It makes] you think: I am going to have to give up and retrain and do something else."

Sarah, a neuroscience researcher in the University of Sheffield's Faculty of Medicine, said, "A lot of my colleagues are NHS employees and in different unions so not necessarily in a position to strike, but that doesn't mean they don't support us. It seems to be quite a political issue. If they're going to try and take our defined-benefits pension, they'll presumably try to take it off teachers and other sectors, and it will spread through the system."

“I started working in 2010 and the situation is certainly in decline across all of the universities. Since they’ve changed the funding structure they’ve started to operate more like businesses.

“With students ... if you’re paying £9,000 a year for a product, there’s a certain expectation that you’ll not only pass but get a good degree, regardless, and I almost can’t blame them for that really. The students have been pretty supportive as a whole across the country. They are the ones that will come in to work as academics and will start off with the terrible conditions left by their predecessors.”

Sarah explained that one effect of the gutting of pensions would be that medical students might avoid a career in pure research as the pensions would be inadequate compared to working within the NHS.

She also pointed to the 2008 financial crash and the huge bailout of the banks that took place at the expense of the majority of the population. “I do think there is a swelling now of people feeling pissed off with everything that this [strike] is revealing. My mother went through the movements in the 1970s and 80s and she feels like the time is happening again, she can see big things happening in the future.”

Maureen, a lecturer at the University of Southampton, said, “We are fighting about the USS scheme for lecturers but at the same time there is a proposal for a local pay scheme for our lower grade staff. That is also going to be changed from defined benefit scheme to a defined contribution and this would have a massive impact on lower paid members of staff. One of their [the university’s] answers to resolve the economic problems is to reduce the level of outgoings like pensions.”

Pip studies in the language faculty of the University of Southampton. She said, “I think it’s totally wrong that their pensions are being cut and they are expected to do more work for less money. I don’t agree with this at all, especially people at the top are receiving horrendous amount of money. Education is not a business commodity.” She added, “Cuts in general, to education, to health and to welfare are an attack on everyone. It’s not only an attack on the pensions of university academics.”

Charlie, a student in the history and politics faculty of Southampton University, reported, “Our sympathies are with the striking lecturers. We’ve seen this consistent

and relentless assault on education over the last 10 years. The fightback we have first seen by lecturers is something our hearts are invested in.”

Susanne, who originates from Germany, has lectured at the University of Manchester for 22 years in the accounting and finance department. She was dissatisfied with how the unions were conducting the strike, saying, “Shouldn’t there be some better coordination with the unions. Lots of Unison [the largest public sector trade union] members said they would have liked to have been balloted and come out.” She continued, “I’m not voting here, but even if I was what choice have you got? Corbyn’s fake socialist talk. The older I get the more I am in favour of internationalism, not national socialism. [I think] attacks on immigration are so dehumanising.”

Simeon has been an academic for 12 years and has worked at the Sackville Street site of Manchester University for four years. He said UUK was “looking to gamble with our pensions—£6 billion is a huge amount of money to move to the free market, and they’re not underwriting any of it. The universities are making huge capital investment in buildings but not in their staff. They are moving us to a privatisation model, increasing student debt and decreasing lecturers’ security. And it’s not just the academic staff but professional support and IT support staff. I feel let down by the university, how it treats us as a commodity. Capitalism is a short-sighted approach.

Asked what he thought about the UCU, he said, “It’s always short-term gains, then the gradual erosion of our rights. That’s what it’s like if we don’t consistently fight for our rights.”



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