

UK university lecturers, college staff and students hold joint protest in London

Our reporters
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Around four thousand university lecturers, college staff and students demonstrated in London yesterday. The protest, called by the University and College Union (UCU) was held on the last day of this week's three-day strike by lecturers against attacks on their pensions by the employers' body—Universities UK (UUK). The college workers were staging the first day of a two-day strike at 14 Further Education (FE) institutions nationwide in opposition to a derisory one percent pay increase.

The march, held during a snowstorm and in freezing weather, began at Malet Street before proceeding through central London to a rally at Westminster Central Hall, near Parliament.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to some of those attending the demonstration.

Kate is a lecturer at the Institute of the Americas at University College London (UCL). She said, "One of the main reasons that I'm out on strike is that I am looking towards the future without defined benefits. It means living the last decades of your life with a lot of uncertainty, an inability to plan. It's also a step towards the individualisation of higher education that I feel strongly to be a collective enterprise at all levels."

Kate explained the impact of the highly casualised Higher Education (HE) sector, saying, "I'm now on a permanent contract two years out of my PhD, but for a lot of my peers it's very much a case of year-to-year contracts, term to term. And coming through graduate work now, you look towards the future with a lot of anxiety about the casualisation of your workplace and the increasing disparity between the haves and the have-nots of the education sector. I think a lot of us are finding that we're not ending up in the kind of career and workplace that we were expecting."

Asked her attitude to the marketisation of HE, central to which is the Conservative government's tuition fee review and creation of the Office for Students, Kate said,

"Just the idea of moving the risk on to individual pension members, which underwrites so much of this [the UUK proposals], is such a problematic signal of the overall movement of society and politics today. Even if this wasn't my personal pension it would be something that I'd be out here protesting, because it represents something that I stand very strongly against."

Another UCL lecturer, **Russell**, said he came to protest "the broader changes in higher education. I feel like the universities are getting probably more money, more students, more fees—and yet the people at the frontline making sure that everybody gets a good education are not being supported by the people in charge of the universities. We've had enough."

After finishing a PhD in 2005, Russell remained in academia. Of the previous attacks on pensions in 2011 and 2015, he said, "I'd never thought too much about pensions to be honest. For me, the strike is more about the way in which education as a whole is being screwed over. Now that I'm being made aware of all of these things, I'm disappointed by the way we're being treated and I think it's time to do something about it."

On the marketisation of higher education, Russell said, "I feel like this issue of pensions is part of a broader transition towards treating universities as businesses."

According to Russell, many students supported the lecturers. "One thing that we can take away from this is that there are a lot of other people we are in common cause with," he said.

"We're really discouraged, often, from thinking about our colleagues as colleagues, because the way in which they [university management] think about and evaluate our work is through playing us off against one another."

Russell said he agreed with the WSWs that a wider struggle was necessary, mobilizing workers throughout the education sector and beyond against the marketisation agenda, saying, "I feel like part of the reason why we're

all out here is precisely that.”

Rory is a technical tutor in the Media Department at Goldsmiths University. He said, “What’s brought me out here today is the pension cuts, but, also the cuts in FE and HE more broadly. Those cuts are running deep and the student-staff ratio is going up all the time. There’s a lot of casualisation happening, which we have to deal with on a daily basis.”

Asked if he saw this as part of a plan to fully marketise HE, with education provision carried out as a business, Rory said, “Completely, completely. I think education has been going that way for a long time. It’s another ‘Americanisation’ of society. It’s been happening in many different industries and seems to be coming through now into education. The bigger British universities taking that model, charging extortionate fees and wanting to break away, is part of what’s caused the big pension disputes in a way. The Oxbridge universities want to break away from the USS, and go independent. That’s putting other universities under pressure.”

Asked his attitude to the UCU, Rory said, “I think they should have been fought then, I think they should continue to be fought back when they first came in. Not just pensions, but all cuts within education need to be fought. It’s people’s futures that the powers that be are playing with. We’ve got to fight.”

The UCU’s Westminster rally was addressed by senior trade union and Labour Party figures, including UCU general secretary Sally Hunt, Trades Union Congress general secretary Frances O’Grady, Labour Shadow chancellor John McDonnell, Shadow education secretary Angela Rayner and National Union of Students (NUS) president Shakira Martin.

The UCU did everything possible to prevent a strike and tweeted a photo of Rayner speaking on the platform with accompanying text noting that Rayner was “saying that it shouldn’t have needed strike action to get employers back round the table, and they must now commit to meaningful negotiations at Acas [Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service Council] talks.” Acas, now led by former TUC leader, Sir Brendan Barber, has overseen the ending of countless strikes on the employers’ terms.

The rally followed the previous day’s talks between the UCU and the Universities UK (UUK) group. UUK stated prior to the talks that it was not prepared to reverse its draconian pensions proposals, under which the average lecturer will lose £10,000 a year.

While UUK refused to budge an inch, the UCU—which has allowed a succession of attacks on pensions to be

imposed since 2011—has signalled its intention to capitulate again by offering further concessions. The union proposed increasing pension contributions by 4.1 percent overall, with employees paying a further 1.4 percent and the employers 2.7 percent.

Fully accepting the marketisation of education that has been central to attacks on education workers’ pensions and working conditions over the last decade, UCU general secretary Sally Hunt said, “At the core of our proposals is for universities to accept a small amount of increased risk, but only at a level a majority have recently said they are comfortable with...”

By calling on the universities to accept “increased risk,” the UCU accepts that any additional costs to the universities create additional risk that could precipitate the financial collapse of one or more institutions. In effect, it concurs with the government’s position that universities—like the corporations that they have increasingly begun to resemble—can be left to go bankrupt or close overnight.

This in turn will pave the way in the not too distant future for the universities, should they accept some form of the UCU’s offer, to insist on terminating the national scheme in favour of “flexible” local schemes in line with each individual university’s financial requirements, as indicated in their August 2017 policy paper “Suitability and Sustainability: pensions in the higher education sector”.

While UUK has not accepted the UCU’s offer at this stage, the union, in a further climb-down, agreed to further talks to be held under the auspices of Acas.



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