

For a unified socialist movement of lecturers and students!

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (UK)
8 March 2018

Success for the national strike by 40,000 lecturers depends on mobilising the support of students as part of a struggle to win support in the working class as a whole in defence of education as a social right for all.

Solidarity pickets and protests have been organised, including occupations by students at nine universities such as Leicester, Bristol, University College London and Liverpool. They are protesting their vice chancellors' role in the pension cuts proposed by Universities UK (UUK). A Twitter account, "Student Solidarity Action with UCU Strike," has been created to share news of these events—testimony to the desire for a combined fight of students and their lecturers in defence of the higher education sector.

The protests repudiate the reactionary campaign by the Conservative government and right-wing media encouraging students to enforce their rights as "consumers" against the lecturers—including docking the pay of strikers to compensate for lost lessons. Most students understand that it is precisely this corporate model which underpins not only the assault on lecturers' working conditions, but the introduction and hiking up of tuition fees as part of the wholesale marketisation of education. They recognise that the fight to defend lecturers' conditions is bound up with a defence of education as a social right.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) supports all efforts to demonstrate solidarity between lecturers and students. But a successful struggle to build such solidarity involves a political struggle against the University and College Union (UCU), National Union of Students (NUS) and other false leaderships whose programme offers nothing to their members and the broader layers of the working class whose future depends on a defence of education.

There is a great deal of pressure being placed on young people, many of whom are entering social struggles for the first time, to identify support for the lecturers with backing the UCU, under whose auspices the strike has been called. But the UCU bears direct responsibility for the calamitous position in which lecturers now find themselves.

Whatever militant language it may be employing today, the union's record speaks for itself. UCU enabled two previous pension cuts in 2011 and 2015 and has allowed the sweeping casualisation and underfunding of the higher education sector to proceed unopposed outside of a few token strikes and protests. The issues raised in the present strike are being confined to the undoubtedly precarious position of the pensions of a small section of the workforce in order to better isolate the struggle. Not a finger is being lifted against the sweeping casualisation of academia—second only to the hospitality industry. And no mention is made by the UCU of the broader issue of the marketisation underpinning all attacks on higher education staff.

Yet, according to a host of self-professed "left" and "socialist" groups on campus, the UCU must be seen as the unchallenged representative of lecturers and must not be criticized, let alone opposed.

Among UCU's champions is the NUS, which is little more than a stepping-stone for various well-paid opportunists and careerists to a future career in politics—especially the Labour Party—or business. The NUS has its own filthy record of betrayal: from scrapping opposition to tuition fees to presiding over sweeping attacks on students.

In the run-up to the present strike, the NUS disgraced itself by signing up to the government's privatisation agenda for higher education to be administered by the

Office for Students (OfS).

After working with the Labour Party in “constructive engagement” with the Higher Education and Research Bill last year, the NUS has been given places on an advisory panel to the OfS, led by NUS President Shakira Martin. Martin now complains that the government’s higher education review has “no student representation yet”—i.e., no opportunity for NUS members to embellish their CVs with yet another “consultative” role. Martin’s statement was posted on the front page of the NUS website alongside an article titled, “Have you considered a career in students’ unions?”

Given its complicity in attacks on education, the last thing the NUS intends to do is expose the UCU for its deplorable role. Both have accommodated themselves fully to the dismantling and privatisation of higher education and are primarily concerned with finding their own niche in the new order.

They are supported in these efforts by a whole range of pseudo-left tendencies masquerading as socialists and which function as an auxiliary staff to the trade unions, attempting to prop up these moribund organisations.

The International Marxist Tendency’s “Socialist Appeal” urges the UCU to “join in struggle with other public-sector unions and mobilise for a general opposition to privatisation and marketisation of public services” and for the NUS to “bring its membership out onto the streets to keep fighting until this vision is achieved.”

The Labour Party should “give political leadership to this movement—putting into practice [Jeremy] Corbyn’s promise for free, cradle-to-grave education for all.”

In a similar vein, the Socialist Workers Party lauded the presence of Frances O’Grady, general secretary of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), and Labour’s Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell at a UCU rally in London—despite neither the individuals nor the organisations they represent doing a single thing on behalf of the lecturers. The TUC has presided over the most prolonged decline in living standards in generations and done everything it can to isolate disputes, from the junior doctors, to school teachers to rail conductors. The other education unions—Unite and Unison—have limited themselves to purely verbal “solidarity” with the UCU’s action.

Labour has said and done nothing to concretely support the strike. The Socialist Party (whose youth wing is the Socialist Students) was forced to reference the case of a single Labour MP not crossing a picket line in its desperate attempt to bolster the party’s image.

For all these organisations, every reference to the class struggle is identified with a call to “get behind” the unions, which only paves the way for betrayal. Recently in West Virginia, more than 20,000 struck and rejected a sell-out deal agreed by their unions that various pseudo-left groups hailed as a victory. The unions then went and engineered an end the strike on virtually the same rotten terms, a betrayal which the pseudo-left groups proclaimed as a victory.

The trade unions, like the Labour Party, cannot be reformed or pushed to the left by militant pressure. They are pro-capitalist and nationalist organisations led by bureaucracies whose substantial privileges are based on their ability to police the struggles of the working class on behalf of big business. To the extent that lecturers seek to actively broaden their strike, the unions work to suppress and betray the action.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality, youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party, insists that the necessary extension of the lecturers struggle throughout schools, colleges and universities as well as among public sector workers, transport and industrial workers more broadly, demands the building of independent rank-and-file committees of education workers and students, acting *in opposition* to the UCU, the NUS, the TUC, the Labour Party and their political apologists. It must be based on a socialist programme of opposition to all forms of marketisation and privatisation and their consequences. We call on all students, working youth and the unemployed to contact us and to join our work.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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