"I'm delighted with the voices of solidarity from West Virginia"

Students and lecturers at the University of Aberdeen speak about the issues in the strike

Our reporters
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Members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) distributed copies of the statement, "For a unified socialist movement of lecturers and students!" at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland on Monday to students and lecturers. They were striking on the first day of this week's scheduled five-day stoppage.

A number of those who took statements spoke to the IYSSE about the issues involved in the dispute. This was just hours before the University and College Union reached a sellout agreement with Universities UK (UUK) management, rejected en masse by lecturers on Tuesday.

Asked why she had joined the protest, **Isabel,** a student, explained, "Firstly we are striking to defend the pensions of lecturers, which is the immediate issue, and secondly we are striking against the notion of universities becoming businesses of which this is a symptom. We cannot continue to equate the value of university lecturers and scientific research with the profit they bring in. We need to restructure universities in a way where finding truth and getting at what society needs is the main goal, not private profit."

Isabel said she understood this as an international struggle: "Under the framework of the global capitalist profit market system this attack is an issue globally. It's not just universities in this country that are striking, it's all over the world.

"We need an education structure that doesn't see students and lecturers as consumers and paid wage labourers. Sitting down and negotiating may work now for saving the pensions, but for the wider goal we must seek to restructure universities, so they see us as human beings. At the moment, we are seen as people who bring the money in to keep universities going and not as people with particular needs such as mental health issues. Universities should be taking a leading role of tackling structural oppression.

"Awareness is creeping up on a global scale. We are aware that our learning centres are being stripped away from us. But the market is creating a culture of 'alternate truths' where 200 scientists can say one thing but one group of scientists paid by a certain company will say another because they are paid to refine the facts in favour of the payer's interests. We are only then told the finding of the one paid group."

Asked if she saw the lecturers' dispute as a political struggle, Isabel answered emphatically, "Yes! Absolutely! There is no question about it."

The IYSSE spoke to another student, **Mie,** about uniting the lecturers' struggle with other sections of the working class, like Aberdeen bus drivers, who are also striking.

She said, "We need to debunk the myth that academics and lecturers are way up here [socially and intellectually], otherwise we can't appeal to the bus drivers and their struggle. There needs to be a mutual understanding of each other that just because I'm a doctor, say, doesn't mean that as a bus driver we don't have mutual interests and mutual things we need to work on to make society a better place."

Asked why she was on strike, lecturer **Patience** explained, "We are striking to oppose cuts to our pensions. The pensions cut is based on a notional deficit, but the problem is the actuarial model, which they used to come up with this deficit, is not one that is robust, shall we say.

"On top of that the consultation exercise that the

pension provider and the UUK put together to try and find out if the institutions as a whole caused them too much risk was dubious to say the least. It was not an official consultation. They had a low response rate and of that low response rate about 42 percent of institutions said they were concerned about the risk, so we're talking about a minority of a minority. When that 42 percent is looked at, it's Oxford and Cambridge colleges that are being counted as if they had the voice of the universities, so the whole thing is dubious."

Patience explained the implications of the proposed pension changes: "It will be changed from a defined benefit scheme, meaning you have a guaranteed pension for life, to a defined contribution scheme, which means your pensions are dependent on the fluctuations of the stock market.

"On top of this, there are lots of fees you have to pay, such as service fees on top of products you buy in. There are concerns for younger members of staff, people who haven't been in the scheme for as long, for members of staff who have caring responsibilities, part-time workers, female members of staff who have child caring responsibilities. For all of these groups this change is particularly problematic."

On the issue of the ongoing marketisation and privatization of higher education, Patience said, "I hope to see this strike turn into a broader attack on marketisation of higher education. The conversations on the picket and the conversations I've seen on Twitter suggest people are seeing the attack on the pensions as part of this marketisation and corporatization of higher education, and people are beginning to ask the bigger questions like 'are students consumers?'

"The precariousness of many of our colleagues in terms of hourly paid contracts and short-term contracts, the funding of education, vice chancellors' pay—all of these issues are inseparable. So officially, we are out here protesting pensions but there are a lot of issues we are angry about."

Patience expressed support for the recent strike of teachers in West Virginia, which was betrayed by the teaching unions. "I'm delighted with the voices of solidarity from West Virginia and we're very sympathetic to their situation. Whatever solidarity there is out there is welcomed. We are very aware of the austerity agenda and how that's impacted people throughout the UK and beyond the UK, so however much we can build connections and work together I think that'd be great."

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